Authority and Reality in the Work of Oliver O’Donovan

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Abstract
Running throughout the work of Oliver O’Donovan is a discussion of the nature of authority, and its relation to reality, and to freedom. While holding fast to the maxim that authority is the correlate of freedom, O’Donovan’s understanding of authority moves, as a result of his engagement with the nature of political authority, to emphasise the idea of social mediation. This leads, in the most recent works, to a description of authority as an event in which reality is disclosed. Arguably, this formal account does not adequately distinguish the element of practical direction within authority, meaning that it may struggle to explain some ways in which we speak about authority’s presence, and its misuse. However, there may be resources for making this distinction within O’Donovan’s understanding of judgment as an act of moral discrimination with a twofold form. O’Donovan’s is an elegant and economical account of authority, promising to provide a simple analysis that encompasses the peculiarities of authority and illuminates a wide range of phenomena.

Keywords
Oliver O’Donovan, authority, freedom, judgment, political authority, practical reason, Nicholas Wolterstorff

Running throughout the work of Oliver O’Donovan from Resurrection and Moral Order to his most recent book, Finding and Seeking, is a discussion of the nature of authority, and its relation to reality, and to freedom. It is a discussion that unites his political theology with his broader moral theology, and that enriches both. It is therefore a useful thread

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2015 Annual Conference of the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics. I am grateful to Dr Guido de Graaf, Professor O’Donovan, and a number of anonymous reviewers for their subsequent constructive comments and criticisms, some of which may well remain valid.

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to follow in order to understand O’Donovan’s work. The purpose of this article is to outline O’Donovan’s central account of authority as it unfolds throughout his works, and to suggest a modest point of criticism. The first part provides an overview of how O’Donovan’s understanding of authority develops throughout his work, observing particularly the ways in which the political works—The Desire of the Nations and The Ways of Judgment—lead O’Donovan to modify the general account given in Resurrection and Moral Order. The focus is on his theory of authority in general, and for this reason a number of aspects of his account of political authority, which have received more attention elsewhere, are only touched on briefly. However, some detailed discussion of O’Donovan’s conception of judgment is required, for this bears on the critical engagement that constitutes the second half of the article. This offers a modest proposal about how O’Donovan’s account might be improved. The formal account reached in Self, World, and Time does not sufficiently demarcate the practical direction authority legitimates from the disclosure of reality through which it appears. Without this distinction, O’Donovan’s formal account struggles to describe how authority can be an enduring phenomenon, and how authority can be corrupted. Arguably, however, resources for making this distinction are present within O’Donovan’s discussion of political authority, in his understanding of judgment as an act of moral discrimination with a twofold form.

An Overview of O’Donovan’s Treatments of Authority

Resurrection and Moral Order

Our survey of O’Donovan’s account of authority begins with his discussion in part two of Resurrection and Moral Order. There, he articulates an understanding of authority as


‘the objective correlate of freedom’. By this, O’Donovan means that authority is that in the created order which evokes free action. Freedom means acting in accordance with reality, and authority is the way in which ‘the real world authorizes man’s agency’. ‘The created order’, he writes, ‘contains authorities which have their own relative finality’, things that constitute an ‘immediate and sufficient ground for acting’. O’Donovan thus explicitly differentiates his understanding from one which sees authority as ‘a reason for acting in the absence of reasons’.

A key point in this discussion is that authority really is ‘vested in creatures’. O’Donovan distinguishes his account from a neo-Platonic one in which creatures merely mediate divine authority. On the contrary, O’Donovan argues, authority is genuinely creaturely. ‘All authority is from God’, as Rom. 13:1 puts it, but only in the sense that God made a world imbued with authority. Natural authorities such as ‘beauty, age, community, and strength’ bear on us and evoke free action. As examples, O’Donovan considers the sound of music that invites us to listen, the community that leads us to join a club, or Mendelssohn’s beholding beauty at Holyrood Abbey, leading him to compose the Scottish symphony. O’Donovan anticipates the objection, a version of which, as we will see, later becomes his own, that this is casting the net too wide, and that a discussion of authority ought to be about speech. However, he insists that the authority of truth makes no sense apart from the natural authorities that lie behind it.

From this point, O’Donovan explicates the ideas of moral authority, political authority, divine authority, and then the authority of Christ. Although we cannot survey all of this now, we should note that O’Donovan stresses that political authority is peculiar in its capacity to demand obedience arbitrarily. He argues that political authority rests upon ‘a concurrence of natural authorities of might and tradition’ with the (‘relatively natural’) authority of ‘injured right’.

Political Theology

As we turn to consider O’Donovan’s two major works of political theology, *The Desire of the Nations* and *The Ways of Judgment*, we may begin by noticing three things. First, O’Donovan consistently stresses that political authority must be understood in relation to authority as such. ‘A political discussion must not be taken by itself’, he

6. *RMO*, p. 120.
writes in *The Desire of the Nations*; ‘it needs a background in the ontology of human freedom’.15 Similarly, in *The Ways of Judgment*, he points out that, ‘there is a multitude of non-political authorities, constituted by the ordinary relations of society, which direct us to perform certain actions: doctors, teachers, parents, employers, all whom the catechism called our “pastors and masters”’.16

The second thing to notice in these works is that O’Donovan begins to pay more focused attention to the significance of mediation. In *Desire of the Nations* he notices the distinct way in which political authority mediates good. In *The Ways of Judgment*, he stresses how with authority, goods of action become present to us through others, assuming the character of an obligation. A reason for acting is present, but only ‘painfully’, through the mediation of another.17 With political authority this painfully mediated character is most apparent. This consideration leads O’Donovan to a critique of his own position in *Resurrection and Moral Order*. Although he maintains that ‘authority is intimately connected with the basic goods of action’,18 he suggests that he should not have used ‘authorities’ interchangeably with ‘goods’, because that failed to identify the key difference about authority, ‘which is that the ground of action is not immediate, but mediated through another agent’.19

This leads to the third feature of these works to note, which is a more developed account of the relation between authority and freedom. In *The Desire of the Nations*, the concept of authority is carefully differentiated from power, force and persuasion.20 These distinctions are taken further in *The Ways of Judgment*, where O’Donovan stresses the need to distinguish authority from the power to compel. Authority does not compel, but ‘obliges us freely to do something’.21 An action is ‘laid upon us’.22 Authority within society creates possibilities for freedom that could not be had otherwise, such that ‘the political subject is freer as a subject’.23 O’Donovan pays particular attention to the form of words in Mt. 8:9, where the centurion says he is a man ‘under authority’.24 ‘To be under authority’, O’Donovan suggests, is to be *authorised*: ‘a condition in which one is at the same time dependent upon authority and freed by that authority to act’.25

Underpinning these ideas is one of the central features of these two works: the notion of the act of judgment. ‘The authority of secular government’, O’Donovan states, ‘resides in the practice of judgment’.26 Elsewhere, he speaks of the way ‘political authority arises as judgment is done’.27 It is not, it should be stressed, that judgment is all there is to say about political authority. On the one hand, political authority depends upon the capacity to exert

22. *WJ*, p. 129.
23. *WJ*, p. 128, emphasis original.
26. *WJ*, p. 3.
27. *WJ*, p. 128.
force in order to secure judgment. On the other hand, political authority arises only where the one who judges does so in the name of the community, defending its tradition. Hence, in both *Desire of the Nations* and *The Ways of Judgment*, O’Donovan puts forward a maxim that represents a modification of the formulation in *Resurrection and Moral Order* noted above: ‘Political authority arises where power, the execution of right, and the perpetuation of tradition are assured together in one coordinated agency’.28 Yet power and tradition are ordered to the service of judgment.29 Government, as O’Donovan puts it at the beginning of *The Ways of Judgment*, is ‘reauthorized’ as judgment, which entails ‘that political authority in all its forms—lawmaking, war-making, welfare provision, education—is to be re-conceived within this matrix and subject to the discipline of enacting right against wrong’.30 Judgment is not merely an initial, foundational act in which political authority emerges, after which judgment is unnecessary. It is the ongoing basis of political authority: ‘Authority belongs to those who, embodying the identity of the community, enact right on its behalf.’31

O’Donovan’s notion of judgment is, however, more complex than it first appears. Here we must slow down our overview and go into some detail, because this is a point we will later draw upon. O’Donovan argues that, at its core, judgment is an act of *discrimination*. It is ‘an act of moral discrimination that pronounces upon a preceding act or existing state of affairs to establish a new public context’.32 A judgment, that is, is an *intellectual* act of clarifying and distinguishing right from wrong, which has a ‘double aspect, retrospective and prospective’.33 It ‘pronounces’ on what has gone before, and it

32. *WJ*, p. 7. Compare *DN*, p. 38: ‘To judge is to make a distinction between the just and the unjust, or, more precisely, to bring the distinction which already exists between them into the daylight of public observation.’
‘founds’ a new ‘practical context’—judgment ‘clears space prospectively for’ renewed action within a community.34 Because of this dual nature, O’Donovan explains, judgments are subject to the criteria of both truth and effectiveness.35

It is important to emphasise this understanding of judgment for a number of reasons. First, it highlights why for O’Donovan judgment depends upon, but is not identical to, the use of force. The act of judgment is not essentially an act of coercion. It is fundamentally an act of truth-telling. Yet it is a truth-telling that secures a new situation effectively. Judgment means enacting right, which is why political authority depends upon the capacity to exert force. Political authority entails a right to command, and to ensure that these commands are given effect. Political authority ‘makes requirements to which we must all conform’.36 I am ordered to attend court on a certain day for jury duty; law requires me to pay national insurance; I must register the birth of my child. My obedience to these commands is free. I am obliged, rather than forced, to do them. Yet these commands are backed up by sanctions, should I refuse. In this respect, O’Donovan points out, political authority has similarities with all authority:

Those who present us with something we must do impose responsibility on us as well as freedom, and they become the immediate object of our fear of responsibility. The police officer waving down the car, the teacher setting the exercise, the physician recommending the operation, are all in varied ways our judges, should our response prove inadequate or unseemly.37

That is, because all authority legitimates certain kinds of practical directions, it also makes certain kinds of response consequential.

Secondly, O’Donovan’s clarification of the nature of the act of judgment also helps us understand why there are two aspects to the response of the political subject to political authority. On the one hand, political authority evokes recognition. On the other hand, political authority requires obedience. These two responses are intimately related—‘Obedient decision’, as O’Donovan points out, ‘is an aspect of recognition’.38 Both obedience and recognition are encompassed by the biblical injunction to ‘be subject … for the sake of conscience’ (Rom. 13:1–5). However, recognition and obedience are distinct

\[\text{enacting right. The prospective element of judgment is enforceable. As Guido de Graaf acutely observes, for O’Donovan, political judgments ‘are not identical … to the “judgements” of practical reason, or even most moral judgements’, but are ‘a specific kind of moral judgement’ in that they are pronounced ‘with the authority of society’ (Politics in Friendship, p. 101). Drawing political judgment and practical reason too closely together runs the risk of allowing the category of judgment to determine our understanding of all authority, and so collapsing the distinction between political authority and authority generally—a distinction that it is a central aim of O’Donovan’s theory of authority to preserve. Something like this occurs in the account of authority given in Charles Mathewes’s book, The Republic of Grace: Augustinian Thoughts for Dark Times (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 147–80.}\]
aspects of the subject’s response.\textsuperscript{39} In relation to political authority, recognition is primarily a response to the disclosure of truth, judgment’s true pronouncement upon the existing state of affairs. Obedience, on the other hand, is particularly a response to the enforceable establishment, in judgment, of a new public context.

This is an important point, because it illuminates a distinctive characteristic of political authority, which is that, as O’Donovan puts it, ‘political authority is non-transparent’.\textsuperscript{40} ‘Political authority is peremptory’, says O’Donovan,\textsuperscript{41} recalling, in a different way, a claim made in \textit{Resurrection and Moral Order}: ‘political institutions can confront us with a morally arbitrary demand which it is morally obligatory to obey’.\textsuperscript{42} With political authority, that is, there is a gap between our perception of the truth disclosed by authority, and our obedient response to its direction. Political authority does present us with a reason for action—without this, as O’Donovan highlights, obedience could not be free.\textsuperscript{43} And yet, with political authority, more than with other kinds of authority, these reasons are ‘not conspicuous’. (To this extent, O’Donovan here acknowledges, reasons for acting are ‘absent’.)\textsuperscript{44} The disclosure of truth effected by a judgment is remote from the particular requirements laid upon the subject. At its best, political authority aspires to overcome this gap, introducing legislation, for instance, with a prologue that justifies the new measures in relation to a presenting problem. And there is, as O’Donovan points out, a responsibility laid on the political subject to ‘discern’ the demands that ‘the bearer of authority’ actually lays upon her: ‘it is always the subject’s business to be clear in his or her own mind that this or that command actually requires obedience’.\textsuperscript{45} Frequently, however, the form that this discernment takes is simply to recognise that this or that demand has been made by a legitimate authority. The response of recognition is only indirectly related to the particular judgment being obeyed.

We have drawn out this discussion because below we will suggest that the idea of judgment as having a twofold form can assist us in overcoming a difficulty in the general account of authority developed in O’Donovan’s two most recent books.\textsuperscript{46} For now, however, we turn to observe the treatment of authority in these two works.

\textsuperscript{39} This point is not explicit in O’Donovan’s work, yet both concepts are central to his account of political subjection. See \textit{DN}, pp. 147–49 and \textit{WJ}, pp. 135–38.

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{WJ}, p. 133.

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{WJ}, p. 134.

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{RMO}, p. 131.

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{WJ}, p. 130.

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{WJ}, p. 131.

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{WJ}, p. 136; original emphasis.

\textsuperscript{46} The foregoing account accepts the risk of disagreeing, at certain points, with Guido de Graaf’s outline of O’Donovan’s account of judgment in \textit{Politics in Friendship}, pp. 99–105. If the interpretation given here is correct—and it is fair to say some of these ideas are not emphasised by O’Donovan—it could also have an impact on what it means for government to be ‘re-conceived within the matrix of judgment’. This might provide some room to address Nigel Biggar’s concern that the principle of judgment is not flexible enough to provide an account of government, and that a further principle of subsidiarity is required. See Nigel Biggar, ‘On Defining Political Authority as an Act of Judgment: A Discussion of Oliver O’Donovan’s \textit{The Ways of Judgment} (Part I)’, \textit{Political Theology} 9.3 (2008), pp. 282–83. For similar criticisms, see Wolterstorff, ‘A Discussion of Oliver O’Donovan’s \textit{The Desire of the Nations}’, pp. 100–108.
Ethics as Theology: Self, World, and Time and Finding and Seeking

The developments in O’Donovan’s political work lead to a significant reformulation of his general account of authority in the first volume of his Ethics as Theology series, Self, World, and Time.47

‘Authority’, O’Donovan says, ‘I take to be an event in which a reality is communicated to practical reason by a social communication’.48 Authority, that is, concerns our action; it is mediated by the agency of others; and its significance lies in its being a ‘focused disclosure of reality’.49 It is this disclosure of reality that differentiates authority from a mere exercise of power, because it means that authority evokes freedom, and freedom, just as in Resurrection and Moral Order, is about action ‘in tune with reality’.50 These emphases are summed up in a fine passage in Finding and Seeking:

The failure to know the world is a social failure. To engage in the common task of knowing is to recognize the authority that human communications have over us. Authority is recognized only by free moral subjects, who can, in the particular instance, recognize it or not recognize it; the generally misleading claim that authority is conferred by recognition claims its moment of truth at this point. But recognition is not without grounds. To recognize authority is to discover that it is grounded in reality. We recognize only what we think true, or authorized by truth. That is as true of politics — ‘They tell things the way they are’, people say of their favourite political leaders — as it is of every sphere in which communication takes place. The disclosure of a fragment of reality that shines through something said or done commands our attention and belief, and so shapes our action. To recognize authority is to discern a reality accessed through what is communicated among us.51

In Self, World, and Time, O’Donovan draws attention to the differences between this formulation and that in Resurrection and Moral Order. The key change, he says, is the emphasis on social mediation. His account in the early work was, he says, ‘flat and this-worldly’, because it identified authority with the purchase of the world-order on us.52 Authority needs rather to be understood as something that happens, a miraculous gift of providence by which God sustains the created order.53

At this point, we should notice another important difference from the account in Resurrection and Moral Order. In the early work, O’Donovan resisted identifying all authority with God’s authority, for he saw in this a neo-Platonic tendency to make the divine immanent within creation. In the later works, however, O’Donovan connects authority more to God’s work of providence than creation. Authority rises and falls in the course of history. It is ‘an event which continually and repeatedly occurs, wave after wave of

48. SWT, p. 53; original emphasis.
49. SWT, p. 54.
50. SWT, p. 25.
52. SWT, p. 53.
53. SWT, pp. 57–58.
disclosure breaking over us, knocking us down and carrying us along, winning our recogni-
tion by the sheer certainty with which each new successive event presents itself. This
emphasis frees O’Donovan to interpret the relation of authority to divine authority differ-
cently: ‘All forms of authority’, he writes, ‘must in the end be taken up into the original’.55
These basic moves allow O’Donovan to clarify the distinctive character of different
forms of authority. He argues that the traditional contrast between two ideal types of author-
ity—of the ruler, on the one hand, and of the teacher, on the other—needs to be complicated.
We should think instead in terms of ‘two spectra’: a spectrum of ‘practical immediacy’, and
a spectrum of ‘cognitive plenitude’.56 Kinds of authority may be differentiated both by how
wide a view of reality they disclose—political authority involves a restricted disclosure of
reality while wisdom provides a more extensive view—as well as by how immediately that
disclosure bears on our practical discernments—authority may be directly relevant to our
urgent needs and interests, such as with a physician’s recommendations, or it may impact
our deliberations more remotely, such as when my consciousness of an established theory
leads me to pay respect to its representatives. I can acknowledge the presence of authority,
and be in various ways impacted by it, even when that authority has no direct relevance for
my action. With these observations, we conclude our overview of O’Donovan’s treatments
of authority and turn to some critical reflection.

**Authority as a Disclosure of Reality to Practical Reason**

In her 1954 essay, ‘What Is Authority?’, Hannah Arendt puzzled over the ‘curiously
elusive and intangible’ nature of authority, by which it has ‘binding force’ and ‘always
demands obedience’, and yet somehow needs ‘neither the form of command nor external
coercion’. O’Donovan’s account of authority can be seen as an attempt to resolve this
puzzle by persistently keeping political authority in contact with authority in general,58
and so showing how all authority creates freedom, providing reasons for acting through

55. *SWT*, p. 59. This changed interpretation of Rom. 13:1 is clearly presented in O’Donovan’s
brief essay, ‘The Moral Authority of Scripture’, in Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance
(eds.), *Scripture’s Doctrine and Theology’s Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian
56. See *SWT*, pp. 55–56.
57. Hannah Arendt, ‘What Is Authority?’ in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political
Thought* (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), pp. 92, 123. Although this essay is not cited, the
discussion in *RMO* bears a striking resemblance to it. See also *DN*, pp. 126–27; cf. *RMO*, p. 67.
Arendt’s significance for O’Donovan is particularly evident in ‘Household and City’, chapter
15 of *The Ways of Judgment*.
58. One of the important differences between O’Donovan’s account and Arendt’s discussion lies
at this point. Arendt draws attention to Plato’s and Aristotle’s attempts to understand the con-
cept of authority by drawing on ‘prepolitical’ examples of supposedly natural difference,
such as the relationships between helmsman and passengers, physician and patient, master
and slave, young and old (pp. 108–19). She argues that these attempts were ultimately mis-
leading. Indeed, she strongly resists building an account of political authority by analogy
with education. Political authority cannot be understood through attention to the ‘extremely
a disclosure of the good, yet only by mediating this disclosure through practical direction—including giving commands. It is a powerful account, promising to provide a simple analysis of authority as such that encompasses the peculiarities of authority and illuminates a wide range of phenomena. That said, the formal description of authority in general given in *Self, World, and Time* warrants further examination. In particular, there seem to be difficulties with the idea that authority is an event in which reality is disclosed to practical reason.59

Let us begin by noticing that O’Donovan’s account appears to be able to accommodate some common ways of speaking about authority only awkwardly. We speak of authority as something enduring. The centurion is a man under authority with others under his authority. His authority seems to involve a kind of position in relation to others. Likewise, we speak of ‘bearing authority’, ‘being in’ authority, and of ‘being in a commanding position’. ‘To be under authority’, as we have seen O’Donovan suggest, is ‘a condition in which one is at the same time dependent upon authority and freed by that authority to act’. Condition appears to imply some kind of ongoing possession. Authority seems to be something that is then a basis for certain actions. The apparent advantage in the notion of authority as an event is that it allows O’Donovan to highlight how ‘authority in worldly institutions rises and falls’,60 because ‘institutionalized authority does not supplant the “moment” of authority’61. Yet, as it stands, the description of authority as occurring in a practical communication makes it difficult to speak of institutionalised authority at all. It also seems to problematise some other forms of authority. Does a mother have authority over her child, for example? O’Donovan’s political works, which can describe authority as ‘an occurrence’, also speak of ‘bearers’ of authority, and of how authorities ‘may be expected to’ do certain kinds of things.62 These points suggest that O’Donovan’s description of authority as an event may not be quite right as it stands.63

The problem, however, may lie not so much with the idea of authority as an event as with the way O’Donovan’s formulation does not clearly distinguish the disclosure of reality on which authority rests from the practical directions it legitimates. Authority is

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59. Some of the issues explored here generate a significantly different account of authority, or of authorities, in Nicholas Wolterstorff’s lucid inquiry into political theology, *The Mighty and the Almighty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). In what follows, I am attempting to show why a modified version of O’Donovan’s understanding of authority might still be preferable to such an account.

60. See *SWT*, pp. 58–59.


63. In *The Mighty and the Almighty*, Nicholas Wolterstorff argues that the kinds of ways we speak of authority noted above in fact point to fundamental distinctions between three kinds of authority. On the one hand, being an authority, or speaking with authority, must be
an event, he says, in which reality is communicated to practical reason. O’Donovan is clear that this phrase is necessary because, ‘Unlike a purely theoretical disclosure, authority gives practical direction’; it ‘always has a bearing on what we do’.64 It is not clear, however, that the directive aspect of authority should be subsumed within the event of authority’s disclosure of reality. The problem is that the element of practical direction in authority frequently seems to be distinct from the element of disclosure of reality. The giving of advice, or the giving of a command, is not simply a disclosure, a communication of reality. Very often, rather, it is a direction that rests upon a recognition of authority. O’Donovan says that in authority, we perceive reality ‘in bottleneck form’, focused ‘through this demonstration, this personality, this theory, this command’.65 Command, however, does not always belong in this list. The centurion’s being in authority is the basis for his saying ‘go’ to his servant, and expecting this order to be obeyed; it is not identical with it. The command is not itself the disclosure of reality that his authority involves. O’Donovan’s formulation brings together into one event two elements that need to be kept distinct.

Above, we saw a similar point in relation to political authority, when we highlighted O’Donovan’s understanding of judgment as having a twofold aspect, retrospective and prospective, and reflected that the prospective aspect of judgment entails a

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64. SWT, pp. 53, 55.
65. SWT, p. 54.
right to command. We also noticed that there was a corresponding duality to the political subject’s response to political authority: being subject involves both recognition and obedience. What this suggests is that authority tends to have a twofold form: a disclosure of reality that legitimates certain practical directions. Sometimes, perhaps, as for instance in the example of charismatic authority O’Donovan draws from P. T. Forsyth, where a man quells a mob, the two elements in authority may come together, the command itself achieving the disclosure of reality that justifies it. Frequently, however, there will be a real gap between authority’s disclosure of reality and its practical direction.

The issues at stake can be focused by considering the phenomenon of corrupt authority. First, let us highlight a positive aspect of O’Donovan’s account: it seems to enable him to explain why authority can vanish from people, governments, institutions. In Self, World, and Time, this becomes the basis for a description of “authorities” ranged alongside “angels”, “principalities”, “powers”, “dominions”, “thrones”, and “rulers of this world”, structuring forces that determine patterns of social existence, yet doomed to be overwhelmed because all forms of authority must in the end be taken up in the original. In The Ways of Judgment, O’Donovan gives a persuasive analysis of how political authority can evaporate when there is a persistent failure of justice, on the one hand, or when the idealism of political authority becomes detached from effective possibilities for the community. The idea of authority as an event aims to secure this truth, by recognising the miraculous, providential nature of authority as the gift of God which happens, and then is taken away. We have already expressed caution about what this means for enduring authority. However, the chief point at issue should not be

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66. SWT, p. 58.
67. Here we should acknowledge a significant challenge to this argument. Wolterstorff insists that it is a mistake to understand all authority as directive. This, he says, is in fact only true of a particular species of performance authority, ‘authority to govern’ (The Mighty and the Almighty, pp. 65, 78). In fact, we can ‘have authority to’ do a whole range of things, like dig holes in the road, wear certain kinds of headgear, enter certain rooms, sit in certain chairs, sign certain documents, or issue certain declarations (p. 49). These are instances, Wolterstorff says, of ‘authorised action’. With the idea of authority flowing from being authorised we have no quarrel; it is, as we have seen, an important aspect of O’Donovan’s account, and the basis on which he can say that all authority is from God. It seems, however, that not all of the examples of authorised action Wolterstorff gives are instances of having authority in a full sense. There is a difference, for example, between the authority of the foreman, who diverts traffic and directs labourers to begin digging, and the ‘authority’ the labourer has to actually dig. The latter ‘has authority’ only in the sense of being authorised. The ‘authority’ we can recognise in their actions does not truly belong to them, but to the one who has authorised them. The former has authority in a fuller sense, in that they are authorised to give particular, legitimate practical directions. The authority we recognise in this case is both of the one who has authorised him or her, and of him or her in some real sense. It seems that chains of authorised authority come to an end with someone merely authorised to do something, and not themselves ‘having authority’. The difference, we suggest, lies precisely in whether the authorisation in question generates legitimate practical directions.

68. SWT, p. 59.
lost sight of: authority is mysterious; it appears, and can vanish. This seems to be helpful for understanding the reality of worldly and corrupt authority.

However, does O’Donovan’s formal account allow us to speak properly of the way these ‘rulers and authorities’, as O’Donovan himself puts it elsewhere, ‘direct our freedom onto self-destructive paths’? Let us notice two ways in which authority may go wrong. First, authority can be misused. If, in order to make money, a doctor advises me to take a drug that he knows to be ineffective, then we might say that what has happened is that he has misused his authority. Certainly, his continuing authority would evaporate with the discovery of this fact. Yet it does not seem right to say that he had no authority when he gave the advice. Rather, he misused his authority. Authority seems to entail responsibility. Authorities can be held to account for the way their authority is wielded. It is hard to see how the notion that authority occurs in the event of a practical communication can account for this phenomenon. If authority is something that occurs as practical direction is given, how can we speak of authority entailing responsibility, and of authorities that lead astray?

Secondly, authority can overreach. If my boss orders me to steal money from the till, it is perhaps not quite true that she is misusing her authority. Rather, she has gone beyond the limits of her legitimate authority. She has no authority to make this command. At first sight, the notion that authority is an event of disclosure might appear to be illuminating in this case. The departure from reality represented by this command means there is no authority. But the problem here is not fundamentally that there is a failure of truth. Rather, it is that there is a mismatch between the truth upon which her authority rests—that she is my superior within a particular human institution—and the practical directions she takes this position to legitimate. This point is clearer if we imagine a less immoral example: my boss orders me to take out a company insurance policy no law requires me to take out. Her command has no authority, not because the thing in question is wrong in itself, but because it goes beyond what she is authorised to require of me. The centurion is a man under authority. This means there are limits

71. The example discussed here is conceptually close to Wolterstorff’s discussion of the magistrate whose command has ‘positional authority’ but not the potestas required for it to have moral authority (see above, n. 63). Rather than requiring this distinction, we are suggesting that this case can be better understood through distinguishing between the disclosure of reality in which authority appears and the practical directions it legitimates. Authority may be rightly recognised even where a given command is not in fact legitimate.
72. These examples, which were developed independently, are strikingly similar to those discussed by Wolterstorff in The Mighty and the Almighty, pp. 60–63. Happily, Wolterstorff’s analysis of the case of a superior directing an employee to do something immoral is similar to my own: ‘In such a case, the owner lacks the potestas to generate in the employee the obligation to do as he directed. The owner may direct some sentences in the imperative mood to the employee. But if the employee is morally obligated not to do X, then the owner cannot, by uttering those sentences, make him obligated to do X. The situation is not that the owner can and does generate in the employee the (prima facie) obligation to do X but does not have the right to do so, and hence ought not to do so. The situation is rather that the owner lacks the potestas to bind the employee in this way. The directive he issues is not authoritative because it’s not morally binding’ (p. 63). Wolterstorff comes to a similar conclusion in the case of a
to his own exercise of authority. His position authorises him to make certain practical
directions, but not others. O’Donovan’s formulation seems to require that we see the
problem in the practical requirement itself, rather than in the disjunction between dis-
closure of reality and justified directions.

These considerations suggest that O’Donovan’s formal description of authority in
*Self, World, and Time* could be improved through a clearer distinction between the
disclosure of reality through which authority appears, and the practical directions it
generates and justifies. Practical directions cannot be authoritative apart from a disclo-
sure of reality. O’Donovan is right, we suggest, to see the essence of authority in the
element of disclosure.\(^{73}\) Yet, as O’Donovan also stresses, authority is essentially prac-
tical; it is a correlate of freedom. And this requires that we also describe the way in
which authority gives rise to practical directions. What authority does is to *mediate*
reality to our practical life. Authority’s direction enables action in accordance with
reality that is not wholly seen.

Greater clarity about this distinction might make it easier to understand how author-
ity can be an enduring reality. Authority appears through a disclosure of reality that is
distinct from the practical directions it gives rise to. For this reason, we may recognise
an authority we are not required, for the moment, to obey. The centurion’s authority
can be recognised apart from the command, ‘Go’. Similarly, the risen Jesus says that
all authority *has been given* to him, and *on this basis* requires that his disciples go.
Authority *happens*, as O’Donovan stresses; but what happens is not merely the moment
of practical direction. Rather, practical directions rest upon the authority that has
appeared.

This point also allows us to reconsider the idea of the spectrum of practical immedi-
acy, in *Self, World, and Time*. Above, we saw that in explaining this idea, O’Donovan
contrasts an example of an intellectual authority having a practical impact indirectly,
even though there is no practical investment in the content of the theory—an established
theory that leads to social respect—with an intellectual authority that has a more direct
practical impact, because the disclosure in question is directly related to my urgent
needs—a doctor’s explanation for an unpleasant treatment. These examples, however,
could be taken to imply a slightly different point, namely that authority affects us practi-
cally both by its very appearance, and by its explicit directions. We may be practically
impacted simply by the recognition of authority’s appearance, as well as when we are the
object of its legitimate practical direction.

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\(^{73}\) Perhaps this also explains why Arendt was reluctant to see authority as needing commands—
because this appeared to alienate authority’s practical direction too far from a disclosure of truth.
How, then, could O’Donovan’s formal account be modified? Perhaps we might say that authority is an event in which a disclosure of reality legitimates certain practical directions. This would be to maintain O’Donovan’s description of authority as an event, along with the crucial idea—because of the link between authority and freedom—of a disclosure of reality, while distinguishing this more clearly from the practical direction authority generates, and so allowing more room to comprehend institutional authority, and various corruptions of authority. This modest reformulation would have implications for some aspects of O’Donovan’s account. Most centrally, it would require us to modify O’Donovan’s emphasis on recognition being related to the ‘something said or done’ in ‘the particular instance’. However, it aims to preserve the central insights of O’Donovan’s discussions.

It is possible, after all, to argue that authority is too complex and variegated a reality to be susceptible to a single description. O’Donovan’s account, however, is an elegant and economical attempt to describe the essential character of authority as such. If this account can be shown to be sound, whether with or without a modification such as that suggested here, it would take us a long way towards understanding what Hannah Arendt acutely described as a ‘curiously elusive and intangible’ phenomenon.

74. See F&S, pp. 83–84, and above.