Authority’s Hidden Network:
Obligations, Roles and the Morphogenesis of Authority

The purpose of this paper is to examine how the morphogenesis of authority presupposes, and in turn constitutes, social roles and relations of obligation. Authority is conceptualised as a relation of power based on legitimacy. The latter is in turn analysed both in terms of authorisation and of obligations. Such a perspective emphasises the import of identities and, in particular, social identities and social roles in the morphogenesis of relations of authority. Moreover, this chapter indicates that those relations of authority that are observable in any given organisation are themselves rooted in a wider – and typically neglected – network of (significant) others whose expected attitudes are commonly used as a compass for agents engaging in relations of authority.

The first section offers a critical exegesis of the classic works of Max Weber on authority. It also presents the main features of my approach in contra distinction with Weber’s. Authority, it is argued, is not merely a situation in which the manifested will of the ruler is meant to influence the conduct of others. If anything, it is first and foremost a circular relation of power whose legitimacy is recognised by participants. Section 2 focuses on the logical and ontological links between legitimacy, authorisation and obligation. It questions whether and how legitimacy can be reformulated in terms of obligations and *vice versa*. Authority thus appears to be a relation of power whose participants have an obligation to refrain from negating. This does not mean that authority is unquestionable but rather that a relation of authority will first be questioned on those aspects which seem less unquestionably legitimate than others. Moreover, such questioning of authority must mobilise other, more fundamental, obligations which participants recognise. Section 3 examines how, at the micro-sociological level, relations of authority typically (though not necessarily) involve social roles. These are not to be confused with the personal identities of those agents who personify roles. Moreover, role occupation is best described as a process of personification that involves (while in turn
constraining) people’s creative powers. Key to this process of personification, are the internal conversations in which agents regularly engage. Section 4 traces the implicit, typically hidden, network of relations (real or imaginary) mobilised by internal conversations. It also offers guidelines for further empirical research on authority from a realist, relational, perspective.

1. 1 Beyond Max Weber: authority as a legitimised relation of power

It has become standard practice, when undertaking a sociological study of authority, to refer to Max Weber’s works. Indeed, any undergraduate in the social sciences will have been exposed at some point to the three pure sources of authority (charismatic, traditional, rational-legal). Moreover, Weber’s works exhibit, amongst other qualities, a laudable concern for the definition of those concepts they mobilise. Such ground-clearing facilitates greatly the works of subsequent generations of researchers, both when they follow the founding-father and when they attempt to discern alternative paths.

The present chapter does not have space for a detailed critique of Weber’s overall approach that combines ideal types and hermeneutics with an actualist ontology. I can, however, analyse Weber’s definition of authority and use it as an (adjustable) spring board for my own theoretical purposes.

1. 1. 1 Weber on authority, domination and legitimacy

In Economy and Society, Weber defines authority as legitimate domination (Weber 1978: 215). This formulation deserves some unpacking as Weber’s use of the words ‘domination’ and ‘legitimacy’ is quite idiosyncratic. A short definition of these terms is proposed in the early pages of Economy and Society:

‘A. “Power” (Macht) is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests.

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B. “Domination” (Herrschaft) is the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons.’ (Weber 1978: 53)

The definition of domination is elaborated further on p. 946. As Weber states:

To be more specific, domination will thus mean the situation in which the manifested will (command) of the ruler or rulers is meant to influence the conduct of one or more others (the ruled) and actually does influence it in such a way that their conduct to a socially relevant degree occurs as if the ruled had made the content of the command the maxim of their conduct for its very own sake. Looked upon from the other end, this situation will be called obedience. (Weber 1978: 946).

Let us note immediately that Weber’s definition of domination as a probability or as a situation is questionable. It is not because in a situation of domination the probability of compliance is particularly high that domination is itself a probability; similarly, it is not because there exist situations of domination that domination is itself a situation. Indeed, the rest of the passage indicates that Weber implicitly treats domination as a relation rather than as a probability or a situation. Furthermore, this definition of domination is based on a (discursive) opposition between ruler and ruled, and between power of command and obedience, thus obscuring the circularity inherent in relations of power (see below). Note also how domination presupposes an appropriation of the command by the ruled. This appropriation, however, is formulated from a third person perspective marked by the use of an ‘as if’ clause. While this definition allows Weber to remain faithful to those positivist standards which he regarded as tokens of scientific rigour, it also casts a veil on the ruled’s reflexive powers and on the micro-sociological processes in which they engage whenever they are involved in a relation of domination. More specifically, Weber does not examine the micro-processes through which people get to play and identify with social roles of domination and subordination. Neither does he refer to the network of those actors whose approbation (real or imagined) is sought whenever people make legitimacy claims.
Weber’s conception of legitimacy is outlined in the early pages of *Economy and Society*, which offer an enlightening characterisation and also include a definition:

An order which is adhered to from motives of pure expediency is generally much less stable than one upheld on a purely customary basis through the fact that the corresponding behaviour has become habitual. The latter is much the most common type of subjective attitude. But even this type of order is in turn much less stable than an order which enjoys the prestige of being considered binding, or, as it may be expressed, of ‘legitimacy’ (Weber 1978: 31. Emphasis added)

If we follow commentators such as Bullen (1987), Weber’s conception of legitimacy is thought as an obligation rather than as an authorization. Thus, according to Bullen, Weber distinguishes between actions and states of affairs that are ‘legitimate’ (that should be obligatory), those that are non-legitimate’ (for which there is neither obligation nor prohibition) and also ones that are ‘illegitimate’ (that should be prohibited). As will be argued in more detail below, such a typology raises a number of concerns: is there not a difficulty in calling ‘non legitimate’ those actions or states of affairs that are permitted without being obligatory? In other words, should not legitimacy be conceived of as a permission rather than an obligation? More generally, are permissions and obligations radically distinct notions or can each be expressed in terms of the other?

9. 1. 2 Four theses on authority

The rest of this chapter is dedicated to fleshing out a conception of authority that seeks to avoid the pitfalls identified above in the works of Weber: i) ontological oscillations concerning the nature of authority; ii) questionable conceptual links between legitimacy, obligation and authorisation; iii) insufficient attention to the processes through which people personify social roles that structure those relations of authority in which they are involved; and iv) an excessive focus on the dyad ruler/ruler that obscures the network of (real or imagined) others whose beliefs and attitudes inform participants’ claims to authority and legitimacy. For clari-
ty’s sake, the revised conception of authority I propose is presented in the form of four theses, each tackling one of the issues mentioned above.

First thesis: authority is a social relation and not a substance or a personal attribute, not to mention a (Weberian) probability. If it makes sense to say that authority *qua* power would not exist without the reflexive personal powers of people, it should immediately be added that the power of authority (as opposed to, say, the power of gathering fruit or fleeing from fire) also supposes a relation to an *alter* who takes account of *ego*’s attitudes and whose attitudes *ego* takes into account in a process of mutual adjustment. As will be discussed below, this other need not be a real, living, person. However, the existence of (a relation of) authority minimally supposes that *ego* be concerned with the plausible attitudes and reactions of that *alter* (real or imagined). Foucault’s analytics of power (Foucault 1983) provide an attempt at moving away from a view of power as a substance held by persons. Rather, he suggests that power is better conceived as a relation in which the actions of one person will influence the actions of another. If authority is a kind of power, then, just like power, it must be circular. In other words, even when relations of subordination exist (e.g. commander/soldier; doctor/patient; teacher/student), both parties are subject to the relation of power. The commander, the doctor, the teacher need the compliance of the soldier, the patient and the student. In this sense, relations of power can be contrasted with relations of sheer violence or passivity. As Foucault maintains:

What defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future. A relationship of violence acts upon a body or upon things; it forces, it bends, it breaks on the wheel, it destroys, or it closes the door on all possibilities. Its opposite pole can only be passivity, and if it comes up against any resistance it has no other option than to try and minimise it. On the other hand a power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship: that the “other” (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to
the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible interventions may open up. (Foucault 1983: 220).

It is clear from this passage that a conception of power that is relational and circular draws attention to agents’ attitudes and reflexive abilities. While the frequency of obedience or disobedience to explicit commands can offer one valid point of departure for such a study, it cannot substitute it.

Second thesis: authority is a social relation that parties see as legitimate. This follows logically from our initial (Weberian) definition of authority as legitimate power. However, the legitimacy of authority raises questions relative to what is meant by ‘legitimacy’, a word that has some ambiguity both in everyday language and in Weberian terminology. As was seen above, Weber defines legitimacy as a form of non-instrumental obligation. But should legitimacy be conceptualised in terms of obligations or in terms of permissions (or authorisations)? More fundamentally, what is the ontological relation between obligations and permissions? Are they fundamentally different sorts of social factors or can the one be reduced to the other? I will return to this question in the second section of this chapter.

Third thesis: the relation of authority is not merely a relation between persons. Rather, it is a relation between persons doing their best to personify a multiplicity of social roles. This point is perhaps where realist and pragmatist approaches to relations of authority diverge most visibly from most Network Theory approaches\(^1\). The third section this chapter will discuss how the notion of a social role is articulated within three widespread theoretical frameworks: network theory; pragmatist social behaviourism and realist social ontology. This third section

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\(^1\) The question as to whether Foucault’s approach recognises social roles is open to debate. The majority of realist sociologists would rather contrast their approach sharply with Foucauldian studies of power (see for instance Archer 1995, 2000) while a minority of realist authors such as Al-Amoudi (2007) and Marsden (1999) would argue that the later Foucault was implicitly relying on a realist understanding of society which includes positions and practices whose existence is both dependent on and irreducible to the personal powers of individual agents.
will also trace how different approaches to social roles secrete widely differing conceptions of authority.

Fourth thesis: the legitimacy of a relation of authority itself depends on a network of social relations that is typically wider than the specific organisations within which it can be observed on a day to day basis. The contours of this network can be grasped by questioning whose legitimacy is being sought? Indeed, unless we are willing to restrict the use of the word ‘legitimate’ to situations that every rational being would recognise as such, we are left wanting for a theory (or at least some ontological meta-theoretical ground clearing) of authority that would help us account for the common situation in which only some participants recognise a relation of authority while others would rather question it. This issue will be explored further in the later parts of this chapter. At this point, however, a couple of questions can be directly addressed to those network analysts who study the network of relations between agents by seeking correlations between the existence of such relations and the objective characteristics of agents and network. How can network analysis account for those reasons that cause agents to engage in (or avoid) certain relations? More crucially perhaps, how can it account for agents’ adoption of certain reasons rather than others? Answering these questions entails moving from legitimacy’s implicit obligations to authority’s hidden networks.

1.2 Legitimacy, obligation and authorisation

The concept of ‘legitimacy’ is not devoid of ambiguity. Indeed, when we say that X is legitimate we can mean either that doing X is permitted, or we can mean that doing X is not only permitted but ought to be encouraged, that people engaging in X ought to be looked upon favourably. Weber clearly chose the second of these meanings when he distinguished between three (rather than merely two) basic cases. For him, a social feature can be legitimate, or it can be non-legitimate, or it can be illegitimate (Bullen 1987).

This ternary distinction can be illustrated with an example from the author’s ongoing fieldwork with Occupy Geneva, a political movement that was formed in October 2011 in
Switzerland out of solidarity with the Spanish Indignados and the American Occupy Wall Street movement. Two striking features of Occupy Geneva are its spontaneity (in the sense that it all started with little planning on the part of its core members) and its explicit rejection of the legitimacy of 21st century society’s social and economic order. While formal rules have slowly emerged over the first couple of months, the early days were characterised by a willingness to keep formal rules to a minimum, whilst relying on fraternity and common sense to regulate social interaction. Occupy Geneva held regular general assemblies which were open to all and in which any question could, in principle, have been discussed. During these assemblies, some participants brought a drink with them, such as a can of beer. Up until the day when a formal rule was voted against alcohol in general assemblies, drinking beer was deemed to be an acceptable form of behaviour and thus it was not illegitimate in Weber’s sense. However, neither was drinking beer legitimate in the Weberian sense since it was not perceived as an essential feature of a binding social order. Since drinking beer at Occupy Geneva’s general assemblies was neither legitimate nor illegitimate, a Weberian would have qualified it as a non-legitimate action. As can be seen from this brief example, for a Weberian, legitimacy is characterised by obligation; illegitimacy is characterised by prohibition; non-legitimacy is characterised by authorisation.

Intuitively, however, a contradiction can be sensed in saying that drinking during a general assembly is not legitimate although it is not illegitimate. However, this intuitive understanding begs for a theoretical demonstration that the two propositions are equivalent. In other words, if the aim is to move beyond the contradictions generated by the trinity of legitimacy/illegitimacy/non-legitimacy, it seems necessary to reconstruct the ontological relations that link obligation, prohibition and authorisation.

When we say in common language that social feature X (say: the practice of drinking beer at a general assembly) is legitimate, we mean primarily that it is forbidden to forbid X. The reverse is also true: upon hearing that it is forbidden to forbid X, it can be concluded that X is a legitimate social feature.

\[ \text{X is legitimate (in common language)} \Leftrightarrow \text{it is forbidden to forbid X} \]
But the expression ‘X is forbidden’ also deserves further unpacking. When one says that X is forbidden, s/he means that people should refrain from doing X (if X is a practice) or engaging in actions that involve X (if X is an institution).

X is forbidden ⇔ one has an obligation to refrain from X

It follows logically that, in common language:
X is legitimate ⇔ forbidding X is not legitimate ⇔ refraining from forbidding X is obligatory

Conversely:
Y is obligatory ⇔ refraining from Y is not legitimate ⇔ forbidding to refrain from Y is legitimate.

The idea that forbidding subjects to refrain from Y is legitimate, rather than obligatory, indicates that, under the conception of legitimacy defended in the present chapter, ordinary people have a duty to comply with norms but not to maintain or enforce the social order\(^2\). Since legitimacy and obligation do not necessarily impede one another\(^3\), it is easy to imagine situations in which some, though not all, agents have a binding mandate to oblige.

\(^2\) I am aware that this assertion is not uncontentious. In Switzerland, where I wrote this chapter, ordinary citizens often go at great lengths to ensure their neighbours respect their social obligations and that shortcomings are duly punished. I can only leave it to the reader to decide whether such an attitude is an instance of ethical behaviour and exemplary citizenship or whether it involves an unwarranted identification with the roles of law enforcers.

\(^3\) Note that obligation implies legitimacy while the reverse is not necessarily true.

X is obligatory ⇒ X is legitimate (in the absence of conflicting obligations).
Yet: X is legitimate ̸⇒ X is obligatory.
This asymmetry is at the root of a number of micro-social games, such as those consisting in hiding behind an obligation to justify an otherwise illegitimate social feature.
The first relation explains why people can find it so reassuring to be told what to do. As long as the order is valid, what they do is legitimate. The second relation shows why Weber’s terminology is so misleading.

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others to do Y (or to forbid them from refraining from Y). Yet, this binding mandate is not analytical to the obligatory character of Y. Legitimacy and obligation are not denied when people without such a binding mandate turn a blind eye, as long as they maintain a real power to forbid.

This reconstruction of the relation between legitimacy, illegitimacy and obligation helps us putting the finger on a number of avenues available to those willing to move beyond Weber’s categorisation – beyond the trivial fact that everyday language treats legitimacy as primarily a matter of authorisation rather than obligation.

Firstly, the ternary distinction is unnecessary and can be expressed equally rigorously by mere reference to legitimacy and obligation. Secondly, although legitimacy is immediately a matter of authorisation rather than one of obligation, it is nonetheless possible to reconstruct it as a matter of obligation. Authority thus appears to be a relation of power which participants have an obligation to refrain from negating. This does not mean that authority is absolutely unquestionable but rather that a relation of authority will first be questioned on those aspects which seem less unquestionably legitimate than others. Moreover, such questioning of authority will mobilise other, more fundamental, obligations which participants recognise. This point will facilitate our analysis, in the next section, of the link between relations of authority and those social obligations that are constitutive of social roles (section 3).

Secondly, our reformulation of legitimacy in terms of obligations indicates network features that would remain unnoticed from a strictly Weberian perspective. In particular, it indicates that for a social feature to be legitimate for an ego, there must be an alter (real or imagined) who does the forbidding. It is possible to conceive a limit case in which the same person takes the role of authorising and forbidding; for example, when activists of the Occupy Geneva Movement started wondering to themselves whether alcoholic drinks were acceptable at general assemblies. Yet, even in such limit cases, the person’s reflection proceeds in turns

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4 Establishing this point firmly necessitates more space than allowed here. An ontological study of how authority is challenged could benefit from such works as those of: Lakatos (1976) on mathematics; of Kuhn (1996) on paradigms (see also Latsis 2005); of Foucault (1973) and Laclau and Mouffe (2001) on the fundamental incompleteness of social forms and the artificiality of their unity.
and the subject must consider herself as an object to herself whenever she authorises herse
do X while, by the same token, obliging herself to refrain from forbidding X. And this is a
limit case; the central case is rather that of people imagining either a specific other (say, the
General Assembly’s convenor in the Occupy Geneva movement) or an abstract member of
their community who would express a judgement of legitimacy that reflects the basic princi-
pies of the whole community.

1.3 Authority and social roles

1.3.1 Obligations and social roles

Obligations, like every feature of the personal, social and cultural realms are both structured
and potentially subject to change at any moment. Because of this, obligations have a past and
a future. They stretch through a certain period of time, variable in length, but only relatively
enduring. Thus, if I promised to meet a friend in the pub every Wednesday evening, then I
should still be bound by the obligation I had contracted in a week’s time. Yet, obligations are
seldom eternal and their continuity is relative: some day, I may have good reasons to stop
feeling obliged to attend that weekly pub meeting. Exploring these reasons gives us some in-
sight about the articulation of obligations between the personal, social and cultural realms
(see Archer 1995 for the distinction between personal, social and cultural properties). For in-
stance, I may decide to quit drinking or to take my own promises more lightly (personal
realm); my relation with that friend may get colder over time (social realm); or the practice of
meeting in pubs can become unfashionable and other places might become more attractive as
meeting places (cultural realm).

This short illustration indicates that the relative continuity of obligations over time
presupposes relative continuities in the personal, cultural and social realms. In the personal
realm, a continuity of concern (for this friendship), and the values it entails, is presupposed.
Indeed, if my (positive) valuation of the pub as a meeting place is transformed, then I may
feel inclined to suggest a different meeting place; if my valuation of punctuality is trans-
formed then I would feel inclined to show up late; if my concern for my friend’s wellbeing
withers, then I may simply not show up without further warning!
In the cultural realm, a continuity of meaning relatively to the content of our promise is also presupposed. If, say in 20 years’ time, virtual meetings become the convention, then I may feel inclined to suggest an internet meeting while expecting a positive response from my friend. Similarly, if the word ‘pub’ comes to refer to what we currently call cafés, then the obligation might also be correspondingly affected. In short, my obligation is internally related to cultural emergent properties.

In the social realm, obligations presuppose – and in turn constitute – relatively enduring continuities that can be located at the level of social roles and of the relations between them. Back to the example of meeting a friend in the pub; the social roles I personify bear on my being subject to the obligation of attending the meeting. For instance, if it is accepted that friends ought to keep their promises and care for one another, then I would have some obligation to attend and further obligation to let my friend know promptly in case of my not going. I have argued elsewhere (Al-Amoudi 2007a; 2010) that a social rule is actually a particular kind of rule that is characterised by its internal relation to social relations between persons personifying social roles. The same can arguably be said of obligations: not all obligations are social and my obligation towards my friend may not always be social. On the other hand, it becomes a necessarily social obligation as soon as it is internally related to a social role. That is, when my ability to personify a role is threatened by my inability to respect that (social) obligation.

Understanding how obligations and social roles are mutually constitutive is of import for the present study. Firstly, because if roles are excluded from the picture, there is a risk of interpreting the normative commitments of people merely in terms of their personal attributes or in terms of the position they occupy within a network of relations. What would be missing in such a picture is an appreciation of the import of people’s efforts at playing their various social roles competently. These acts of personification are irreducible to the patterns of exchange in which people engage and can’t be subsumed under any personal data the inquirer may gather about participants. In other words, if I take my role as an employee seriously and if I am running late on a piece of work, then I may feel obliged to postpone that pub meeting.

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5 See Al-Amoudi 2010. NB : I used in that paper the notions of role and position interchangeably. This is not the case in the present chapter.
This obligation, stemming from my social role as an employee, depends on but cannot be explained away reductively by reference to my personal integrity or the fact that I have been meeting that friend every week over the last 2 years. Secondly, understanding the relation between obligations and social roles opens the door to a study of the morphogenesis of relations of authority that spans beyond mere agreements between two individuals. An ontological study of the links between roles, obligations and authority enables empirical studies of authority that attend to the morphogenesis of social roles and of the relations between them, rather than mere re-configurations of personal networks linking individuals but without making reference to the roles they are personifying.

One difficulty for such an ontological study is, however, that the notion of a social role is employed with considerable variation in the literature. In the context of the present chapter, I am trying to retrace its meaning, usage and import in two broad bodies of literature: network theory and realist social ontology. The next sub-sections are dedicated to that.

1.3.2 The notion of role in network theory

Network theorists distinguish between roles and positions. In their language, a position is a set of actors who have similar relations to all other actors in the network (Lazega 2007: 59). On the other hand, a role, or a role set, is the set of those relations as opposed to the individual actors who personify them. Network Theory leaves us, however, with the following questions:

Question 1: Are positions really of the same nature as persons? Approaches reducing positions to those people who occupy them (or vice versa) have been criticised by Archer (1995: 31-163). The gist of the argument is that, although their continuing existence and structure depends on one-another, positions, relations and people are different kinds of things with different properties and powers and are therefore subject to differing temporalities.

Question 2: Are roles merely identifiable by the fact that a person engages in regular transactions with a specific set of others? If my understanding of network theory is correct,
then a nurse working exclusively for a patient and a cleaner working exclusively for that same individual would be involved in the same roles *strictu sensu*. Conversely, two nurses working with different patients would be playing different roles. This result is not only counter-intuitive, it also casts doubts on the relevance of the use of terms in network theory. More importantly, it again prompts the question of what more robust conception of a role should be adopted by network theorists.

**Question 3**: Can there be roles without some form of recognition by the person personifying them? In the conception of a role above, it is sufficient for two persons to engage in a similar pattern of relations to hold that they play similar roles. This would imply that they may be personifying a role without even knowing. We shall see below how a plausible distinction between roles and positions might evolve precisely around participants’ recognition (Archer 2000). While persons with similar vested interests may occupy the same position, they do not hold the same role until they become conscious of their shared interests, decide to defend them, and accept those obligations implied by their preservation. While being poor is a social position, not all the poor feel sympathetic to protest movements. And even fewer amongst them accept to commit time and effort.

**Question 4**: Are roles immediately occupied by individuals by the mere fact of engaging into relations of exchange with others? Or is the process of playing a role a fragile and incomplete act of personification? And if so, how is this vulnerability exploited within relations of authority?

### 1. 3. 3 Actors and roles in realist social theorising

It is noteworthy that, although the early works on realist social ontology, such as Bhaskar’s *Possibility of Naturalism* (1998) paved the way to subsequent realist developments, they also treated social positions and practices as slots which individuals occupy immediately. Such works did not problematize, or enquire into, the subtle mechanisms through which individuals may engage and commit themselves to practices, positions and roles (for a critique from a realist Foucauldian perspective, see Al-Amoudi 2007b). More recent developments, such as
those of Archer since *Being Human* (2000, see also Archer 1995, 2003, 2007, 2012), open the black box of role personification. By the same token, they also address the four questions we have directed to network theory above.

Archer (2000, pp. 283-7) establishes a distinction between agents and actors. While the former are characterised by their actions within a collectivity, the latter are characterised by their identification with and personification of particular roles. Since the same person is typically both an agent and an actor, the question is set in terms of the dialectical relation between one’s personal identity and one’s social identity. Unless we fall back on the contractualist time paradox of would-be actors picking a role with no good reasons, except those they will find good *ex post*, we must admit that would-be actors are already endowed with a personal identity – if one that is incomplete and malleable. The pre-existence of personal identity is what accounts, in Archer’s argument, for the fact that actors are capable of personifying a social role rather than merely animating it. Agents (*qua* would-be actors) take up a new role by reflecting on their past experiences in the natural, practical and social realms. In turn, once they get involved in a role, they discover the constraints and opportunities this role imposes and offers for the development of their personal identity. Thus, young Jane who enjoys horse-riding may initially want to work in a stable. As she learns more about the job and starts experimenting with it first hand, she discovers that it is paid poorly and leaves little time for rest and leisure. This newly discovered constraint is of import for other concerns which she also holds dearly, such as spending time with her friends or dining in fine restaurants. In this light, Jane will have to choose between abandoning some of her personal concerns (relative to her personal identity), or look for another role (another social identity), or tailor her investment in that role (thus engaging an alignment of personal and social concerns).

This exceedingly short summary of Archer’s account helps answering the first and fourth questions I have raised above. Positions are not the same kind of things as persons, though the two are related dialectically. And the occupation of roles is never immediate but is the fragile result of agents’ creative attempts at personifying it while considering the totality of their concerns.

A slightly more detailed discussion is needed to answer question 2 (whether roles are defined exclusively by those transactions they entail?) and question 3 (do roles presuppose a
prior recognition from part of those who personify them?) If a lead is taken from Archer (1995; 2000), then question 2 might be answered along the following lines: although transactions and relations are vital for the persistence of roles over time, the latter can’t be defined by those regular transactions which they entail, nor by those relations which allow for such transactions to take place in the first place. Rather, roles are characterised as bundles of obligations; vested interests; penalties and rewards (Archer 1995: 187). Archer (2000: 286) also hints at an interesting distinction between social positions and roles:

to take an example from institutional morphogenesis, when educational control was exclusively in Church hands, this created exigencies for a number of groups and where such problems represented a clash of beliefs, an obstacle to a nascent social movement, or the exclusion of a particular category, these could only be interpreted as impinging upon roles by over stretching that concept to turn “believer”, “radical”, or “nouveau riche” into roles. (Archer 2000: 286)

While ‘believer’, ‘radical’ and ‘nouveau riche’ all entail vested interests and obligations, they remain labels for groups of individuals until they are recognised as such by their own members. By contrast, the interplay of these groups led in turn to the morphogenesis of ‘an array of new roles - teachers, administrators, inspectors and Ministers.’ (Archer 2000: 286). Thus, the answer to question 3 also has to be negative: an observer looking at people from a third person perspective can identify vested interests, regularities of practices and even commonalities of obligations (for instance by studying the systems of rewards and punishment at play). And participants may well be unaware of their vested interests, or unaware that their practices follow certain patterns. They may also be unaware that geographically distant persons share their obligations. What they cannot ignore, however, is whether they are personifying a role that crystallises these interests, practices and obligations into a social identity that they are willing to embrace.
1.4 Authority’s hidden networks

Network theory has offered us a point of entry into roles and obligations and realist social theory has offered much needed correctives. The obligations relative to authority are typically, though not necessarily, bundled into social roles. The latter are in turn personified by actors who rely on their own reflexivity in the form of internal conversations that may be carried with varying levels of aptitude (on this particular topic, see Archer 2003, 2007, 2012). Because the internal conversation represents both a central social process and a key difference between realist ontology and network-theory, it is worth clarifying it further. In particular, we shall attend to the question whether the internal conversation presupposes a network of social relations and how this can be traced empirically. To this end, we shall perform a short leap into the past and discuss George Herbert Mead’s theorisation of the morphogenesis of reflexivity through a succession of role-taking exercises (Mead 1967, [1934]).

1.4.1 Role-taking in pragmatic philosophy

Mead, one of the founding fathers of American pragmatist philosophy, does not use the notion of role as such. However, he relies extensively on the related notion of role-taking. The latter is a characteristic feature of human interaction (as opposed to interaction amongst insects and higher mammals) and is described as: ‘assuming the attitude of the other individual as well as calling it out in the other’ (Mead 1967: 254). The particular significance of role-taking lies in the fact that it enhances the individual’s control over his own response and improves co-operative activity. Indeed, even criticism – of self and others – is closely related to role-taking: a critique formulated by a person is always addressed from within a particular standpoint, and with the expectation of certain reactions on the part of those to whom it is addressed. Conversely, a gesture (including uttering a sentence) that would be uttered without

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* Purists will notice that I dropped the circumflex in Mead’s expression. This is due to editorial constraints. It may be worth noting that Meadean ‘rôle-taking’ does not presuppose exactly the same conception of (potentially unstable and heterogeneous) social communities that is presupposed in Archer (2012: pp. 87-93).
taking the attitudes of others into consideration cannot be meaningful, or can only be so for spurious reasons.  

Birds give us some insight as to the rudimentary mechanisms involved in role-taking (Mead 1967: 360). Each note they utter stimulates them and others into producing the next one. Yet, contrary to humans, birds do not anticipate the reaction of the other bird, not to mention their own (future) reaction. With humans, instances of role-taking are particularly visible in children’s play, especially when it involves dolls. These games reveal, indeed, how ready most children are for the expression of the parental attitude in situations similar to those they imagine in their games. Through the sequence of interactions with and between dolls, the child stimulates in herself the responses of adults, that is, responses that belong in a certain sense to another. This process of role-taking allows Mead (and other pragmatist philosophers) to account for the relative stability of the social order without recourse to direct imitation of behaviour. There is a process of imitation involved but it is an imitation of attitudes, which allows for improvisations that are truthful to the ‘principles’ of those serving as role-models.

Mead’s notion of role-taking provides a crucial insight into the functioning of the internal conversation. The latter does not merely involve a self (as I) conversing with herself (as Me) but also involves a (Meadean) you towards whom the internal conversation is oriented and whose attitude and plausible reactions are taken into account as the internal conversation progresses. Furthermore, the internal conversation does not necessarily take the form of a conversation of oneself with oneself imagined in front of another. Rather, the central case (especially in the early phases of the formation of the self) takes the form of a conversation of oneself with several imagined others.

The import of role-taking for the present discussion of authority’s networks should now be clearer. Social roles are personified by their human actors. Following Archer, this

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7 A well-known joke can perhaps illustrate this point. A madman is satisfying a natural, though intimate, urge in the middle of the asylum courtyard. As the warden enters, the madman stops and pulls up his trousers. The warden is pleasantly surprised by this reaction and asks the madman to elaborate on the shame he felt. ‘I don’t know’ responds the madman, ‘I just felt I was done…’
personification necessitates an internal conversation that seeks to align the actor’s personal identity (held as an agent) with the social identity provided by the role. However, following Mead, this internal conversation also mobilises countless attitudes which the actor has encountered during her life, both in others and in herself. This prompts novel research questions and associated methodological considerations for a study of the roles and networks involved in any relation of authority. To these questions we now turn.

1.4.2 Retracing authority’s hidden networks

Personifying a role presupposes a network of relations of authority that spreads beyond the specific organisation where it is located. In this last sub-section we provide a few indications as to how this ‘hidden network’ can be traced for the purpose of an empirical study of relations of authority.

Network theorists are eminently aware of the philosophical and methodological difficulties relative to specifying the boundaries of those networks they are attempting to analyse. Indeed, we agree wholeheartedly with Lazega (2007) that

The choice [of a network’s boundaries] depends on the process that is being studied *in fine*. Indeed, there is no one-size-fits-all categorization of the world that would allow examining all social processes and phenomena at once. Each and every delimitation at the meso-level enhances the visibility of some processes at the expense of others. (Lazega 2007, p.22. My translation)\(^8\)

\(^8\) ‘le choix [des frontières du réseau à étudier] est fonction du processus que l’on cherche à examiner *in fine*. Certes, il n’y a pas de découpage valable pour l’examen de tous les processus et phénomènes sociaux à la fois ; chaque découpage au niveau méso assure la lisibilité de certains processus au détriment de la lisibilité des autres.’ (Lazega 2007, p.22)
Our ontological ground clearing can provide some guidelines as to how the boundaries should be set and as to what aspects of the network should be examined with particular attention.

i) *Specific attention must be devoted to participants’ belief in legitimacy (or illegitimacy).* Since authority is a relation of power that is viewed as legitimate by participants, any study of authority should interrogate the reasons why participants comply with those relations of power in which they engage: is it a matter of calculative interest? Or do they view them as legitimate, and for what reasons? Similarly, since relations can be complex: what aspects of the relation are considered as particularly legitimate and which are less so?

ii) *Specific attention must be dedicated to social roles.* Observing individuals engaging into transactions is fundamentally insufficient. Similarly, attempts at reconstructing roles on the mere basis of those transactions in which participants engage are likely to be unconvincing. These may at best indicate patterns unknown to participants, however, they cannot account on their own for the normativity of social roles. That is, for the bundle of obligations they carry and, conversely, for their significance relative to relations of authority between actors. Ethnographic fieldwork should be used to explore the various roles in which participants engage. Typically, every participant is committed to a number of (often conflicting) roles. Empirical studies of authority need to explore what obligations/prerogatives these roles entail, what conflicts emerge between roles, how participants accommodate (or otherwise) to such conflicts and how much of their personal identity they are willing to invest in each of their roles.

iii) *The contours of the network of authority need to consider role taking.* The visible network of authority is provided by the regular transactions of participants and, once social roles are duly recognised, by those roles that are internally related to them (for an analysis of internal relations see Lawson 2003, pp. 227-8, see also Al-Amoudi 2010). There is, however, a much less visible network that is provided by actors’ role-models. If our brief Meadean considerations are taken seriously, then a network analysis of relations of authority should also include
role-models, real or imaginary, and specify which attitudes are generalised and transposed by actors.

iv) A diachronic approach is needed to understand participants’ socialisation. Since socialisation is neither immediate nor automatic, this prompts the question as to how participants learned to interact within those relations of authority they must face in their activity. Thus, interviews should probe them about those past experiences in which they were confronted with similar situations. This line of questioning is expected to flesh out past interactions in participants past-professional experiences, in their social milieu, in their university training and in childhood experiences of family and friendship (as well as hardships).

Concluding remarks: studying authority’s morphogenesis

I have endeavoured to offer a succinct ontological argument about authority. Its purpose is to clear the ground for future empirical studies. It has been proposed that Max Weber’s pioneering definition of authority could be improved in several ways: by considering its relationality and circularity; by attending to the subtle relation between obligation and legitimacy; by recognising the import of social roles in the morphogenesis of authority relations; and by attending closely to the micro-processes of role-taking.

These ontological considerations carry implications for empirical studies of authority: i) investigate the reasons why participants deem certain relations more legitimate than others, and certain aspects of them as more legitimate than others; ii) Attend to the normativity constitutive of social roles; iii) study the visible network provided by interactions and internally related roles but study as well the ‘hidden network’ provided by role models; iv) interview participants in-depth as to their past biographies and study how past relations contribute to shaping present ones.

The realist conception of authority offered in this paper differs from the (interpretive yet positivist) one proposed by Weber in a number of ways. Firstly, it aspires to trace real mechanisms and processes rather than merely to describe configurations of authority through such
heuristic categories as ideal types. In a sense, it is perhaps more subtle too as it attends to significant variations within a single ideal type or a combination of them. For instance, while warfare leadership and social activism can both be characterised by their reliance on charismatic authority, their implicit values, roles, networks and dynamics differ greatly. Secondly, it can account for the frequent situations in which power is so diffused amongst participants that it becomes difficult to discern a ‘ruler’ from a ‘ruled’. Moreover, even in those situations where the asymmetry of power is indubitable, the proposed approach allows us to account for the (admittedly limited) authority of the ruled over the ruler. Finally, it does not assume that groups are homogeneously structured by a single form of authority or a combination of them. Rather, it attends to differences and conflicts between participants within the group.

One last short example from the author’s ongoing study of the Occupy Geneva movement might illustrate the difference between a Weberian approaches and an ontologically informed study of authority’s morphogenesis. A Weberian analysis would usefully point out that the Occupy Geneva camp displayed elements of charismatic, rational-legal and traditional authority. It would also point out that charismatic authority was prevalent in the early days, although it was slowly replaced (without ever being suppressed) by rational-legal authority and, to a lesser extent, by traditional authority.

The approach offered in the present paper supplements Weberian analysis by attending to the evolution of the roles and role-taking attitudes of participants. It studies the evolution, sometimes over short periods of time, of those roles being personified and of those role-models whose attitudes are adopted by participants and whose approbation is sought to secure the legitimacy of their actions. The displacement of charismatic authority by rational-legal authority can be accounted for through a study of the gradual introduction of formal rules within the Occupy Geneva movement and through a study of the discussions and conflicts that followed. While all participants expressed open distrust of ‘bureaucracy’, some were favourable early on to formalising the basic rules of conduct expected during general assemblies through a written charter whereas others were much less keen to do so. The opposition between both groups is difficult to understand without some reference to the generalised other each was trying to please. Those in favour of the charter were worried about the gaze of the media, the police and those right-wing politicians ready to close the camp. Those against
the charter were particularly worried precisely because they believed they ought to combat or ignore, rather than seduce or accommodate, the press, the police and politicians.

One obvious limitation of this proposed approach is that it must abandon any pretension at mapping an entire network exhaustively. Moreover, extensive mathematical crunching is expected to be impossible from the outset. The hope is that such an approach, centred on local networks, will nonetheless provide a thick description of relations of authority in specific social contexts and that it will result in maps that may include surprising rationales and unexpected participants (especially role models).
References

Conference paper, usual disclaimers apply