

# The Problem of Political Authority

An Examination of the Right to Coerce  
and the Duty to Obey



**Michael Huemer**



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*Also by Michael Huemer*

ETHICAL INTUITIONISM  
SKEPTICISM AND THE VEIL OF PERCEPTION

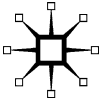
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An Examination of the Right to Coerce  
and the Duty to Obey

Michael Huemer

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# Preface

This book addresses the foundational problem of political philosophy: the problem of accounting for the authority of government. This authority has always struck me as puzzling and problematic. Why should 535 people in Washington be entitled to issue commands to 300 million others? And why should the others obey? These questions, as I argue in the following pages, have no satisfactory answers.

Why is this important? Nearly all political discourse centers on what sort of policies the government should make, and nearly all of it – whether in political philosophy or in popular forums – presupposes that the government has a special kind of authority to issue commands to the rest of society. When we argue about what the government's immigration policy ought to be, for example, we normally presuppose that the state has the right to control movement into and out of the country. When we argue about the best tax policy, we presuppose that the state has the right to take wealth from individuals. When we argue about health care reform, we presuppose that the state has the right to decide how health care should be provided and paid for. If, as I hope to convince you, these presuppositions are mistaken, then nearly all of our current political discourse is misguided and must be fundamentally rethought.

Who should read this book? The questions addressed herein are relevant to anyone interested in politics and government. I hope my fellow philosophers will profit from it, but I also hope it will reach beyond that small group. I have therefore tried to minimize academic jargon and to keep the writing as clear and straightforward as possible. I do not presuppose any specialized knowledge.

Is this a book of extremist ideology? Yes and no. I defend some radical conclusions in the following pages. But although I am an extremist, I have always striven to be a reasonable one. I reason on the basis of what seem to me common sense ethical judgments. I do not assume a controversial, grand philosophical theory, an absolutist interpretation of some particular value, or a set of dubious empirical claims. This is to say that although my *conclusions* are highly controversial, my *premises* are not. Furthermore, I have striven to address alternative viewpoints fairly and reasonably. I consider in detail the most interesting and initially

plausible attempts to justify governmental authority. When it comes to my own political view, I address all the important objections found in the literature and the oral tradition. Politics being as it is, I cannot expect to persuade committed partisans of other ideologies. My aim, however, is to persuade those who have kept an open mind regarding the problem of political authority.

What is in this book? Chapters 2–5 discuss philosophical theories about the basis of state authority. Chapter 6 discusses psychological and historical evidence regarding our attitudes about authority. Chapter 7 asks the question, if there is no authority, how ought citizens and government employees to behave? It is here that the most immediately practical recommendations appear. Part II of the book proposes an alternative social structure not based on authority. Chapters 10–12 address the most obvious practical problems for such a society. The last chapter discusses whether and how the changes I recommend might come about.

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# **Part I**

## **The Illusion of Authority**