Philosophical Anarchism Revisited

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Robert P. Wolff argued in 1970 that it is always wrong for a person to obey the commands of a political authority, and that the very idea of legitimate authority is empty and self-defeating. His view came to be known as a classic kind of 'philosophical anarchism'. Though his argument vexed legal and political philosophers for years, it is now generally acknowledged that the Oxford philosopher Joseph Raz decisively refuted Wolff's argument, and vindicated the possibility of legitimate authority, by showing how obeying legitimate authorities can be both rational and justified. Sevel argues that while Raz's initial response was plausible, the broader moral and political philosophy which Raz himself has developed over the last half century unwittingly provides the resources for formulating a very different but equally challenging objection to the idea of legitimate authority. Sevel articulates this new and unrecognized form of anarchism implicit in Raz's philosophy, and shows that neither Raz nor anyone else has a plausible response to it.