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Authoritarianism and the Architecture of Obedience

From Fiduciary–Epistemic Trusteeship to Clientelist Betrayal

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A study of obedience and dissonance reframing authority through the camp guard's epistemic condition

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Lex et Ratio Ltd provides research, advisory, and strategic consulting in governance reform, fiduciary accountability, and epistemic ethics, integrating legal analysis, institutional theory, and practical reform strategies across public, corporate, and academic institutions.

Abstract

This paper develops a theory of authoritarianism as an *architecture of obedience*, integrating classical social psychology with fiduciary–epistemic theory. It argues that obedience is not merely behavioural but epistemic: to obey is to substitute another's judgment for one's own, to silence conscience, and to inhabit categories fabricated by authority. Situating Nazi concentration camp guards within this framework, the analysis reframes them not as aberrant sadists but as epistemic subjects shaped by systemic betrayal.

The argument advances four contributions. *Diagnostic*: authoritarianism is analysed as amplified epistemic clientelism, scaling ordinary bargains of dependence into systemic capture. *Psychological*: cognitive dissonance is reconceptualised as a structural epistemic event, its dual trajectories—collapse or endurance—explaining both routinised complicity and rare acts of bounded freedom. *Philosophical*: authority is redefined as fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship, distinguished from Raz's exclusionary model and other procedural accounts by its duties of candour, care, and loyalty. *Normative*: atrocity prevention is shown to require fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds and, ultimately, an epistemic constitution capable of dignifying dependence, protecting dissonance, and preserving pluralism.

Guards thus appear both as enforcers and casualties: participants in atrocity, yet entrapped in an epistemic order that converted trust into betrayal. Their condition exposes authoritarianism as fiduciary breach in nuce, where candour, care, and loyalty collapse into propaganda, coercion, and distortion. By analysing the guard as an epistemic subject, the paper provides a framework for diagnosing past atrocities and for resisting new architectures of obedience, from populist propaganda to algorithmic governance.

Keywords

authoritarianism, architecture of obedience, epistemic clientelism, fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship, authority, fiduciary breach, atrocity as epistemic failure, camp guards, obedience and conformity, cognitive dissonance, bounded freedom, epistemic subjugation, Volksgemeinschaft, propaganda, fiduciary duties, epistemic constitution, pluralism

Working Paper Status

This paper is a draft contribution to an ongoing research programme on fiduciary–epistemic governance. It represents work in progress and is subject to further revision as the arguments are refined and situated within a broader book-length project. Readers are welcome to cite this version, but should note that substantive changes may be introduced in subsequent iterations.

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1. Introduction — Framing the Epistemic Condition of the Guard

1.1 Why the Guard? From Historical Figure to Epistemic Subject

The Holocaust is not only a historical catastrophe but an enduring challenge to human understanding. At its centre stands a troubling figure: the concentration camp guard. He was often not a mastermind of ideology nor a senior bureaucrat, but an ordinary man charged with extraordinary acts of cruelty. Scholars have long debated how to explain this role. Hannah Arendt (1951/1973) spoke of the "banality of evil," locating responsibility in unthinking obedience. Christopher Browning (1992) portrayed Reserve Police Battalion 101 as ordinary men whose conformity led them into atrocity. Daniel Goldhagen (1996), by contrast, argued for deep-rooted cultural antisemitism as the decisive factor, a view complemented by Claudia Koonz's (2003) account of Nazi conscience-building through ideological domestication.

These interpretations frame the guard as moral agent, bureaucratic functionary, or cultural product. Yet what they do not fully consider is the guard as epistemic subject: someone whose capacity to know, judge, and perceive was reshaped by authoritarian structures. Guards were situated at the hinge between systemic command and individual action, translating ideology into practice while themselves dependent upon the very authority they served. This liminal position makes them a revealing test case for analysing authoritarianism not only as a political or cultural formation but as an epistemic architecture of obedience.

This perspective has contemporary salience. Recent prosecutions—including John Demjanjuk, convicted as an accessory to 27,900 murders at Sobibor (Fischer, Vogler & Nachtmann, 2011; BreakingNews.ie, 2009), Bruno Dey, sentenced for complicity in Stutthof (Vormbaum, 2021), and Josef S., convicted at 101 years of age for accessory to murder at Sachsenhausen (Anadolu Agency, 2022)—demonstrate that the guard remains not only a historical but also a juridical problem. These cases testify to the enduring struggle to adjudicate complicity when authority, ideology, and obedience intertwine. They also reveal why the guard is the appropriate focal point: neither top architect nor powerless victim, he embodies both complicity and epistemic captivity, at once accomplice and casualty of systemic betrayal.

A crucial caveat is necessary at the outset. To analyse the guard epistemologically is not to excuse, mitigate, or relativise responsibility. The crimes remain crimes. The point is rather to expose the epistemic mechanisms that enabled ordinary men to become instruments of extraordinary violence. This inquiry supplements moral judgment with an account of how cognition, perception, and dependence were systematically reorganised under authoritarianism.

1.2 Problem statement

Psychological research demonstrates the fragility of independence under pressure. Solomon Asch's (1951) conformity experiments showed that individuals deny their own sensory evidence to match group consensus. Stanley Milgram (1963) revealed how far people will go in obeying authority, even to the point of harming others. Stanley Feldman (2003) theorised authoritarianism as an intensification of the autonomy–conformity conflict, while Karen Stenner (2005) emphasised the authoritarian dynamic as a response to perceived threat.

These findings illuminate important dynamics, but they leave a crucial gap. They explain obedience as behaviour, but not obedience as epistemic structure — how cruelty was normalised as duty, how silence became assent, and how ideology fabricated reality itself. Holocaust historians have described guards as

bureaucratic cogs (Arendt, 1951/1973) or ordinary men pressed into service (Browning, 1992), but they, too, seldom analyse the epistemic architecture of complicity: how authority systematically reorganised perception, judgment, and conscience.

Epistemic Clientelism Theory (Kahl, 2025f) provides a way to bridge this gap. Clientelism occurs when epistemic autonomy is surrendered in exchange for recognition, protection, or belonging. Applied to the guard, this means that independence of judgment was traded for membership in the *Volksgemeinschaft*, protection within the SS hierarchy, and recognition from peers. His knowledge, and the limits of what could be questioned, were shaped by these conditional bargains.

This paper therefore advances a broader claim: authority is properly understood not as the power to silence judgment (Raz, 1979) but as fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship, bound by duties of candour, care, and loyalty (Darwall, 2006; Kahl, 2025c). Authoritarianism represents this formula inverted: fiduciary trust betrayed, dependence converted into exploitation. The guard is the test case, not because he was exceptional, but because his obedience crystallises the architecture of authoritarianism itself — an architecture of obedience built on the systematic capture of epistemic life.

1.3 Thesis statement

This paper argues that the psychology of the Nazi concentration camp guard is best understood not merely as obedience or conformity but as the systematic erosion of epistemic agency — a collapse of independent judgment into authoritarian clientelism. The guard's autonomy was progressively traded away through conditional bargains: belonging, security, and advancement in exchange for assent to ideological categories.

Cognitive dissonance was central to this process. Guards experienced tension between conscience and command, perception and propaganda. Yet dissonance, reconceptualised here as an epistemic event, was rarely preserved as a fragile space of freedom. Instead, it was channelled into rationalisation, obedience, and silence, closing the very space in which agency might have persisted.

The Nazi regime exemplifies a fiduciary breach of authority. Authority, properly conceived, is fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship: it dignifies dependence through candour, care, and loyalty. The regime inverted this relation, demanding loyalty while betraying candour and exploiting epistemic vulnerability. Guards thus became not autonomous knowers but nodal agents within an architecture of obedience — epistemically captured subjects whose dependence was weaponised into domination.

This reframing illuminates atrocity as an epistemic failure. It explains how ordinary men could participate in extraordinary crimes — not through sadism or pathology alone, but through systemic betrayal of fiduciary–epistemic duties. The guard is therefore both accomplice and casualty: morally responsible, yet entrapped within a structure that radicalised dependence into complicity.

1.4 Significance and contribution

This paper makes five interconnected contributions — theoretical, diagnostic, psychological, philosophical, and normative — unified by the claim that authority is properly understood as fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship: the holding of power in trust, bound by duties of candour, care, and loyalty, so that dependence is dignified rather than exploited.

- **Theoretical**. The paper develops a *theory of authoritarianism as the architecture of obedience*. Classical studies of conformity and obedience (Sherif, Asch, Milgram, Feldman, Stenner) are integrated into a structural framework that interprets obedience not only as behaviour but as epistemic submission — the surrender of judgment in exchange for recognition, security, or belonging. This provides a conceptual bridge from psychology to fiduciary–epistemic theory, showing how authoritarianism magnifies ordinary bargains of deference into systemic capture.

- **Diagnostic**. The analysis extends existing accounts of the guard's psychology by introducing an epistemic dimension. Whereas Arendt, Browning, and Goldhagen frame the guard in terms of moral judgment, bureaucratic function, or cultural predisposition, this paper shows how knowledge itself was structured and constrained. Through Epistemic Clientelism Theory, the guard is revealed not simply as obedient but as epistemically dependent: his autonomy exchanged for recognition, protection, and belonging within an authoritarian system.

- **Psychological**. The paper reconceptualises cognitive dissonance not as a bias or anomaly but as an epistemic event. The guard's unease when confronted with cruelty was constitutive of his condition. The decisive hinge was how dissonance was managed: most collapsed into rationalisation, obedience, or silence, while a few endured contradiction as bounded freedom. This dual trajectory clarifies both complicity and the fragile persistence of agency under systemic distortion.

- **Philosophical**. By introducing fiduciary theory into atrocity studies, the paper reframes authority itself. Fiduciary obligations of care, candour, and loyalty dignify dependence by protecting the vulnerable. The Nazi regime inverted these obligations, demanding loyalty while betraying fiduciary duties, thereby converting authority into exploitative clientelism. This casts the guard not merely as an agent of violence but also as an epistemic casualty of authoritarianism, trapped in a structure that annihilated independent judgment.

- **Normative**. The paper argues that atrocity prevention requires fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds: institutional and cultural frameworks that dignify dependence, preserve pluralism, and protect dissonance as a fragile form of freedom. The relevance extends beyond Holocaust studies to pressing contemporary challenges — authoritarian populism, the governance of artificial intelligence, and the erosion of democratic trust.

In sum, the paper reframes the guard as an epistemic subject, develops the theory of authoritarianism as an architecture of obedience, and defines authority as fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship: a standard for distinguishing legitimate power, which dignifies dependence, from authoritarian clientelism, which exploits it.

1.5 Methodological approach

The argument advanced in this paper is conceptual, normative, and interdisciplinary. It does not present new archival evidence about the Holocaust nor fresh experimental data on obedience. Instead, it synthesises insights from psychology, philosophy, law, and epistemology to illuminate the camp guard as an epistemic subject and to test and extend a set of theoretical tools. In particular, it develops the theory of authoritarianism as the architecture of obedience: a framework that integrates classical studies of conformity with fiduciary–epistemic theory to show how authority captures judgment by converting ordinary bargains of deference into systemic clientelism.

- **Philosophical and epistemological method**. Drawing on phenomenology (Husserl, 1913/1983; Heidegger, 1927/1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012) and social epistemology (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013), the analysis

frames the guard's condition of dissonance, silence, and dependence as a structural feature of knowing rather than an anomaly. Husserl's account of intentional horizons shows that perception is always framed by prior structures of meaning, a point that clarifies how Nazi pedagogy could reorganise what guards experienced as self-evident reality. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology deepens this insight by emphasising perception as embodied structuring, not passive reception. Heidegger's concept of *Entschlossenheit* (resoluteness) is then used to anchor rare endurance in a phenomenological register, complementing Arendt's (1973) account of inner dialogue as conscience. Cognitive dissonance is reconceptualised as an epistemic event (Kahl, 2025b), with bifurcated outcomes: collapse into conformity or endurance as bounded freedom.

- **Psychological foundations**. Classic findings on conformity and obedience (Sherif, 1936; Asch, 1951; Milgram, 1963) and modern theories of authoritarianism (Feldman, 2003; Stenner, 2005) are re-read through *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (Kahl, 2025a, 2025f). Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (1957) and its experimental demonstration (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959) are also integrated, showing how belief adjusts to behaviour under pressure. Together, these frameworks reveal how conditional bargains of autonomy for recognition and belonging structured the guard's psychology within the authoritarian system.

- **Legal and fiduciary framework**. Fiduciary theory (Frankel, 2011; Miller, 2014; Smith, 2011) is employed to assess the Nazi regime as a fiduciary-breached authority. Building on Kahl's account of fiduciary–epistemic duties (2025c, 2025g, 2025l), the regime is analysed as an authority that demanded loyalty while betraying duties of candour, care, and truth — thereby converting dignified dependence into exploitative clientelism. The contrast with Raz's (1979) "pre-emptive reasons" model, and with relational accounts of authority (Pitkin, 1967; Flathman, 1980; Darwall, 2006; Tyler, 2006), sharpens the normative stakes.

- **Holocaust scholarship**. Foundational works (Arendt, 1951/1973; Hilberg, 1961; Levi, 1987; Browning, 1992; Goldhagen, 1996; Koonz, 2003; Longerich, 2012; Wildt, 2008, 2012; Welch, 1983) provide the historical grounding against which the conceptual analysis is developed. These ensure that the argument remains connected to empirical realities and avoids drifting into abstraction.

- **Methodological stance**. The paper is interpretive rather than empirical. The camp guard functions as a test case through which epistemic clientelism, dissonance-as-epistemic-event, and fiduciary–epistemic analysis are tested and extended. The goal is not to replace historical or psychological accounts of the Holocaust, but to supplement them with an epistemological dimension that clarifies how atrocity becomes possible and how it might be prevented in the future. In this sense, the Holocaust serves both as a historical case and as a lens for analysing contemporary crises of authority — from authoritarian populism to algorithmic governance — where fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds remain urgently needed.

1.6 Scope and limitations

The scope of this paper is conceptual and diagnostic. Its focus is on the epistemic and psychological structures that shaped the concentration camp guard's condition. It does not seek to reconstruct the institutional history of the Holocaust or adjudicate between competing interpretations of Nazi policy. Those tasks remain with historians. The contribution here is interpretive: reframing the guard as an epistemic subject within an authoritarian architecture of obedience, marked by fiduciary breach.

Several limitations follow.

- **Selectivity of sources**. The analysis draws on emblematic works in psychology, philosophy, fiduciary law, and Holocaust studies. These texts are illustrative rather than exhaustive. The Holocaust has generated a vast and contested literature; this paper narrows its focus to strands most relevant to epistemic clientelism, cognitive dissonance, and fiduciary betrayal.

- **Conceptual orientation**. The argument is interpretive rather than empirical. It develops a philosophical and theoretical account of the guard as an epistemic subject. Its claims are designed to complement, not replace, empirical research in history, psychology, or legal studies.

- **Ethical boundaries**. To describe the guard as an epistemic casualty of authoritarianism is not to relativise guilt or diminish responsibility. Moral culpability remains intact. The purpose is to supplement moral and historical accounts by exposing how knowledge, dependence, and dissonance were reorganised under authoritarian structures.

- **Illustrative case**. The guard functions as a paradigmatic lens for analysing authoritarian epistemic collapse. While the same frameworks may illuminate contemporary crises—such as authoritarian populism, mass propaganda, or algorithmic governance—those applications lie beyond the scope of this study.

By setting these boundaries, the paper ensures rigour and proportion: grounded in scholarship, sensitive to historical context, and committed to clarifying epistemic structures without overreaching into historical reconstruction or moral exoneration.

1.7 Roadmap

The argument unfolds across eight further chapters, each analysing a dimension of the guard's epistemic condition and advancing the claim that authority must be understood as fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship: power held in trust, bound by candour, care, and loyalty, so that dependence is dignified rather than exploited.

- **Chapter 2 — Authoritarianism and the Architecture of Obedience**. Reviews classic and contemporary studies of conformity and obedience (Sherif, Asch, Milgram, Feldman, Stenner) and reframes them as epistemic submission: the surrender of judgment in exchange for recognition or security. Integrating historical research (Wildt, Longerich), it shows how SS training, oaths, and ideological saturation recast obedience as a way of knowing.

- **Chapter 3 — Epistemic Clientelism in Totalitarian Contexts**. Develops Epistemic Clientelism Theory by analysing the Volksgemeinschaft as a grand epistemic bargain: belonging exchanged for conformity. Drawing on Koonz, Wildt, and Koslov, it highlights how fascist subjectivity was shaped through racial exclusion, gendered domination, and colonial logics, situating the guard within this wider economy of dependence.

- **Chapter 4 — Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event**. Reconceptualises Festinger's theory of dissonance as a structural epistemic rupture. Guards confronted tensions between conscience and command; most collapsed into rationalisation, obedience, or silence, while a few endured contradiction as bounded freedom. This dual trajectory becomes the hinge of epistemic autonomy. Literary testimony

(Bivens on Anna Seghers) illustrates how fascist subjectivity was culturally produced as well as psychologically enforced.

- **Chapter 5 — Silence, Shadows, and Epistemic Subjugation**. Interprets the Lager as an economy of silence and illusion. Drawing on Kahl's Silent Tree and Silent Shadows alongside Spivak and Fricker, it shows how authority suppressed conscience and manufactured distorted realities. With Koonz's account of the Nazi conscience, it demonstrates how cruelty was moralised, casting epistemic distortion as ethical duty.

- **Chapter 6 — Fiduciary Authority and its Breach**. Reframes authority itself. Drawing on fiduciary theory (Frankel, Miller, Smith, Kahl), it defines authority as fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship and contrasts it with Raz, Darwall, Flathman, Pitkin, and Tyler. The Nazi regime inverted fiduciary duties, demanding loyalty while betraying candour and care. Guards thus became epistemic dependants systematically betrayed by the very authority they served.

- **Chapter 7 — Micro–Macro Linkages**. Situates guards as nodes within an epistemic architecture of power. It integrates psychological mechanisms of obedience with macro-structures of propaganda, Volksgemeinschaft, and bureaucracy (Arendt, Welch, Hilberg, Wildt, Rich). Auxiliary guards illustrate how epistemic bargains scaled transnationally, extending complicity beyond German perpetrators. The return to Plato's cave underscores how guards were both enforcers of deception and captives of its shadows.

- **Chapter 8 — Normative and Contemporary Implications**. Moves from diagnosis to prescription. It develops the concept of fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds as safeguards against authoritarian collapse, tested against recent prosecutions (Bruno Dey, Josef S.) which show that epistemic breaches remain juridically legible. Extending the framework to contemporary crises — authoritarian populism, disinformation, and algorithmic governance — it argues that new "guards of perception" (Mittelstadt, Zuboff) demand fiduciary–epistemic constraints.

- **Chapter 9 — Conclusion — The Guard as Epistemic Subject**. Synthesises the argument, restating the fivefold contribution — theoretical, diagnostic, psychological, philosophical, normative — and underscoring that atrocity prevention requires reconstituting authority as fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship. The guard stands as both accomplice and epistemic casualty, a figure whose condition illuminates authoritarian collapse and whose legacy warns that responsibility remains legible across generations.

Taken together, these chapters reframe the concentration camp guard not simply as an obedient perpetrator but as an epistemic subject. This lens provides new resources for diagnosing atrocity as epistemic failure and for constructing institutional architectures capable of resisting what this paper terms the architecture of obedience — the authoritarian conversion of fiduciary dependence into systemic clientelism — in both historical and contemporary contexts.

2. Authoritarianism and the Architecture of Obedience

2.1 Classic Frameworks: Sherif, Asch, Milgram, Adorno

The psychological study of authoritarianism and obedience began with attempts to explain how ordinary people could become complicit in extraordinary violence. A foundational early contribution came from Muzafer Sherif (1936), whose autokinetic effect experiments revealed that in ambiguous situations, individuals rapidly converged on group norms. Asked to estimate how far a stationary point of light appeared to move in a dark room, participants, when tested together, produced judgments that aligned over time, creating a shared "truth" that persisted even when individuals were later tested alone. Sherif's insight was profound: perception itself could be socially structured. Where reality was uncertain, consensus filled the gap, producing norms that then bound individuals beyond the immediate group setting.

Solomon Asch (1951) extended this insight into situations of clear, unambiguous reality. In his line-judgment experiments, participants knowingly denied their own visual perception to match a unanimous group. Unlike Sherif's ambiguous light, here the evidence was plain. The finding demonstrated that social pressure could override even the most basic sensory judgments, showing that conformity was not simply a way to manage uncertainty but a force capable of reconfiguring certainty itself. For guards, the implication was stark: to dissent from the uniformity of the SS was to risk standing alone against a manufactured consensus that felt as binding as perception.

Stanley Milgram (1963) added the dimension of hierarchy and command. His obedience studies showed that ordinary people, instructed by an authority figure, would administer what they believed were painful and even lethal shocks to another person. The lesson was that under hierarchical authority, conscience could be displaced upward: individuals obeyed, not because they were inherently cruel, but because they treated the experimenter's command as overriding their own moral judgment. Milgram himself drew the connection to wartime atrocities, noting how obedience could transform otherwise ordinary individuals into instruments of violence.

Theodor Adorno and colleagues (1950), in *The Authoritarian Personality*, offered a different but complementary lens. They argued that authoritarian submission was not merely situational but often dispositional, rooted in childhood experiences that instilled traits of conventionalism, deference, and hostility toward outsiders. Though the study was marred by methodological flaws, it gave conceptual shape to the idea that authoritarianism could be internalised as character structure. Later theorists such as Feldman (2003) and Stenner (2005) would refine this into situational dynamics, but Adorno's effort underscored that the roots of obedience might extend deep into psychic formation.

Taken together, Sherif, Asch, Milgram, and Adorno outlined a psychological architecture of obedience. Sherif revealed how norms arise and persist even in ambiguity; Asch showed how consensus overrides perception; Milgram demonstrated how conscience itself could be subordinated to command; Adorno suggested that personality predispositions could make such deference more likely. The camp guard entered precisely this architecture, where perception, judgment, and conscience were corroded by overlapping pressures of norm, conformity, hierarchy, and personality.

2.2 Feldman's Autonomy–Conformity Conflict

If Sherif, Asch, and Milgram revealed the situational power of group norms, consensus, and authority, later theorists sought to explain why individuals so often chose conformity over autonomy. Stanley Feldman (2003) provided one of the most influential refinements by framing authoritarianism not as a fixed personality type, as Adorno had suggested, but as the resolution of a basic psychological conflict. Human beings, Feldman argued, continually oscillate between two needs: the desire for autonomy — to think and act independently — and the need for conformity — to secure stability, belonging, and order. Under ordinary circumstances, these impulses coexist uneasily. But under conditions of threat or uncertainty, the balance tips, and people resolve the tension by collapsing autonomy into conformity.

This reframing corrected earlier accounts in two ways. First, it avoided the determinism of Adorno's Authoritarian Personality, which implied that authoritarianism was the fate of certain individuals rather than a potential dynamic for all. Second, it offered an explanatory bridge between the laboratory findings of Asch and Milgram and the realities of mass obedience under totalitarian regimes. Where Asch showed how consensus could bend perception, and Milgram how commands could override conscience, Feldman illuminated the bargain beneath these behaviours: autonomy traded away for recognition, safety, or social harmony.

Karen Stenner (2005) sharpened this analysis with her account of the "authoritarian dynamic." She argued that authoritarian predispositions lie dormant until activated by diversity, instability, or perceived threat. In these conditions, the latent preference for conformity surges, producing heightened intolerance of difference and intensified demands for authority. Feldman and Stenner together demonstrate that authoritarianism is less an intrinsic character flaw than a relational response to vulnerability: a way of resolving cognitive and social tension by surrendering judgment to collective norms or powerful leaders.

For the camp guard, this autonomy–conformity conflict was manufactured and constant. SS training and ideological saturation destabilised prior moral anchors, creating perpetual uncertainty. Peer surveillance and denunciation culture ensured that deviation carried risks of ostracism or punishment, while conformity promised safety, career advancement, and belonging. Autonomy thus became the dangerous choice; conformity, the rational one.

Not all deference to authority, however, collapses autonomy. Tom Tyler (2006) showed that individuals comply with law when they perceive it as legitimate — procedurally just, transparent, and fair. Hannah Pitkin (1967) tied legitimacy to representation: authority must answer to those on whose behalf it acts. Stephen Darwall (2006) reframed authority in terms of reciprocal accountability in the "second-person standpoint." By contrast, Joseph Raz (1979) defined authority as providing exclusionary reasons — pre-emptive commands that override personal judgment. Feldman's model, read against these theories, highlights the crux: authoritarian regimes resolve the autonomy–conformity conflict through coercion and distortion, while legitimate authority resolves it through reciprocity, candour, and recognition.

Here Feldman's conflict converges with Kahl's *Epistemic Architecture of Power* (2025d). Authority is not simply behavioural control but epistemic structuring — shaping the terms of what can be known, believed, and judged. Legitimate authority functions as fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship, binding itself to candour, care, and loyalty so that dependence dignifies rather than degrades autonomy. Authoritarian authority, by contrast, betrays these duties, turning dependence into clientelism and collapsing judgment into obedience.

2.3 Authoritarianism as Epistemic Condition: Obedience = Submission of Judgment

The frameworks of Sherif, Asch, Milgram, Feldman, and Stenner, taken together, reveal a progression. What begins as norm-formation in ambiguous settings (Sherif), expands into conformity against sensory evidence (Asch), is radicalised into obedience against conscience (Milgram), and finally generalised into a situational conflict between autonomy and conformity (Feldman, Stenner). Each contribution illuminates behaviour, but each also points to a deeper truth: obedience is not merely an act of doing, but an act of knowing.

To obey is to substitute another's judgment for one's own, to silence perception, and to reconfigure conscience within the terms dictated by authority. In this sense, obedience becomes an epistemic act. Sherif's subjects did not simply agree with others — they learned to perceive the ambiguous light in line with group consensus. Asch's participants did not merely pretend; many came to doubt their own senses. Milgram's subjects did not only perform an act against conscience — they deferred conscience itself, treating the experimenter's assurance as the arbiter of reality. Feldman clarified the trade-off beneath these behaviours: autonomy of judgment exchanged for recognition, stability, or belonging.

Epistemic Clientelism Theory (Kahl, 2025a, 2025f) names this conditional bargain explicitly. What appears as conformity or obedience can be redescribed as the surrender of epistemic autonomy in exchange for protection, recognition, or the reassurance of being aligned with the collective. The participant in Milgram's lab, like the guard in the Lager, did not merely "follow orders": he mortgaged independent judgment for the promise of safety, order, or acceptance.

This reframing resonates with social epistemology. Miranda Fricker (2007) has shown how prejudice erodes epistemic agency by discrediting voices, and Ivana Marková (2025) emphasises that epistemic trust — the willingness to rely on others for orientation — is indispensable yet always exposes vulnerability. In authoritarian contexts, this vulnerability is systematically exploited. Obedience thus becomes less about individual weakness than about structured epistemic submission: knowing as commanded, perceiving as instructed, interpreting within the categories supplied by authority.

From a phenomenological perspective, this collapse of judgment echoes Martin Heidegger's analysis of *das Man* — the anonymous "they" into which *Dasein* falls when it surrenders authentic understanding. In such fallenness, individuals no longer interpret the world for themselves but adopt the pre-interpreted categories of the collective. The guard who obeyed did not simply comply with orders; he lived within a world disclosed by the "they," where conscience was muffled and authenticity replaced by conformity (Heidegger, 1927/1962).

The SS oath exemplifies this dynamic. Sworn personally to Hitler, it was not simply a declaration of loyalty but a renunciation of private judgment — an act of epistemic surrender. What Milgram simulated in the laboratory, the oath enacted in lived reality: conscience transferred to authority, with recognition and safety conditional upon obedience (IMT, 1946, Vol. IV, pp. 148–150; Höhne, 1969; Arendt, 1973; Levi, 1987).

Seen this way, authoritarianism can be reinterpreted as an epistemic condition. It is not merely behavioural conformity or psychological submission, but the collapse of epistemic agency into systemic clientelism. Judgment is no longer exercised independently but mediated through the categories of power. This insight prepares the ground for §2.4, where the mechanisms of oath, training, propaganda, and ritual are shown to institutionalise obedience as the very condition of knowing within the Nazi order.

2.4 SS Training, Oaths, and Ideological Saturation

If obedience is best understood as epistemic submission, then the SS provides perhaps the most vivid historical case of how such submission can be institutionalised, ritualised, and made to appear natural. Recruits did not merely acquire military discipline; they were subjected to a deliberate re-education that reshaped perception, judgment, and conscience. The goal was not only to train men to fight but to unbind them from inherited norms and re-anchor their entire epistemic horizon in the categories of the Nazi order.

Michael Wildt (2008) describes this as the formation of a "generation of the unbound": young men deliberately severed from older moral traditions, taught to see themselves as a new vanguard, emancipated not into freedom but into total commitment to ideology. Heinrich Himmler's vision of the SS, as Peter Longerich (2012) shows, was explicitly pedagogical. He conceived of the corps not simply as an elite fighting unit but as a community remade to perceive the world through the lenses of racial hierarchy, bureaucratic duty, and the Führer's will.

Central to this transformation was the oath sworn personally to Hitler. This was more than ritualistic loyalty; it was, in the terms of Epistemic Clientelism Theory, a formalised act of epistemic surrender. The oath bound recognition and belonging within the SS hierarchy to the renunciation of private judgment. What Milgram (1963) simulated in the laboratory — the transfer of conscience to authority — the SS oath enacted with existential seriousness: a binding pledge that one's conscience now resided in the Führer (IMT, 1946, Vol. IV, pp. 148–150). This was not only an act of loyalty but a fiduciary breach in nuce: authority demanded unconditional trust while withholding candour, care, and reciprocity — themes developed further in §6.2.

Around this core, propaganda, ritual, and surveillance reinforced the domestication of knowledge. As Welch (1983) documents, Nazi propaganda was not limited to grand spectacles but penetrated daily life, shaping how recruits saw the world and themselves. Guards were not only instructed in procedure; they were trained to see differently. Husserl (1913/1983) had already shown that perception is structured through intentional horizons: we do not encounter objects neutrally, but always within a horizon of meaning. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) radicalised this point, emphasising perception as embodied structuring of the world. Nazi pedagogy reconfigured these horizons and fields, bending them so that cruelty appeared as duty and racial hierarchy as natural order. Films, lectures, and catechisms reframed Jews as enemies, comrades as kin, cruelty as moral obligation. Claudia Koonz's (2003) account of the "Nazi conscience" captures this inversion: acts of brutality were moralised, recoded as ethical obligations to the Volksgemeinschaft. What should have been fiduciary duties of candour and care were inverted into imperatives of distortion and betrayal.

This process exemplifies what Kahl (2025h) calls the domestication of knowledge: the disciplining, narrowing, and repurposing of epistemic life so that it sustains authoritarian authority. Knowledge was no longer an open field of inquiry but a fenced domain, tamed to reproduce loyalty. To dissent, or even to see otherwise, became unintelligible within the categories supplied.

For the camp guard, this meant that training was not only technical but epistemological. It did not merely prepare him to carry out orders; it recast the very conditions under which judgment could be exercised. Recognition and belonging were bound to assent; dissonance was disciplined into silence. What resulted was not just military discipline but epistemic captivity: a condition in which to think differently was no longer conceivable, because the categories of Nazi reality had become the limits of intelligibility itself, as the oath texts preserved in the IMT proceedings starkly reveal (IMT, 1946, Vol. IV, pp. 148–150). This captivity, as later argued in §6.2, exemplifies how fiduciary–epistemic duties were inverted — trust betrayed, vulnerability exploited, and dependence weaponised into submission.

2.5 Authoritarianism as Amplified Epistemic Clientelism

The insights from psychology and Holocaust history converge on a central claim: authoritarianism magnifies ordinary mechanisms of deference until they become the organising principle of social life. Epistemic Clientelism Theory (Kahl, 2025a, 2025f) provides the vocabulary for this transformation: conditional dependence, ordinarily limited and sometimes constructive, is scaled into systemic capture.

In ordinary contexts, epistemic bargains are familiar and often benign. Students defer to teachers, patients to physicians, citizens to officials. Such deference can dignify autonomy when exercised under fiduciary conditions: candour in disclosure, care for epistemic vulnerability, and loyalty to the interests of dependants. The fiduciary scaffolding protects judgment, turning dependence into a condition of growth.

Authoritarian regimes corrupt this structure by escalating these bargains into total dependence. Under indoctrination and coercion, autonomy is not selectively given but absorbed wholesale into the authority structure. Safety, recognition, and belonging become wholly contingent upon obedience. Stanley Feldman (2003) showed how threat intensifies conformity, while Hannah Arendt (1973) observed that totalitarian systems fabricate reality itself, leaving no neutral ground from which independent judgment can stand. In fiduciary terms, candour is replaced by propaganda, care by manipulation, loyalty by coercion.

For the camp guard, this collapse was lived reality. The oath to Hitler enacted epistemic surrender at its most absolute: conscience was transferred to the Führer, recognition within the SS mortgaged to conformity. Propaganda saturated his perceptual world; surveillance ensured that even hesitation carried risks of ostracism or punishment. Each ritual reinforced the same bargain: to belong was to obey, and to obey was to relinquish judgment.

Heidegger's analysis in *Being and Time* (1927/1962) sharpens this point. Most guards were drawn into the anonymity of *das Man*—the levelling of judgment into collective categories where thinking is no longer one's own. Yet the very structure of dissonance implied the possibility, however rare, of what Heidegger called *Entschlossenheit* (resoluteness): the decision to resist absorption, to remain open to contradiction rather than dissolving it in obedience. This possibility was fragile and often suppressed, but it clarifies that collapse was not inevitable.

Seen this way, authoritarianism is best understood as amplified epistemic clientelism: the conversion of ordinary deference into a pervasive economy of dependence. Resistance remained possible, but only at the margins—costly, fragile, and rare (§4.5). The fiduciary bond of authority, which ought to have dignified dependence, was inverted into betrayal. Guards became not only participants in atrocity but also casualties of epistemic breach, their vulnerability systematically exploited by a regime that demanded loyalty while offering only deception in return.

Bridge to Chapter 3

If authoritarianism is amplified epistemic clientelism, then its operation must be traced not only in the psychology of individuals but also in the structures of society. The Nazi regime did not rely solely on the obedience of guards; it constructed an entire social order around the conditional bargain of belonging for conformity. The oath sworn personally to Hitler exemplified this logic at the micro-level, formalising epistemic surrender as a condition of recognition within the SS (IMT, 1946, Vol. IV, pp. 148–150). At the macro-level, the *Volksgemeinschaft* — the "belonging to the nation" — functioned as the grand epistemic exchange through which individuals mortgaged judgment for identity, recognition, and safety. To grasp the guard's condition

fully, we must situate him within this wider bargain, where epistemic dependence was institutionalised at every level of collective life.

3. Epistemic Clientelism in Totalitarian Contexts

3.1 Defining Clientelism (ECT)

Epistemic Clientelism Theory (ECT) begins from the premise that knowledge relations are never wholly symmetrical. Individuals routinely depend on others for recognition, information, or validation. Epistemic clientelism arises when this dependence becomes conditional: a person surrenders a measure of epistemic autonomy in exchange for belonging, protection, or recognition (Kahl, 2025a, 2025f).

Three features mark this structure. First is relational asymmetry. One party—the authority—controls epistemic resources or recognition. The other—the dependant—offers loyalty and compliance. Second is conditionality. Benefits such as safety or membership are not granted unconditionally; they hinge upon continued conformity. Third is the fragility of autonomy. Independent judgment, once traded away, is difficult to recover. In clientelist relations, dissent threatens belonging itself, making obedience the rational choice even when it violates conscience.

Clientelism must be distinguished from trust and fiduciary authority. Trust, when grounded in reciprocity, can dignify dependence. A student who defers to a teacher, or a patient who follows medical advice, often does so because the authority has demonstrated care and competence. Similarly, fiduciary authority—as theorised in law—requires duties of loyalty, care, and candour (Frankel, 2011; Kahl, 2025c). These duties protect the dependant, ensuring that deference enhances rather than erodes autonomy. By contrast, clientelism degrades dependence. Reciprocity is absent or exploitative; the authority benefits from compliance while the dependant's autonomy is diminished.

Political science has long analysed patron–client relations as exchanges of material benefits for loyalty (Scott, 1972; Kitschelt, 2000). ECT shifts the focus from material resources to epistemic autonomy. It asks not only what is given but what is known, believed, or silenced in these transactions.

In everyday life, clientelism appears in subtle forms—deference to peers, bosses, or institutions. In totalitarian contexts, however, it becomes the organising principle of society. The camp guard's dependence on the Nazi system was not incidental but structural, his recognition and safety bound to his surrender of independent judgment.

3.2 "Belonging to the Nation" as Grand Epistemic Bargain

The Nazi project of the *Volksgemeinschaft*—best translated as "belonging to the nation"—promised unity, recognition, and security at a time of crisis. Yet the offer came with strict conditions. Inclusion required unconditional conformity to Nazi categories of identity and truth. To be recognised as Aryan was to belong; to be labelled Jew, Roma, homosexual, or political dissident was to be excluded, punished, or annihilated (Mosse, 1964; Hilberg, 1961).

This was not simply a political or cultural demand but an epistemic bargain. Acceptance depended on assenting to the Nazi redefinition of reality itself. The categories "Aryan" and "Jew," "comrade" and "enemy," were not neutral descriptors but prescriptive orders, dictating how individuals must see and interpret the world. To reject them was to forfeit recognition and, often, to risk ostracism or death. What Milgram (1963) simulated in the laboratory and the SS oath enacted at the micro-level (IMT, 1946, Vol. IV, pp. 148–150), the *Volksgemeinschaft* extended to society as a whole: the transfer of conscience to authority, binding recognition and safety to epistemic surrender.

The bargain was sustained by propaganda, ritual, and surveillance. Public rallies and private gestures of loyalty performed the unity of the nation; surveillance punished hesitation; rewards such as honour and access to resources reinforced compliance (Welch, 1983; Kershaw, 1987). Claudia Koonz (2003) shows how this process moralised distortion, recoding cruelty as ethical duty. Michael Wildt (2012) further demonstrates that the Volksgemeinschaft was not a mere abstraction but a dynamic of racial exclusion lived out in local communities, where neighbours and officials collaborated in violence against Jews, reinforcing complicity through everyday practices. Koslov (2008) extends this picture: Nazi subjectivity was shaped not only racially but also through colonial and gendered practices of domination, where guards and auxiliaries learned to exercise violence as part of an imperial and patriarchal order.

Epistemic Clientelism Theory clarifies the logic. The *Volksgemeinschaft* functioned as a grand exchange: individuals mortgaged their autonomy of judgment in return for recognition, safety, and belonging (Kahl, 2025a, 2025f). But this exchange was one-sided. Fiduciary duties of candour, care, and loyalty were stripped away; what remained was loyalty demanded without reciprocity. Arendt (1951/1973) observed that totalitarianism fabricates reality itself, eliminating spaces for independent thought. Kahl (2025h) terms this the domestication of knowledge: epistemic life disciplined and redirected to sustain authoritarian power.

For SS guards, this bargain was lived reality. They were not abstract members of the nation but its vanguard, tasked with policing its boundaries and embodying its values. To dissent was to risk losing career, safety, and one's very place within the community.

Such analysis explains complicity without excusing it. The *Volksgemeinschaft* shows how belonging itself became conditional on epistemic surrender—how "belonging to the nation" meant relinquishing the independence of judgment that could have resisted atrocity. This insight also provides the link to Chapter 7: the guard's role must be understood not only in personal or psychological terms but as a node within a wider epistemic architecture. The *Volksgemeinschaft* scaled the individual bargains of judgment-for-belonging into a systemic order, embedding guards within the macro structures of propaganda, bureaucracy, and ideology.

3.3 Guards' Micro-Dependence: Career, Safety, Recognition

If the *Volksgemeinschaft* represented the grand epistemic bargain of Nazi society, the camp guard embodied that bargain in daily life. His career, safety, and recognition were inseparably tied to the surrender of epistemic autonomy.

Career advancement hinged on ideological conformity and loyal service. The SS fashioned itself as an elite vanguard of the nation (Höhne, 1969; Longerich, 2012). Guards who displayed discipline and ideological zeal were rewarded with promotion and privileges; those marked as hesitant risked stagnation or exclusion. Conformity was not incidental but the condition of stability.

Safety also depended on obedience. Disobedience carried risks ranging from peer ostracism to punishment and, in extreme cases, imprisonment or death. Himmler's demand for obedience "unto death" (Kershaw, 2008) was not rhetorical; it set the epistemic horizon within which loyalty defined survival. Browning's (1992) account of Reserve Police Battalion 101 shows the dynamic: formal refusal was possible but stigmatised, making obedience the safer way to manage dissonance.

Recognition functioned as a constant incentive. Within the SS community, belonging was conditional on compliance. Rituals—roll calls, salutes, denunciations—performed loyalty while exposing dissenters. Levi (1987), writing from the prisoner's perspective, observed how camp life fractured solidarity and rewarded those who embodied the categories of oppressor and victim. For guards, esteem among peers was tied to the visible enactment of obedience.

Koslov (2008) extends this analysis by showing how guard subjectivity was further shaped through colonial and gendered practices of violence. Male and female guards at Majdanek internalised domination not only through racial ideology but also through imperial and patriarchal scripts that normalised cruelty as duty. Guards' micro-bargains—career, safety, recognition—were thus embedded in broader fascist dynamics that fused racial, imperial, and gender hierarchies into everyday practice.

Epistemic Clientelism Theory clarifies the mechanism. Guards enacted the bargain daily, trading judgment for advancement, survival, and recognition. These pressures explain how complicity was sustained, though they do not absolve responsibility. Each guard remained accountable for his choices, even as those choices were structured by systemic dependence and a distorted economy of belonging (Kahl, 2025j).

The guard's dependence was not unique to the Lager. The same dynamics of conditional belonging—career secured by conformity, safety by obedience, recognition by loyalty—echo patterns familiar from ordinary life. In families, schools, and intimate relationships, individuals often surrender judgment in exchange for acceptance or care. What distinguishes authoritarianism is not the mechanism but its scale and weaponisation: clientelist bargains that in private life may be limited and reversible are, under totalitarian conditions, institutionalised and absolute. To grasp this continuity and distortion, the next section turns to parallels between domestic and authoritarian clientelism.

3.4 Parallels with Domestic and Relational Clientelism

Epistemic clientelism is not peculiar to authoritarian states. It arises in everyday dependence, where autonomy is surrendered for recognition, care, or belonging. These ordinary patterns create habits of deference that authoritarian regimes later amplify and weaponise.

In intimate relationships, dependence often takes the form of conditional affection. A partner may control recognition, compelling the other to adjust beliefs or suppress doubts to preserve harmony. Gaslighting is the clearest expression: one partner systematically undermines the other's perception until judgment itself is displaced. As Kahl (2025e) argues, such bargains reorganise epistemic life around the demands of authority: to be loved or accepted is to think as the other requires.

Childhood and family life display similar dynamics. Children quickly learn that belonging is contingent upon compliance: parental approval or a teacher's praise depends on reciting, imitating, or obeying. Classroom rituals—rote repetition, enforced silence—train young people to equate conformity with recognition. Miranda Fricker (2007) interprets this as epistemic injustice: the child's voice is discounted, its credibility pre-empted.

Ivana Marková (2025) underscores the ambivalence of epistemic trust: dependence on authority is natural, but it always exposes vulnerability to manipulation.

The parallels sharpen rather than trivialise the guard's condition. He did not enter an alien structure of dependence; he entered an intensified version of it. What distinguishes authoritarianism is not the mechanism but its scale and irreversibility. Where childhood dissent risks rebuke, and relational dissent risks loss of affection, dissent within the SS risked punishment, ostracism, or death.

These continuities help explain how guards could be habituated to epistemic submission long before donning the uniform. Yet explanation is not absolution. The guard's clientelism was an escalation of familiar structures of dependence, but enacted within a system that demanded, and received, complicity in atrocity.

3.5 Authoritarian States as Economies of Epistemic Clientelism

The Nazi case illustrates a broader principle: authoritarianism functions as a systemic economy of epistemic clientelism. What in ordinary life appear as limited bargains of dependence are, under totalitarian rule, scaled up into a comprehensive order that governs recognition, belonging, and knowledge itself.

Three features define this economy. First is the **monopoly on recognition**. Totalitarian regimes claim exclusive authority to determine who belongs. In the Third Reich, inclusion in the *Volksgemeinschaft* was restricted to Aryans; Jews, Roma, and others were codified as outsiders through instruments such as the Nuremberg Laws and the Reich Chamber of Culture (Arendt, 1951/1973; Linz, 2000). Guards were tasked with enforcing these boundaries, embodying the epistemic act of deciding who counted as human and who did not.

Second is the **manufacture of threat**. Feldman (2003) demonstrated that conformity intensifies under insecurity. Authoritarian regimes deliberately cultivate such insecurity. Nazi propaganda cast Jews as existential dangers, while Gestapo surveillance made dissenters feel perpetually unsafe. For guards, the omnipresent spectre of betrayal or disloyalty reinforced the lesson that safety lay in obedience.

Third is the **domestication of knowledge**. Authoritarian regimes capture and redirect epistemic life so that knowledge itself sustains dependence. Schools, youth organisations, and controlled media created a closed epistemic environment where alternative interpretations were silenced. Kahl (2025h) terms this the domestication of knowledge: epistemic life disciplined and bent to authority. For guards, daily rituals and indoctrination ensured that obedience was not only expected but epistemically normalised.

The implications are twofold. Guards exemplify how authoritarian states convert individual bargains into systemic obedience. Yet authoritarianism is not a complete rupture from ordinary life; it radicalises dynamics already present, scaling up clientelist bargains into totalising economies (Levitsky & Way, 2010). In fiduciary terms, the regime claimed trusteeship over knowledge but betrayed its duties of candour, care, and loyalty, leaving only naked dependence.

It must be emphasised that explanation is not exoneration. These mechanisms clarify how autonomy was corroded, not why responsibility disappeared. Guards remained accountable moral agents, even as they operated inside an economy designed to suppress judgment.

It is essential to stress, however, that explanation does not equal exoneration. These mechanisms clarify how dependence was structured, not why responsibility vanished. Guards remained moral agents within an economy designed to suppress judgment.

4. Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event

4.1 Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance and Empirical Foundations

The modern study of cognitive dissonance begins with Leon Festinger's seminal *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957), which established the framework still central to psychology today. Dissonance, in Festinger's terms, is the discomfort experienced when one's actions conflict with beliefs or when competing cognitions collide. This discomfort motivates active resolution, typically by rationalisation (reinterpreting behaviour), denial (discounting evidence), or alignment of attitudes with action. The central insight is that humans seek not logical consistency but psychological coherence.

Festinger and Carlsmith's (1959) induced-compliance experiment vividly illustrated this process. Participants who were paid only $1 to describe a dull task as enjoyable later reported actually finding it interesting, lacking sufficient external justification for their lie. By contrast, those paid $20 felt no need to alter their private beliefs. The study showed that beliefs adjust to behaviour when external justification is insufficient. Related paradigms confirmed the effect: Aronson and Mills (1959) showed that harsh initiations increase group attachment; Brehm (1956) demonstrated post-decision rationalisation; and Egan, Santos, and Bloom (2007) found similar effects in children and monkeys. Across species and contexts, dissonance reduction emerged as a robust feature of cognition.

Critics questioned whether these findings reflected genuine belief change or impression management (Tedeschi, Schlenker & Bonoma, 1971). Yet the persistence of effects across paradigms and even primates supports the claim that dissonance reduction is a fundamental cognitive mechanism, just as Festinger (1957) anticipated and Festinger & Carlsmith (1959) demonstrated.

For authoritarianism, the implication is direct. Guards confronted dissonance between sympathy and cruelty, between the perception of prisoners as human beings and the ideological demand to annihilate them. As in Festinger's laboratory, dissonance was often resolved by adjusting belief to align with behaviour. Rationalisations such as "I follow orders" or "they are enemies" performed the same function as the $1 justification—minimising discomfort by reconfiguring judgment. The SS oath, the uniform, and the promise of belonging within the Volksgemeinschaft offered slender external justifications that reinforced the internal adjustment.

The broader arc of this chapter extends Festinger's framework in two directions. First, it reinterprets dissonance not merely as psychological discomfort but as an epistemic event—a rupture between competing ways of knowing, capable of collapsing into rationalisation, obedience, and silence (§4.4) or, more rarely, being endured as contradiction (§4.5). Second, it triangulates Festinger with philosophy: Arendt's account of conscience as inner dialogue and Heidegger's concept of resoluteness (Entschlossenheit) show that the fate of dissonance is not only a matter of cognition but of responsibility and authenticity. These resources deepen the insight that for the camp guard, to resolve or endure dissonance was to choose between complicity and a fragile form of freedom.

4.2 Kahl's Reconceptualisation: Dissonance as Structural Epistemic Event

Festinger's theory framed dissonance as psychological discomfort, but its deeper significance lies in its epistemic dimension: dissonance signals a rupture in knowing. When conscience clashes with command, or

perception contradicts ideology, the individual confronts competing claims to reality. To resolve dissonance is therefore not simply to ease discomfort but to decide whose judgment, whose categories, and whose authority will define truth.

Reframing dissonance as an epistemic event (Kahl, 2025b) shifts the focus from the individual psyche to the structure of authority. Each episode of dissonance marks a fiduciary moment: will candour, care, and loyalty be honoured, or will they be betrayed? If authority admits limits, uncertainty, and fallibility, dissonance can be endured as bounded freedom, a fragile assertion of independence within dependence. If authority suppresses candour and care—through propaganda, coercion, or ritual—dissonance is collapsed into rationalisation, obedience, or silence. In this way, dissonance becomes the *hinge of epistemic autonomy*: to endure it is to preserve freedom in contradiction; to collapse is to submit to clientelism.

This reinterpretation resonates with wider scholarship. Miranda Fricker (2007) shows how epistemic injustice erodes agency by stripping credibility from voices. Ivana Marková (2025) emphasises that epistemic trust, though indispensable for orientation, leaves subjects vulnerable when authority manipulates dependence. Authoritarian regimes exploit this vulnerability, converting dissonance from a potential resource of freedom into an instrument of capture.

For the camp guard, the implications are decisive. His unease was not accidental but constitutive of his epistemic condition. Dissonance surfaced whenever sympathy met cruelty, whenever direct perception of the prisoner as human collided with ideological command to treat them as subhuman. These ruptures could in principle be endured—as some rare refusals and gestures of decency showed—but most often they were suppressed. Later sections trace these divergent outcomes: collapse into rationalisation, obedience, and silence (§4.4), and the rarer endurance of contradiction as bounded freedom (§4.5).

4.3 Guards' Dissonance: Sympathy, Cruelty, and Fascist Subjectivity

Historical evidence shows that guards rarely lived in perfect harmony with Nazi ideology. They experienced moments of unease when human sympathy clashed with the demands of cruelty. Christopher Browning (1992) describes how members of Reserve Police Battalion 101 hesitated, expressed nausea, or even refused when first ordered to execute civilians at Józefów. Though police, not SS camp guards, their case demonstrates the same underlying rupture: the perception of victims as human beings resisted annihilation by command. Primo Levi (1987) likewise reported fleeting moments of guarded sympathy in the Lager — an extra crust of bread, a softened word — that quickly gave way to renewed brutality. These gestures did not alter the structure of domination, but they reveal that perception of humanity was not wholly extinguished.

Such conflict was more than emotional disquiet. It was an epistemic rupture: two incompatible modes of knowing — direct perception affirming personhood versus ideological command negating it — forced into confrontation. The system worked to collapse this rupture. Propaganda, rituals, and peer surveillance disciplined guards to silence sympathy and recalibrate judgment. Dissonance, rather than being endured as fragile freedom, was systematically suppressed, converted into conformity.

Cultural testimony underscores this formation of fascist subjectivity. Anna Seghers's "The End", analysed by Bivens (2017), illustrates how narrative itself was mobilised to resolve dissonance — producing subjects who internalised violence as destiny. Guards' rationalisations ("I obey orders," "They are enemies") functioned in the same way, turning inner conflict into obedience by aligning cognition with ideology.

Through the lens of Epistemic Clientelism Theory, each guard's dissonance was resolved as an epistemic bargain. Independent judgment was exchanged for recognition, security, and belonging within the SS. The fiduciary–epistemic breach is clear: the regime demanded loyalty but betrayed candour, care, and truth. Guards thus became epistemic casualties, their dissonance captured and redirected, even as they remained responsible for choosing compliance over resistance.

4.4 Collapse into Rationalisation, Obedience, Silence

For most guards, the epistemic rupture described in §4.3 did not remain open. It collapsed into patterns of resolution that preserved loyalty and muted contradiction. These outcomes—rationalisation, obedience, and silence—were not incidental but structured by the authoritarian system itself. They represent what can be called a fiduciary breach: authority demanded candour, care, and loyalty from its subjects, but returned only distortion, manipulation, and betrayal.

Rationalisation provided the most immediate way to reduce tension. Guards explained their actions to themselves and others with familiar formulas: "It is my duty," "They are enemies," "Orders must be followed." Testimonies from Reserve Police Battalion 101 reveal this logic vividly: some men justified their participation in shootings by claiming, "If I don't do it, someone else will" (Browning, 1992). Such rationalisations did not change the reality of atrocity but allowed perpetrators to reframe it in terms that felt coherent, even necessary.

Obedience offered another resolution. Submission to hierarchy became the default epistemic posture: authority was treated as the arbiter of truth, dissolving the burden of individual judgment. Himmler's oft-repeated demand for obedience "unto death" (Kershaw, 2008; Longerich, 2012) epitomised this posture. To obey was not only to act but to know in accordance with command, surrendering conscience as though it were an unauthorised excess.

Silence completed the collapse. Doubt was not merely dangerous to express; it became difficult even to articulate internally. Hannah Arendt (1973) argued that totalitarianism suppresses thought by foreclosing the silent dialogue of conscience through which responsibility is borne. Martin Heidegger likewise warned that fallenness into *das Man* levels conscience into mere idle talk (*Gerede*), and that authentic resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*) requires resisting such levelling (Heidegger, 1927/1962). In the Lager, guards abandoned this resoluteness. They retreated into ritual and procedure—saluting, drilling, filing reports—where gestures displaced reflection. Silence was thus not neutral but an epistemic subjugation: an engineered erasure of contradiction and an abdication of authenticity.

Epistemic Clientelism Theory clarifies the mechanism: each collapse represented an epistemic bargain. Independent judgment was traded for recognition, safety, or belonging, but without reciprocity. The Nazi regime extracted loyalty while breaching fiduciary duties of candour, care, and truth. The bargain reduced dissonance but did not dissolve responsibility. Rationalisations eased discomfort, obedience offered protection, silence suppressed unease—but culpability for cruelty remained.

4.5 Rare Endurance of Contradiction as Bounded Freedom

Although collapse was the norm, history records rare instances in which dissonance was endured rather than resolved. These moments illustrate what Kahl (2025b) calls *bounded freedom*: a fragile but genuine form of agency grounded in the willingness to sustain contradiction.

Browning (1992) shows that a minority in Reserve Police Battalion 101 refused to participate in mass shootings despite stigma and censure. Their refusal did not halt the killing, but it demonstrated that alternatives existed. To refuse was to accept the burden of dissonance—acknowledging victims as human while resisting the command to annihilate them.

Levi (1987) described small acts of decency: a guard offering extra bread, easing a task, or muting a blow. These gestures, though marginal, signal that recognition of humanity persisted amid systemic brutality. They illustrate that dissonance need not collapse; it could be sustained as an ongoing fracture within the guard's epistemic life.

Literary testimony underscores this point. Bivens (2017) highlights Anna Seghers's "The End", which portrays fascist subjectivity suspended between sympathy and cruelty. Seghers depicts the fascist not as an inhuman monster but as someone caught in unresolved tension, a figure who illustrates both the fragility of conscience and the possibility of resistance. Such works reveal that endurance of contradiction, however rare, was imaginable within fascist culture itself.

Philosophical resources deepen this framing. Schopenhauer (1818/1969) saw freedom in resisting the blind pull of the Will; Arendt (1973) argued that thinking itself is a bulwark against evil, for the silent dialogue of conscience resists collapse into mere obedience. Heidegger, too, provides a resource: his concept of *Entschlossenheit* (resoluteness) in Being and Time (1927/1962) names the stance of refusing to dissolve into the anonymity of *das Man*. To endure contradiction without smoothing it over with the ready-made categories of the collective is precisely such a stance. It represents a fragile authenticity achieved within structures of fallenness, a refusal to capitulate entirely to systemic distortion.

In fiduciary–epistemic terms, these moments represent a reclamation of trusteeship from within. Where the Nazi regime demanded epistemic surrender without reciprocity, endurance of contradiction constituted a fragile assertion of candour, care, and loyalty to truth. Even when muted or marginal, such acts embodied bounded freedom.

The implication is decisive: even in systemic clientelism, where authority channels dissonance toward collapse, spaces of agency persisted. To endure contradiction without resolving it was itself a form of resistance—rare, costly, but real. This recognition prepares the ground for Chapter 5, where silence and shadows are analysed as epistemic categories of domination, and where the survival of contradiction becomes the seed of moral responsibility. It also sets up the return in Chapter 9, where this dual trajectory—collapse into rationalisation versus endurance as bounded freedom—becomes central to the psychological and normative contributions of the paper.

5. Silence, Shadows, and Epistemic Subjugation

5.1 Silence as Epistemic Subjugation: Kahl's Silent Tree

Silence in authoritarian contexts is not merely the absence of speech; it is a manufactured epistemic condition. In *The Silent Tree* (Kahl, 2025j), silence is reconceptualised as structured suppression: the foreclosure of judgment, testimony, and memory when only the voice of authority is permitted. Silence thus marks the consummation of epistemic clientelism—the point at which contradiction is closed and fiduciary trusteeship has been inverted into betrayal.

Two forms of silence dominated the Lager. First, silence as compliance defined the guard's condition. Many muted their doubts or suppressed pangs of conscience, refusing even the internal dialogue that Hannah Arendt (1973) identified as the ground of responsibility. Testimonies often insist that perpetrators "did not allow themselves to think," signalling not absence of thought but its deliberate foreclosure. Martin Heidegger, too, illuminates this collapse: his critique of *das Man* describes how conscience is levelled into conformity through idle talk (*Gerede*), while his concept of *Entschlossenheit* (resoluteness) insists on sustaining inner dialogue against such levelling (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Guards, however, largely abandoned this resoluteness. Surveillance and denunciation culture reinforced compliance: to voice doubt was to risk ostracism, punishment, or worse. Silence became the safest epistemic bargain.

Second, silence as erasure defined the prisoner's reality. Speech was forbidden during roll calls, censored in barracks, and stripped of credibility when it occurred. Raul Hilberg (1961) notes that Jewish testimony was systematically dismissed as propaganda, while Primo Levi (1987) observed that survival often demanded cultivating silence: to speak despair or defiance was to court harsher treatment. Charlotte Delbo (1995) recounts how silence was not only imposed but corrosive: under conditions of terror, language itself seemed to disintegrate, leaving prisoners estranged even from the possibility of expression. Terrence Des Pres (1976) extends this analysis, arguing that the suppression of voice was not incidental but constitutive: silence both enabled survival strategies and enacted the Nazis' intent to erase witness. In this way, silence became the paradoxical ground where survival and annihilation were entwined.

The analytic payoff is twofold. For guards, silence of conscience facilitated complicity; for prisoners, enforced silence was domination. In fiduciary terms, both reflect breach: authority that owed candour, care, and loyalty instead weaponised silence to secure dependence.

Seen this way, silence is the precondition for shadows. Where silence extinguishes voice, shadows distort vision. Together they reveal how authoritarianism operates not only through violence but through epistemic subjugation, collapsing fiduciary trusteeship into clientelist capture.

5.2 Shadows as Clientelist Economy: Kahl's Silent Shadows and Plato's Cave

Plato's allegory of the cave depicts prisoners chained in darkness, mistaking shadows for reality. Truth lies beyond the cave, but liberation requires a perilous break from the community of illusion.

The Silent Shadows (Kahl, 2025i) reinterprets this allegory through Epistemic Clientelism Theory. Shadows are not passive deceptions but active distortions sustained by bargains of dependence. Belonging and recognition depend upon assenting to the shadow-world. To question the shadows is to forfeit membership in the community of knowers.

Authoritarian regimes exploit this structure by constructing what may be called an economy of shadows. Propaganda projects distorted images of the world; as Welch (1983) shows, these images both mobilised mass enthusiasm and narrowed horizons of thought, making the distorted categories of Nazi ideology appear natural. Rituals such as rallies and salutes rehearsed them in collective form; surveillance ensured compliance with the shared vision. Membership in the community became conditional upon accepting these distortions. To reject them was to lose recognition, security, and identity. Claudia Koonz (2003) shows how Nazism moralised these distortions, recasting cruelty as ethical duty. The Volksgemeinschaft offered inclusion only to those who accepted the categories of Aryan versus Jew, comrade versus enemy, loyalty versus betrayal.

Husserl's phenomenology clarifies why shadows had such force. Perception, he argued, is always structured by intentional horizons that frame what can appear as meaningful (Husserl, 1913/1983). Nazi ideology did not merely add false content to an otherwise neutral field; it restructured the horizons themselves, so that only its categories could organise experience. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) radicalised this point: perception is an embodied structuring of reality. Shadows thus functioned not only as surface illusions but as lived worlds, where cruelty appeared self-evident and recognition of prisoners as human became perceptually unintelligible.

Heidegger's analysis of *Gerede* (idle talk) further illuminates the mechanism. Under the levelling force of das Man, speech circulates without authenticity, flattening meaning (Heidegger, 1927/1962). In the camp, propaganda and ritual operated as institutionalised *Gerede*: a constant chatter that reinforced shadows and drowned out conscience. Silence suppressed dissent, shadows distorted perception, and *Gerede* hollowed out thought itself. Together they formed a phenomenological triad of epistemic subjugation: the guard's world was saturated by distortions he could neither easily resist nor authentically articulate.

For guards, shadows defined epistemic recognition within the SS fraternity. To perceive prisoners as human was to step outside the community that conferred safety, career, and honour. The cost of clarity was exclusion, suspicion, or punishment. Shadows thus chained guards epistemically: they secured belonging at the price of truth.

The fiduciary dimension is decisive. Authority owed candour and care but instead inverted these duties, fabricating distortions as moral imperatives. Silence closed the space for dissent; shadows filled it with epistemic violence; *Gerede* gave it the form of communal chatter. Together, they show how authoritarianism naturalises obedience, ensuring that complicity appears not as choice but as reality itself.

5.3 Epistemic Violence and Injustice: Spivak, Fricker, and the Nazi Conscience

Postcolonial and analytic frameworks illuminate how silence and shadows operated not merely as metaphors but as structures of epistemic subjugation. Gayatri Spivak (1988) introduced the notion of epistemic violence to describe how colonial discourse erased the subaltern, making their voice unintelligible within dominant categories. In Nazi Germany, a similar logic prevailed: Jewish testimony was disqualified in advance as deception or propaganda, incapable of entering the regime's epistemic order. This was violence enacted through categories, not only through force.

Miranda Fricker's (2007) concept of testimonial injustice complements this picture. In the camps, prisoners endured systematic credibility deficits: their words counted for nothing, while guards were treated as the only credible knowers. The asymmetry was absolute. Knowledge itself was structured by prejudice, rendering some voices void and others definitive.

Claudia Koonz (2003) sharpens this point by showing how Nazi ideology moralised distortion. Cruelty was not framed as vice but as virtue: acts of brutality became markers of loyalty and ethical duty to the *Volksgemeinschaft*. This is what Kahl (2025h) terms the domestication of knowledge: betrayal of fiduciary candour and care recast as moral imperative. Authority, instead of dignifying dependence, inverted its fiduciary role into epistemic violence.

Guards, too, were caught in this distortion. Conscience, doubt, or gestures of sympathy carried no credibility within the SS community. Loyalty and cruelty, by contrast, secured recognition and advancement. This represents an inverted testimonial injustice: not the erasure of voice, but the inflation of the wrong voice. The epistemic field was weighted so that betrayal of conscience was rewarded as fidelity.

Seen through Epistemic Clientelism Theory, the Lager becomes an economy of epistemic bargains: prisoners erased, guards entrapped, both bound within a distorted fiduciary order. Violence and injustice worked in tandem—silencing one group, corrupting the other, and ensuring that complicity appeared as duty.

5.4 Camps as Epistemic Spaces

Concentration camps were not only sites of extermination and forced labour; they were also environments where knowledge itself was structured into domination. Silence and shadows, analysed above, reached their most acute expression here. Both prisoners and guards were subjected to epistemic subjugation—though in radically different ways.

For prisoners, speech was systematically suppressed. Roll calls demanded silence under threat of violence; conversations in barracks were monitored; prayer and song were forbidden. Attempts to testify or resist verbally were dismissed as lies or punished outright. Hilberg (1961) records how Nazi ideology pre-emptively disqualified Jewish testimony as propaganda. Levi (1987) noted that survival often required cultivating silence, since voicing despair or dissent risked punishment. Charlotte Delbo (1995) described how language itself seemed to disintegrate in the camp, while Terrence Des Pres (1976) argued that suppression of voice and memory was central both to survival strategies and to the Nazis' intent to erase witness. This was epistemic violence in its starkest form: the stripping of voice, the denial of credibility, the foreclosure of testimony.

For guards, epistemic capture took a different form. Indoctrination, peer surveillance, and ritual discipline bound them into complicity. The SS oath demanded unconditional loyalty to Hitler, while lectures and drills reinforced ideological categories that defined prisoners as subhuman. Höhne (1969) describes the SS as a corps where ideological training left little space for independent judgment, and denunciation culture ensured dissent was perilous. Arendt (1973) adds that such systems suppress thought itself, silencing the inner dialogue through which conscience operates.

Through the lens of *The Silent Tree* (Kahl, 2025j), the camp appears as a laboratory of epistemic subjugation: prisoners silenced through erasure, guards through indoctrination. Yet the asymmetry is crucial. Prisoners' silence was imposed as violence; guards' silence was complicity, the price of recognition and safety. What united them was the betrayal of fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship: authority demanded loyalty while corrupting the very conditions of voice and judgment, turning knowledge into an instrument of annihilation.

5.5 Foucault and the Domestication of Knowledge: Extended by Kahl

Michel Foucault insisted that knowledge is inseparable from power. Institutions do not merely transmit information; they produce regimes of truth that shape what can be seen, said, and thought. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and *The History of Sexuality* (1978), he showed how schools, prisons, and hospitals discipline by structuring epistemic possibility itself, embedding authority in the very categories of knowledge.

Kahl (2025h) extends this framework with the concept of *domestication of knowledge*. Where Foucault traced disciplinary capture, Kahl adds an ethical dimension: institutions hold fiduciary–epistemic duties of candour, care, and loyalty toward their dependants. Authoritarian regimes betray these duties by taming knowledge into obedience, suppressing contradiction, and substituting loyalty for truth. Domestication is thus not neutral but a fiduciary breach, corrupting the trust that ought to bind authority to subject.

The concentration camp was the radicalisation of this betrayal. Bureaucratic categories reduced lives to files, numbers, and procedures (Hilberg, 1961). Agamben (1999) described the camp as the paradigm of modernity, where life was stripped to "bare life" and subjected entirely to sovereign fiat. Guards were inducted into this epistemic order through oath-taking, indoctrination lectures, and Himmler's catechisms of SS duty (Höhne, 1969; Longerich, 2012). Prisoners, by contrast, were erased as knowers: their voices disqualified, their memories targeted for annihilation, their testimonies pre-emptively dismissed as lies. Claudia Koonz (2003) adds that cruelty itself was moralised—framed as ethical duty in defence of the Volksgemeinschaft. This recasting epitomised epistemic domestication: betrayal reframed as virtue.

Heidegger's phenomenology deepens the point. He warned that under the levelling force of das Man, authentic relation to Being gives way to conformity, where idle talk (*Gerede*) erodes meaning (Heidegger, 1927/1962). In the camp, domesticated knowledge functioned as an institutionalised *Gerede*: a totalising chatter of propaganda and ritual that hollowed out authenticity, leaving only the shadow-world of authority's categories. What for Heidegger was ontological levelling became here political technology—epistemic captivity under the guise of order.

It is essential to emphasise that indoctrination facilitated complicity but did not erase responsibility. Guards conformed to domesticated categories; their silence was compliance, not innocence.

Silence, shadows, and voice were thus not incidental but the very products of domesticated knowledge. The camp functioned as a closed epistemic system, where reality itself was fabricated and enforced. Foucault's account of disciplinary knowledge here reached its most radical form: the total subjugation of epistemic life. Kahl's extension makes explicit what Foucault left implicit—that such domestication is a fiduciary violation.

The implication is twofold. Authoritarianism corrodes not only political trust but epistemic trust, annihilating the scaffolds of candour and care. And the camp system shows how far domestication can extend when fiduciary duties are abandoned. The camp thus represents the radicalisation of domesticated knowledge — authority weaponising dependence while betraying candour, care, and loyalty. Chapter 6 takes this breach directly into view by reframing authority itself, contrasting fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship with clientelist exploitation.

6. Fiduciary Authority and its Breach

6.1 Fiduciary Theory and Competing Models of Authority

Fiduciary theory provides a normative framework for understanding authority in contexts of dependence. Tamar Frankel (2011) defined fiduciaries as actors who hold discretionary power on behalf of others and who are bound to act in their beneficiaries' interests. This entrustment imposes stringent duties: loyalty, to avoid conflicts of interest and prioritise the beneficiary's welfare; care, to act diligently and prudently; and candour, to disclose relevant facts fully and honestly. These duties distinguish fiduciary relations from ordinary contractual exchanges, because they transform dependence into a condition that can be trusted.

Later theorists expanded Frankel's foundation. Lionel Smith (2011) underscored fiduciary law's coherence as a body of doctrine rooted not in contractual promise but in relational trust, where one party's autonomy is entrusted to another. Paul Miller (2014) extended fiduciary logic beyond private law, arguing that governments, corporations, and universities exercise fiduciary authority because they wield discretionary power over

vulnerable publics. In this broader sense, fiduciary authority is not merely a legal doctrine but a moral architecture for institutions.

The hallmark of fiduciary relations is that they dignify dependence. Autonomy is not obliterated but supported: fiduciary duties ensure that reliance is protective rather than degrading. A patient trusts a physician not only because of expertise but because candour and care safeguard informed decision-making. A shareholder entrusts directors with capital on the assumption that loyalty and diligence will prevent exploitation. In both cases, dependence is rendered safe by the binding of power to duties.

This fiduciary conception of authority stands in sharp contrast to rival models. Joseph Raz (1979) famously described authority as the provision of exclusionary reasons—pre-emptive commands that replace an agent's own deliberation. Authority, in this view, is legitimate if it helps subjects better comply with reasons that already apply to them. Yet this model sidelines reciprocity: it treats obedience as justified when subjects gain efficiency in reasoning, not when authority owes them candour, care, or loyalty. Hannah Pitkin (1967) reframed authority through representation, stressing accountability to those on whose behalf authority acts. Stephen Darwall (2006) highlighted the second-person standpoint, where authority rests on reciprocal claims and recognition. Richard Flathman (1980) underscored that authority is not a static right to command but a practice sustained by trust and contestation. Tom Tyler (2006) demonstrated empirically that people obey law not simply out of fear of sanction but because they perceive authority as procedurally just and legitimate.

Against Raz's pre-emptive model, fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship anchors legitimacy in ethical duties: candour in disclosing truth, care in protecting epistemic vulnerability, and loyalty in aligning authority with the interests of dependants. Authority, properly conceived, dignifies dependence by securing autonomy rather than absorbing it.

This distinction has profound implications for understanding authoritarianism. Totalitarian regimes present themselves as fiduciary authorities—promising protection, order, and belonging—but they systematically betray the fiduciary logic. They demand loyalty without candour, obedience without care, and submission without reciprocity. The result is not fiduciary authority but epistemic clientelism: the conversion of dependence into exploitation. Wildt's (2008) study of the SS leadership corps captures this betrayal at its inception, showing how young men were deliberately severed from inherited norms and trained to perceive loyalty to the Führer as the sole fiduciary bond, while all genuine duties of care and candour were annihilated.

6.2 Kahl's Fiduciary–Epistemic Duties

Fiduciary theory has traditionally been confined to law, finance, and medicine. Kahl (2025c, 2025h) advances a theoretical innovation by extending fiduciary principles into the epistemic realm, reframing knowledge itself as a fiduciary relationship. This move establishes a new category of actors—epistemic fiduciaries—whose authority rests on the trust of those who depend upon them for orientation in the world. Universities, scientists, journalists, and states all occupy this role. Their legitimacy derives not only from their capacity to produce knowledge but from their fulfilment of fiduciary–epistemic duties.

Kahl identifies three such duties. Candour is the central epistemic obligation: authorities must disclose what is known, what is uncertain, and what is mistaken. Candour entails transparency and intellectual honesty, without which knowledge collapses into propaganda. Care requires diligence in the curation, protection, and communication of knowledge. Epistemic structures should shield the vulnerable from manipulation and ensure that dependence on authority enhances rather than erodes judgment. Loyalty obliges epistemic authorities to

act in the interest of those they serve, resisting the temptation to capture knowledge for partisan, commercial, or authoritarian ends.

The originality of this framework lies in its normative repositioning of epistemic authority. Existing accounts—Foucault's analyses of power/knowledge or Fricker's account of epistemic injustice—show how knowledge can dominate or silence, but they do not specify positive duties owed by epistemic authorities. By contrast, fiduciary–epistemic duties provide a standard of care against which authority can be judged. They define what epistemic trust should look like, and they name its breach not merely as error or distortion, but as betrayal. Wildt's (2008) study of the SS leadership corps illustrates how such betrayal was institutionalised: recruits were severed from inherited moral traditions and taught to relocate their fiduciary trust solely in the Führer, a move that stripped away candour and care while inflating loyalty into an instrument of domination.

The analytic payoff is decisive. Authoritarian knowledge systems can now be evaluated as fiduciary breaches: failures of candour, neglect of care, and betrayal of loyalty. This reframing shifts critique from descriptive to normative: **authoritarianism corrupts not only truth but trust**, degrading dependence into exploitation. Fiduciary–epistemic duties thus supply the moral grammar for distinguishing authority that dignifies dependence from authority that enslaves it.

This framework also clarifies what distinguishes fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship from other influential models of authority. Raz's (1979) account of authority as pre-emptive reasons emphasises the exclusion of private judgment but offers little normative grounding. Pitkin's (1967) concept of representation, Tyler's (2006) findings on legitimacy, and Darwall's (2006) emphasis on relational accountability all suggest that authority must be reciprocal and responsive. Flathman (1980) underscores its practical, enacted dimension. Fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship integrates these insights into a single formula: **authority is legitimate only when it binds itself to candour, care, and loyalty**. Without these, dependence collapses into clientelism, and the very scaffolds of judgment are corrupted.

6.3 The Nazi Breach: State Demanded Epistemic Loyalty Without Reciprocity

The Nazi regime exemplifies the most radical form of fiduciary–epistemic breach. Totalitarian states present themselves as fiduciaries of their citizens—promising security, belonging, and guidance—but the Reich demanded absolute epistemic loyalty while providing no reciprocity in candour, care, or loyalty.

The bargain was asymmetrical. Citizens and guards alike were required to give unconditional obedience. Oaths bound guards personally to Hitler (Höhne, 1969); ideology saturated schools and youth organisations; surveillance by the Gestapo and peer denunciation culture ensured dissent was perilous (Kershaw, 2008). Loyalty to the Führer became the sole condition of recognition, both for ordinary citizens and for those serving in the SS.

Yet this loyalty was met only with betrayal. There was no candour: propaganda institutionalised deception, presenting pseudo-knowledge as truth. "Racial science" reframed prejudice as biology, giving extermination the appearance of necessity (Hilberg, 1961; Arendt, 1973). This was not a mere absence of honesty but the systemic fabrication of reality—an institutionalised bad faith that converted epistemic trust into deception.

There was no care: epistemic vulnerability was weaponised. Citizens depended on official sources for orientation, but education and media dismantled independent judgment instead of cultivating it. Fear and distortion ensured that dependence could only be resolved through obedience.

There was no loyalty: both citizens and guards were expendable. Guards' recognition was conditional, contingent on cruelty and conformity; refusal meant exclusion or punishment. Ordinary Germans were sacrificed in futile wars, while prisoners were annihilated. The state used loyalty as a one-way demand, never as a reciprocal commitment.

Propaganda and racial science illustrate this betrayal vividly. They masqueraded as knowledge, but functioned as breaches of candour, care, and loyalty—betraying epistemic trust at its core.

The analytic payoff is decisive. The Nazi state converted fiduciary dependence into epistemic clientelism: demanding submission without reciprocity. This makes the regime a paradigm of fiduciary–epistemic breach, in which authority that should have dignified dependence instead degraded it into exploitation. To note this betrayal is to clarify structures of corruption, not to exculpate complicity. Guards and citizens remained responsible for their choices within the framework of systemic deception.

6.4 Guards as Fiduciary Subjects Betrayed by Epistemic Authorities

While guards were perpetrators of cruelty, they were also fiduciary subjects in their relation to the Nazi state. They entered into epistemic bargains with the SS and the regime, treating these institutions as epistemic authorities that would provide orientation, protection, and recognition. In principle, this mirrored a fiduciary relation: the vulnerable seeking security from those entrusted with authority. Yet the state consistently betrayed this trust, converting the fiduciary promise into clientelist capture.

The betrayal took several forms. Guards were indoctrinated, not protected. Training schools and oath rituals promised them belonging and moral purpose, but these institutions stripped away independent judgment. Instead of cultivating conscience, education was saturated with ideology designed to ensure epistemic conformity (Höhne, 1969).

Their epistemic vulnerability—the universal need for recognition and belonging—was exploited. The SS presented itself as a community of honour, but membership was contingent on submission to cruelty. Loyalty became the sole currency of recognition, binding guards to the regime at the cost of conscience.

Even this loyalty was conditional and revocable. Rewards—promotion, prestige, camaraderie—were always dependent on compliance. Any lapse into doubt or dissent risked ostracism, denunciation, or punishment. Guards were not protected by fiduciary reciprocity but kept perpetually vulnerable within a system that demanded constant reaffirmation of obedience.

The ethical implications are crucial. To note the betrayal of fiduciary–epistemic duties is to explain the vulnerability of guards, not to absolve their actions. They remained responsible for the cruelty they enacted. The breach clarifies the systemic structure in which their agency was deformed, but it does not erase accountability for the choices they made within it.

The analytic payoff is that guards exemplify how authoritarian states corrode fiduciary relations. What should have been a fiduciary bond—authority safeguarding dependence—was inverted into epistemic clientelism, where dependence was exploited and loyalty was traded for recognition that could vanish at any moment.

6.5 Distinguishing Fiduciary Authority vs Clientelism

The contrast between fiduciary authority and clientelism lies at the heart of this analysis. Both structures emerge in conditions of dependence, yet they diverge radically in how that dependence is treated.

Fiduciary authority dignifies dependence. It is reciprocal, protective, and autonomy-enhancing. A fiduciary recognises the vulnerability of the dependent party and undertakes duties of candour, care, and loyalty to ensure that trust is not betrayed. The teacher–student relation illustrates this dynamic: in fiduciary mode, the teacher guides the student by disclosing knowledge honestly, nurturing judgment, and prioritising the student's flourishing. Dependence is transformed into a condition of growth.

Clientelism, by contrast, degrades dependence. It is asymmetrical, exploitative, and autonomy-eroding. Here, recognition and protection are conditional upon submission. The same teacher–student relation in clientelist mode becomes indoctrination: the student's vulnerability is exploited to enforce obedience, loyalty is demanded without candour, and autonomy is suppressed rather than cultivated.

The guard–state relation exemplifies the distinction in political form. Ostensibly, the Nazi state positioned itself as fiduciary: the protector of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, guardian of order and belonging. In reality, it operated in clientelist mode. Guards' loyalty was demanded without candour (truth was distorted by propaganda), without care (their vulnerability exploited), and without genuine loyalty in return (they were expendable). What looked like fiduciary authority was in fact clientelist exploitation.

The analytic payoff of this distinction is significant. Authoritarianism is not merely an abuse of power; it is a structural betrayal of fiduciary–epistemic duties. It perverts the very logic of trust, converting what should be protective into exploitative. Dependence is not dignified but enslaved, and autonomy is not supported but suppressed.

This conclusion prepares the ground for Chapter 7. By distinguishing fiduciary authority from clientelism, we can see why authoritarianism produces not only obedience but complicity. Fiduciary breach creates the conditions in which individuals surrender judgment, yet it also clarifies the narrow spaces where responsibility and resistance remain possible.

7. Micro–Macro Linkages: From Guard to Epistemic Order

7.1 Guards as Nodes in Epistemic Architecture

Guards were not marginal actors in the Nazi system; they functioned as crucial nodes in its epistemic architecture, linking micro-level psychology with macro-level ideology (Kahl, 2025d). Each guard occupied a junction where orders were translated into practice and where obedience reinforced the larger structure of power. Commands flowed downward through them—at roll call, during selections, in the imposition of silence and discipline—and were enacted upon prisoners. At the same time, loyalty and conformity flowed upward, as guards demonstrated allegiance to the SS and the state through ritual, surveillance, and violence (Hilberg, 1961; Browning, 1992; Levi, 1987).

This position was not passive. Guards actively embodied and interpreted ideology, giving tangible force to categories such as Aryan/Jew or comrade/enemy. By enforcing rituals, repeating propaganda, and policing

daily life, they ensured that distortions of ideology became lived reality. In this sense, they were not merely executors of orders but epistemic agents who produced, transmitted, and normalised the regime's knowledge order.

The analytic payoff is twofold. First, authoritarian systems do not rest on commands alone but on distributed agents whose obedience and initiative sustain the whole. Second, identifying guards as nodes highlights that complicity was systemic without being anonymous: each guard's choices—however structured by pressure, ritual, or fear—remained acts of epistemic and moral complicity.

7.2 Micro Mechanisms: Conformity, Obedience, Dissonance-Reduction

The daily behaviour of guards can be illuminated by three recurring psychological mechanisms.

Conformity. Asch's (1951) experiments show how individuals align perception with group norms even when those norms contradict their own judgment. Browning (1992) records similar dynamics in Reserve Police Battalion 101, where men reluctant to shoot Jews complied under peer pressure, unwilling to stand apart from comrades. Rich (2014) demonstrates that the same pressures operated among Eastern auxiliary guards at Auschwitz-Birkenau in spring 1943. Many of these men were Soviet POWs or coerced collaborators, yet once inside the system they confronted the same epistemic bargain: survival and belonging were conditional on conformity to SS expectations. Conformity thus scaled across national and cultural lines, transforming diverse recruits into reliable executors of atrocity.

Obedience. Milgram's (1963) studies highlight deference to authority against conscience. In the camps, guards' oath to Hitler exemplified this structure, binding obedience not merely to orders but to identity itself. Hierarchical command created an epistemic posture in which questioning was unthinkable, and deviation could mean ostracism or death. For auxiliaries, obedience was sharpened by vulnerability: having already been defeated, captured, or marginalised, their survival depended even more directly on compliance with German command (Rich, 2014).

Dissonance-reduction. Festinger (1957) showed how individuals rationalise contradictions, while Kahl (2025b) reconceptualises dissonance as an epistemic event: a rupture between competing knowledges. Guards experienced this rupture when perceiving prisoners as human while being required to treat them as subhuman. Many resolved the fracture by rationalising cruelty as duty, inevitability, or necessity. Eastern auxiliaries, caught between prior identities and their new role, faced dissonance even more starkly: their compliance was rationalised as the only path to recognition and protection within the Nazi order.

These mechanisms were not deterministic. Browning (1992) documents men who refused to conform; Levi (1987) recalls gestures of decency within the camp; Rich (2014) notes auxiliaries who deserted or resisted. The analytic payoff is that micro-mechanisms of conformity, obedience, and dissonance-reduction—though varied in outcome—explain how individual psychology was systematically harnessed to sustain atrocity. Importantly, they reveal that epistemic clientelism was not confined to German SS culture but extended through transnational bargains of dependence, each reflecting the betrayal of fiduciary trusteeship.

7.3 Macro Structures: Propaganda, Volksgemeinschaft, Bureaucratic Order

If guards' psychology reveals the micro-mechanisms of conformity and obedience, macro-level structures explain the epistemic environment that made those mechanisms effective.

Propaganda. As Arendt (1973) observed, totalitarian propaganda institutionalised distortion as truth. Welch (1983) emphasises both its power and its limits: propaganda did not merely misinform but habituated populations to Nazi categories, narrowing perception until Jews appeared as existential threats and obedience as civic virtue. Newspapers like *Der Stürmer* and films such as Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* exemplified how ideology was staged and rehearsed. Husserl's phenomenology clarifies why this was effective: perception is always structured by intentional horizons that frame meaning (Husserl, 1913/1983). Nazi propaganda reshaped those horizons, redefining what could appear as self-evident. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) deepens this point: perception is not passive reception but embodied structuring. Symbols, rallies, and spectacles reconfigured the perceptual field itself, so that Nazi categories became the gestalt through which reality was lived. Guards were immersed in this environment, expected not merely to consume propaganda but to embody it — disciplining prisoners in accordance with its categories and enacting its images of power in ritual and violence.

Volksgemeinschaft. The myth of the *Volksgemeinschaft* promised unity, security, and belonging, but only on condition of conformity. As Kershaw (2008) notes, this "people's community" erased difference by excluding Jews, Roma, homosexuals, and political dissidents. Michael Wildt (2012) demonstrates that this was not a mere abstraction but a dynamic enacted in provincial communities, where racial exclusion and violence became the very grammar of belonging. Everyday acts of denunciation and participation in anti-Jewish measures reinforced the epistemic bargain: to be recognised as part of the nation was to internalise and enact its categories. Koslov (2008) extends this picture further, showing how these logics were not confined to Germany but carried into colonial and gendered registers: male and female guards at Majdanek, for instance, embodied domination as part of a broader imperial and patriarchal order. For guards, recognition and advancement depended on inhabiting this community fully: wearing the uniform, policing its boundaries, and treating prisoners as outsiders to be annihilated.

Bureaucratic order. Hilberg (1961) demonstrated how extermination was routinised into administrative form. Deportation lists, transport timetables, and camp registers reduced human beings to numbers. Guards became functionaries of this machinery, enforcing roll calls and documentation that disguised killing as procedure. Rich (2014) adds that auxiliary guards—often non-German recruits—were absorbed into this bureaucratic order, their survival and recognition contingent on executing its routines. This shows how epistemic bargains scaled transnationally: the same structures that entrapped German SS guards also ensnared coerced collaborators.

Together, these macro structures fabricated reality. They normalised atrocity by structuring what could be seen, said, and believed. Conformity, obedience, and dissonance-reduction operated effectively because propaganda distorted perception, the *Volksgemeinschaft* defined belonging, and bureaucracy mechanised killing. Yet these structures did not erase agency. They illustrate how authority betrayed its fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship: instead of candour, propaganda; instead of care, bureaucratic annihilation; instead of loyalty to dependants, loyalty demanded only for the regime.

The implication is clear. Guards were not merely victims of conditioning but participants in an epistemic order that converted dependence into complicity. The betrayal was systemic, but responsibility for choosing collapse over resistance remained personal.

7.4 Interlocking Clientelisms: Intimate, Institutional, Authoritarian

Epistemic Clientelism Theory shows that dependence on authority is rarely confined to one domain; it operates through interlocking layers that reinforce one another. These layers are not linear stages but recursive structures that habituate individuals to treat autonomy as negotiable.

At the most basic level lies intimate clientelism, first learned in families and early relationships. Children discover that recognition or affection often depends on compliance, surrendering independent judgment to parental or pedagogical authority. Such early bargains establish the grammar of epistemic deference (Kahl, 2025e).

Institutional clientelism extends this grammar into schools, workplaces, and bureaucracies. Nazi education exemplified this: Hitler Youth and *Napola* schools conditioned belonging on ideological conformity, making loyalty to the regime inseparable from advancement. Institutional routines—drills, denunciation culture, rigid hierarchies—habituated individuals to submission (Feldman, 2003; Stenner, 2005; Kahl, 2025f).

Authoritarian clientelism magnified these dynamics to the totalitarian scale. The Volksgemeinschaft promised security and recognition only through unconditional loyalty, enforced by propaganda, surveillance, and violence. Epistemic autonomy was systematically mortgaged to the state.

Guards embodied this convergence. Childhood patterns of obedience primed them for deference, SS institutional training reinforced submission, and authoritarian command demanded absolute loyalty through oaths and rituals. In daily practice, they enacted these bargains simultaneously, collapsing autonomy across all scales.

The normative stakes are clear. Where fiduciary trusteeship would dignify dependence by embedding candour, care, and loyalty, authoritarian clientelism inverted the formula: dependence was exploited, recognition conditional, and betrayal recast as duty.

To trace these interlocking clientelisms is to explain systemic capture, not to excuse cruelty. Individuals remained responsible for their actions, even when shaped by recursive dependencies. The analytic payoff is that clientelism functions as the connective tissue between micro psychology and macro politics, showing how ordinary relational bargains can be weaponised into instruments of domination.

7.5 Re-Reading the Cave: Guards Perpetuate Shadows While Chained Themselves

Plato's allegory of the cave (Republic, Book VII) provides a compelling metaphor for the epistemic condition within totalitarian systems. Captives mistake shadows for reality because they are bound by chains that prevent them from turning toward the light. Kahl (2025i) reinterprets this allegory as a clientelist economy of shadows: authority projects distortions, and subjects assent to them in exchange for recognition and security.

Guards occupied a dual role in this structure. They actively enforced shadows, projecting ideology onto prisoners. Roll call rituals, denunciation practices, and the parroting of slogans turned Nazi categories—Aryan/Jew, comrade/enemy—into lived reality. Guards were not passive transmitters; they gave tangible force to shadows through daily surveillance and violence.

Yet guards themselves remained chained, bound by ideology, oath, and peer surveillance. They were indoctrinated by propaganda films, instructed in SS catechisms, and monitored by comrades who punished doubt. In sustaining the shadows for others, they reinforced their own captivity within the same distorted order (Arendt, 1973).

This recursive dynamic reveals the depth of epistemic subjugation: guards perpetuated domination even as they were subject to it. But captivity does not absolve complicity. By enforcing shadows, guards became responsible for sustaining the very economy that chained them.

The analytic payoff is that the cave metaphor illuminates how authoritarian systems capture both victims and perpetrators within a shared epistemic darkness.

7.6 Closing Synthesis: From Guard to Epistemic Order

Chapter 7 has shown how the micro-level psychology of guards and the macro-level structures of Nazism were interwoven through epistemic clientelism. Guards were not peripheral executors but nodes in the epistemic architecture of totalitarianism (§7.1), translating orders into practice while feeding loyalty upward to the SS and the state. Their daily conduct was structured by conformity, obedience, and dissonance-reduction (§7.2), mechanisms nurtured by propaganda, the Volksgemeinschaft, and the bureaucratic order (§7.3).

Epistemic Clientelism Theory clarified how these dynamics operated across scales. Intimate, institutional, and authoritarian clientelisms (§7.4) reinforced one another, habituating individuals to treat dependence as the price of belonging until autonomy collapsed into systemic submission. Guards embodied this convergence, carrying childhood deference, institutional discipline, and authoritarian loyalty into daily practice.

The return to Plato's cave (§7.5) underscored the recursive nature of subjugation: guards projected ideological shadows onto prisoners while themselves chained to the same distortions. This duality captured the paradox of complicity: guards were both enforcers of deception and captives within its epistemic order.

The analytic payoff is twofold. First, authoritarianism emerges as a multi-scalar epistemic system that radicalises ordinary mechanisms of dependence into totalising domination. Second, it reveals how fiduciary trusteeship was inverted: where candour, care, and loyalty should have dignified dependence, betrayal, distortion, and coercion ruled instead.

Guards emerge as nodal agents within an interlocking system of micro obedience and macro distortion, enforcers and captives at once. Chapter 8 turns to the normative task: if complicity was sustained by systemic betrayal, then prevention requires scaffolds of fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship — a framework tested against contemporary crises from authoritarian populism (§8.3) to algorithmic governance (§8.4).

8. Normative and Contemporary Implications

8.1 Beyond Pathology: Atrocity as Epistemic Failure

Explanations of atrocity often begin with psychology. Arendt's (1973) notion of the "banality of evil" interprets mass violence as the product of thoughtlessness: ordinary individuals failing to think critically about their actions. Adorno et al.'s (1950) authoritarian personality thesis casts atrocity as the expression of predispositions toward obedience and aggression. While these frameworks illuminate important dynamics, they risk psychologising atrocity, reducing it to aberrant traits or failures lodged in individual minds. In doing so, they obscure the structural betrayal of knowledge that enables atrocity to occur.

This study advances a different claim: atrocity should also be understood as an **epistemic failure**. Atrocity emerges when fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds—candour, care, and loyalty—collapse. Authorities entrusted to orient the public betrayed their role as epistemic fiduciaries. Instead of candour, they offered propaganda;

instead of care, manipulation; instead of loyalty, exploitation. The result was a system that demanded epistemic submission without reciprocity.

The compliance of Nazi guards illustrates this betrayal. Their actions were sustained not by monstrous psychology alone but by structures that silenced conscience, distorted perception, and weaponised dependence. Yet guards were not merely passive. They actively entered into clientelist bargains: trading independent judgment for recognition, belonging, or safety. Each bargain compounded the collapse of epistemic order, until atrocity became routinised.

This reframing shifts atrocity from pathology to betrayal. Atrocity occurs when epistemic authorities fail their fiduciary duties, converting dependence into exploitation. The point is not to exculpate: responsibility remained with individuals who chose submission. Rather, the analytic payoff is normative. Prevention of atrocity requires more than detecting "bad actors" or aberrant personalities. It requires constructing epistemic systems capable of preserving candour, care, and loyalty—safeguards that sustain dissonance rather than collapsing it into obedience.

The lesson extends beyond the Third Reich. Wherever fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds are hollowed out, whether by authoritarian regimes, populist movements, or opaque technologies, atrocity—or its functional equivalents—becomes thinkable.

8.2 Kahl's Fiduciary–Epistemic Scaffolds: Preserving Dissonance as Freedom

Freedom is often imagined as independence from others, a state of self-sufficiency. Kahl (2025b) redefines this assumption by proposing that freedom is **bounded**: human beings are inescapably dependent on institutions, communities, and authorities for orientation. What matters is not whether dependence exists, but whether it is structured protectively or exploitatively. True freedom emerges when dependence is framed by conditions that preserve contradiction—when individuals are able to perceive dissonance, dwell within it, and resist collapsing judgment into obedience.

This redefinition requires what Kahl calls **fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds**. Like scaffolding that stabilises a building under construction, these supports hold autonomy upright under conditions of dependence. They are institutional arrangements that embed candour, care, and loyalty as structural duties of epistemic authority.

- **Candour** is foundational. Without transparency and disclosure of uncertainty, neither care nor loyalty can function. Authorities must reveal the limits of their knowledge, admit error, and resist presenting partial truths as total.

- **Care** entails responsibility for protecting epistemic vulnerability. Schools, courts, and universities must shield questioning and dissent from suppression, ensuring that dependence cultivates growth rather than exploitation.

- **Loyalty** demands that epistemic authority align with the interests of knowers, not its own preservation. It means resisting capture by commercial, partisan, or authoritarian forces.

Applications are concrete. **Schools** should teach students how to hold contradictions open rather than resolve them prematurely. **Media** must report uncertainty with candour, as in transparent margins of error during crises. **Universities** should prioritise open access and honesty in peer review over prestige. **Corporations**,

especially in AI, must treat algorithmic transparency and explainability as fiduciary duties, aligning systems with public interest rather than profit alone.

These scaffolds do not guarantee resistance; they make it possible. Autonomy remains fragile, but without such supports, it collapses into clientelism. The analytic payoff is decisive: fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds provide the normative architecture of freedom under dependence, preserving dissonance as the condition of agency.

8.3 Toward Post-Clientelist Orders: Authority Bound by Fiduciary Duties

Epistemic Clientelism Theory shows that authority without ethical limits collapses into exploitation. Yet authority itself is indispensable: human beings depend on teachers, leaders, experts, and institutions to navigate the world. The normative task is not to abolish authority but to reconstruct it as fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship, a form that makes dependence safe by binding it to candour, care, and loyalty.

The contrast with alternative models is decisive. Joseph Raz (1979) defined authority as providing *pre-emptive reasons for action*—a model that justifies obedience by exclusion, not reciprocity. Authority here operates as command, subordinating judgment without accountability. Stephen Darwall (2006), by contrast, framed authority in terms of the *second-person standpoint*: obligations arise through relational accountability between persons. Richard Flathman (1980) highlighted authority as a practice of political life, embedded in conventions rather than abstractions. Hannah Pitkin (1967) tied authority to representation, showing its legitimacy rests on fidelity to those represented. Tom Tyler (2006) demonstrated empirically that people obey law not because of coercion but because they perceive authority as fair, transparent, and procedurally just.

Fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship synthesises and extends these insights. Like Darwall, it grounds authority in accountability; like Flathman, it recognises its embeddedness in practice; like Pitkin, it insists on representation; like Tyler, it links legitimacy to fairness. But it adds a decisive normative layer: fiduciary duties of candour, care, and loyalty. Authority dignifies dependence only when it discloses truthfully, safeguards epistemic vulnerability, and remains loyal to those it serves. Without these duties, authority slides back into Raz's exclusionary model, demanding submission without reciprocity.

The implications are structural. Universities must be reconstituted as fiduciary–epistemic institutions, obligated to preserve dissent, protect whistle-blowers, and resist capture by market or state. Political leaders must act as fiduciary trustees, transparent about risks and limits, stewards of their constituents' epistemic autonomy rather than proprietors of truth. Corporate boards—especially in AI and high-risk domains—must design technologies as fiduciary structures of public trust: transparent, accountable, and aligned with human flourishing, not profit alone.

Such a post-clientelist order does not abolish asymmetry; it recalibrates it. Authority remains, but as trust rather than domination. The analytic payoff is clear: authority is only legitimate when bound by fiduciary–epistemic duties. Any other form risks collapsing into clientelism, repeating the betrayals that turned guards into captives of atrocity.

8.4 Contemporary Stakes: Authoritarian Populism, AI Governance, Epistemic Injustice

The framework developed here is not confined to understanding past atrocity. Its force lies in clarifying the crises of the present, where epistemic orders remain fragile and susceptible to capture.

Authoritarian populism exemplifies the re-emergence of clientelism in political form. Populist leaders present themselves as the only authentic voice of "the people," demanding epistemic loyalty in return for belonging. Truth is redefined as whatever the leader proclaims; dissenters are labelled traitors or enemies. This echoes the Nazi breach: loyalty demanded without candour, care, or reciprocity. Donald Trump's denunciation of critical journalism as "fake news" or Viktor Orbán's framing of universities and NGOs as threats illustrates how candour is suppressed and epistemic vulnerability is exploited (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Fiduciary–epistemic duties provide the countermeasure: leaders must be bound as trustees of their citizens' epistemic autonomy.

AI governance introduces new epistemic authorities. Algorithms now filter news, predict crime, and allocate resources, functioning as gatekeepers of perception and decision. Their opacity breaches candour; their biases exploit epistemic vulnerability rather than protecting it; their loyalty is often aligned with shareholders, not publics. Predictive policing systems that reinforce racial profiling or opaque content moderation on social media demonstrate these dangers (Mittelstadt et al., 2016). Zuboff (2019) shows how such systems extend into surveillance capitalism, where human experience itself is commodified as behavioural surplus, transforming epistemic life into raw material for control. Kahl (2025n) sharpens this critique by rejecting technological determinism: AI does not inherently undermine democracy, but its governance often breaches fiduciary–epistemic duties. He proposes epistemocracy: algorithmic trusteeship grounded in candour, care, and loyalty as safeguards against authoritarian capture.

Epistemic injustice persists in democratic societies. Fricker's (2007) testimonial injustice and Spivak's (1988) epistemic violence illuminate how the voices of refugees, minorities, and climate activists are routinely discredited. These injustices represent fiduciary breaches: candour withheld (misrepresentation of climate science), care denied (silencing of refugees), and loyalty inverted (authorities protecting themselves rather than the vulnerable). The same structural logic that erased prisoners' testimonies in camps operates in subtler form today. Terrence Des Pres (1976) underscored how silence under terror was not incidental but a strategy of domination, a condition under which survival itself depended on withholding voice. Contemporary authoritarian populism and AI systems risk reviving this logic, demanding compliance through silence, whether in political dissent or digital speech.

The analytic payoff is stark. Authoritarian populism, opaque AI, and epistemic injustice are not disparate challenges but symptoms of clientelism metastasising in new guises. The lesson of history is clear: atrocity begins when fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds collapse. Contemporary crises demand urgent reconstruction of institutions that dignify dependence and preserve dissonance. Without this recalibration, the conditions of epistemic failure remain intact, making systemic betrayal—and its human costs—once again thinkable.

8.5 Closing Synthesis: Toward Epistemic Emancipation

Chapter 8 has extended the analysis beyond historical atrocity to its normative and contemporary implications. The argument has been that atrocity is not only a moral pathology or a psychological aberration but an epistemic failure—a collapse of candour, care, and loyalty in fiduciary relations (§8.1). Guards' compliance in Nazi Germany was sustained not by monstrous psychology alone but by systemic betrayal of epistemic trust.

Against this collapse, Kahl's framework introduces fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds as safeguards of freedom under dependence (§8.2). These scaffolds preserve dissonance as the core of bounded freedom, ensuring that individuals can sustain contradiction without collapsing into submission. Candour, care, and loyalty become not abstract virtues but institutional design principles: conditions that stabilise autonomy against exploitation.

From this follows the vision of a post-clientelist order (§8.3). Authority need not be abolished; it must be reconstituted. Universities, political institutions, and corporations can only be legitimate if they bind themselves to fiduciary–epistemic duties. This represents a structural shift: authority as trust, not demand. The contrast with clientelism could not be starker—protection versus exploitation, autonomy dignified versus autonomy degraded.

The framework's contemporary relevance is clear (§8.4). Authoritarian populism reproduces clientelist bargains of loyalty without reciprocity. AI governance risks creating new opaque epistemic authorities. Epistemic injustice persists in silencing marginalised voices. Each is a symptom of systemic failure, warning that the conditions of atrocity can recur in modern forms unless fiduciary scaffolds are built and defended.

The analytic payoff of this chapter is twofold. First, it reframes atrocity as epistemic failure, shifting analysis from description to critique. Second, it provides a normative horizon: epistemic emancipation is possible only when dependence is dignified through fiduciary authority. With this synthesis, the stage is set for concluding reflections on responsibility, resistance, and the fragile work of preserving freedom in epistemic life.

9. Conclusion — From Guard to Epistemic Order

9.1 Diagnostic Contribution: Guard Psychology as Epistemic Clientelism

The guard has too often been described through a narrow lens: as a mere bureaucratic cog, a willing executioner, or an obedient conformist. Each of these perspectives captures something important, yet all risk flattening the guard into either pathology or function. What they leave underexplored is the guard as an epistemic subject — someone whose capacity to judge and to know was systematically reorganised within authoritarian structures.

The diagnostic claim advanced here is that the guard's psychology is best understood as a form of epistemic clientelism. Autonomy was not erased overnight but progressively exchanged for conditional goods: recognition from peers, protection within the SS hierarchy, belonging in the Volksgemeinschaft, and the career stability offered by obedience. In effect, the guard entered into recursive bargains where epistemic independence was traded away for security and advancement. These bargains were not incidental but constitutive of the authoritarian order.

The mechanisms are familiar from psychology: Asch's conformity studies show how perception bends to group consensus; Milgram demonstrates the collapse of moral resistance under hierarchical command; Festinger reveals how dissonance is reduced by rationalisation. Reinterpreted through Epistemic Clientelism Theory, these findings show that the guard's condition was not simply one of obedience, but of epistemic dependence.

That this diagnosis retains urgency today is evidenced by ongoing trials of former guards. The cases of John Demjanjuk, Bruno Dey, and Josef S. demonstrate that complicity remains legible to courts even decades later. These prosecutions acknowledge that the guard was neither a passive functionary nor an inhuman monster, but a person who entered into epistemic bargains with an authoritarian system — bargains that facilitated atrocity.

The diagnostic contribution, then, is to reframe the guard as an epistemic subject shaped by systemic bargains and fiduciary breach. This perspective clarifies how ordinary men could participate in extraordinary crimes: not through sadism alone, but through a structural capture of their judgment and agency. In sum,

authoritarianism is revealed as the architecture of obedience: a system that magnifies ordinary mechanisms of deference into pervasive economies of epistemic dependence, binding judgment to power until autonomy collapses into complicity.

9.2 Psychological Contribution: Dissonance as Structural Event

A second contribution of this paper lies in reframing the psychology of the guard through the lens of cognitive dissonance. Festinger's theory teaches that human beings experience acute discomfort when behaviour and belief diverge. For guards, such dissonance was ever-present: they perceived prisoners as human beings, yet were compelled to treat them as enemies, subhumans, or expendable labour.

The standard interpretation casts dissonance as a bias or psychological anomaly. The argument here, by contrast, is that dissonance should be understood as a structural epistemic event. It emerges whenever conscience and command collide, whenever perception resists ideological categories. The decisive hinge was how dissonance was managed. Most guards collapsed into rationalisation, obedience, or silence, while a few endured contradiction as bounded freedom. These divergent trajectories clarify both the routinisation of complicity and the fragile persistence of agency.

This framing resonates with juridical debates in recent trials. Vormbaum (2021), reflecting on the case of Bruno Dey, describes it as an "unusual trial": the accused was a 92-year-old guard whose complicity was evident, but whose subjectivity was also marked by coercion and structural entrapment. The court's difficulty lay in acknowledging both dynamics simultaneously — that the guard was shaped by systemic forces, and yet remained responsible for his actions.

The contribution, then, is to reconceptualise dissonance not as background noise but as the very hinge of agency. Guards were not devoid of conscience, nor simply automata of ideology. They were psychological casualties of epistemic capture, experiencing tensions that the regime was designed to suppress. As Wildt (2012) shows in his account of provincial Germany, the dynamics of exclusion and complicity that entrapped guards also permeated everyday life, embedding obedience within a wider architecture of belonging. Recognising this dual trajectory does not erase culpability; it clarifies how moral responsibility operates under conditions of systemic distortion.

9.3 Philosophical Contribution: Authority as Fiduciary–Epistemic Trusteeship

A third contribution of this paper is philosophical: the reconceptualisation of authority itself. Traditional accounts treat authority as the power to pre-empt judgment or to secure compliance. Raz (1979) defines authority as the capacity to provide exclusionary reasons that replace an individual's own deliberation. Pitkin (1967) understands authority through representation, Flathman (1980) through the practice of political authority, Darwall (2006) through relational accountability, and Tyler (2006) through perceived legitimacy as the foundation of compliance. Each of these frameworks illuminates part of the puzzle, but all leave open the question of what makes authority legitimate in the deepest sense.

Agamben (1999), by contrast, shifts the lens from procedural to ontological grounds. For him, the camp embodies the sovereign power to strip persons to bare life—life reduced to biological existence without political standing. This paradigm explains how law and violence converge to annihilate autonomy. Yet while illuminating, Agamben's account leaves the fiduciary dimension implicit: it describes how power dominates, but not how authority might be normatively bound to protect rather than exploit vulnerability.

The position advanced here is that authority is properly understood as fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship. Authority is not legitimate because it silences judgment, but because it dignifies dependence. To exercise authority is to hold power in trust, bound by duties of candour, care, and loyalty. Authority that respects these duties protects epistemic vulnerability while guiding judgment; authority that breaches them degrades dependence into exploitation.

The Nazi regime exemplifies fiduciary betrayal. It demanded loyalty from guards and citizens while systematically withholding candour, distorting truth through propaganda, and exploiting epistemic vulnerability through coercion and indoctrination. Authority was converted into clientelism, not trusteeship. Guards thus became epistemic casualties of an authoritarian architecture of obedience, entrapped in a system that annihilated independent judgment by stripping dependence of its protective scaffolds.

The philosophical contribution, therefore, is a redefinition of authority. Against the Razian model of pre-emptive reasons, against Agamben's sovereign capture of bare life, and against procedural accounts that leave legitimacy underspecified, this paper anchors authority in fiduciary duties. Authority must be candour-bearing, care-protecting, and loyalty-aligning. Without these elements, dependence collapses into clientelism, and atrocity becomes possible. This formula — authority as fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship — is the central theoretical innovation and the horizon for rethinking responsibility and prevention.

9.4 Normative Contribution: Toward Fiduciary–Epistemic Scaffolds and an Epistemic Constitution

The final contribution is normative. If atrocity is understood as the collapse of fiduciary–epistemic duties, then prevention cannot rest on moral exhortation or retrospective justice alone. It requires scaffolds: institutional and cultural frameworks that preserve contradiction, protect epistemic vulnerability, and ensure that dependence is dignified rather than degraded.

This scaffolding distinguishes fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship from clientelism. Candour obliges authorities to disclose limits, uncertainty, and error rather than fabricate reality. Care obliges them to shield epistemic vulnerability, cultivating environments where dissent can survive. Loyalty obliges them to align with the interests of dependants rather than their own survival or profit. Without such scaffolds, authority reverts to exploitation, and epistemic collapse becomes systemic.

The persistence of trials against former guards underscores the urgency. Bruno Dey's trial, described by Vormbaum (2021) as "unusual," highlights how courts continue to grapple with the dual problem of complicity and epistemic casualty. The conviction of Josef S. at 101 years old symbolises society's refusal to release authority from accountability, even across generations. These juridical acts signal that epistemic breaches cast long shadows: responsibility delayed remains responsibility recognised.

The challenge extends into the present. Authoritarian populism fabricates reality through slogans and disinformation, demanding loyalty without candour or care. Artificial intelligence systems now operate as "guards of perception," filtering information, shaping belief, and mediating dependence. As Mittelstadt et al. (2016) warn, opaque algorithms breach fiduciary–epistemic duties by concealing limits and distorting vulnerabilities for profit or control. Without scaffolds, these systems risk replicating the very structures of epistemic capture that enabled atrocity.

At this horizon lies the choice of authority's definition. Raz's (1979) model of authority as pre-emptive reasons legitimises exclusion, requiring obedience without reciprocity. By contrast, fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship, as

articulated here, binds authority to duties of candour, care, and loyalty. Where Raz's model risks repetition of clientelist collapse, fiduciary authority transforms dependence into trust, vulnerability into freedom.

Here Terrence Des Pres (1976) offers a stark reminder. He showed how survival in the camps often depended on silence under conditions of epistemic violence, where voice invited annihilation. Fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds must invert that paradigm: survival must never again depend on silence, but on candour disclosed, care extended, and loyalty upheld. This inversion is the ethical heart of fiduciary trusteeship, ensuring that epistemic vulnerability becomes a site of protection rather than exploitation.

The normative horizon, therefore, is an epistemic constitution: a framework binding authority across domains — juridical, political, technological, academic — to fiduciary–epistemic trusteeship. It must enshrine candour, care, and loyalty as non-negotiable duties; protect pluralism as the antidote to homogenised shadows; and preserve dissonance as the fragile but essential condition of freedom. Only such scaffolds can prevent dependence from mutating into captivity and counteract what this paper has called the architecture of obedience — ensuring that authority functions as trusteeship rather than betrayal.

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