

# State as a moral agent

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## Context:

1. It has become quite noticeable that modern world politics across the globe has lacked a guiding morality in which we can hold states morally accountable in both the international and domestic spheres.
2. This can be seen in the never-ending wars and occupations across the Middle East, South-East Asia, and the recent one in Ukraine.
3. Now, attempting to implement such guiding moral principles seems to be an impossible task mainly because of the massive difficulties that one would face in trying to get the 195 countries around the world to agree on such principles.

The inevitable effects of the Climate Crisis and the need to see basic human rights observed across the world are enough reasons to at least discuss the question:

## How can we begin to hold collective agents, states specifically, accountable for their actions?

### Scholar and philosophical perspectives supporting State as a moral agent:

1. To begin a discussion on how to hold the state morally responsible, it seems necessary to look back at how philosophers have traditionally discussed the agency of the state and figure out what features must a state have to be able to say that it can be held morally responsible.
2. Phillip Pettit establishes conditions that must be met for a collective entity to hold moral responsibility. Though Pettit does not specifically talk about the state, we can observe that the argument he lays out for collective entities as a whole can be used for the state by breaking down the argument and analyzing how and why a state meets these same conditions.
3. This will include deciphering what the state owes its citizens and how to decipher whether an action taken by the state, in the domestic sphere, is morally right or wrong. While doing this, we can lay the groundwork for holding states morally responsible for their actions, which can be rarely seen in the world anymore, and help craft the image of a morally just state.
4. To start analyzing the moral responsibilities of states and what a morally right or wrong state looks like, we must have a moral theory to use as the framework. While traditionally agential theory arguments have been running through Kantian and Rights-Based moral framework, we can see that the argument can better be laid out using a form of Virtue Ethics.
5. By using Virtue Ethics, we can achieve two things. First, we can create The Virtues of the State, which will resemble the virtues that already exist for moral agents, but will be specifically tied to actions that are uniquely made by states. This will provide us with basic moral principles that we can use to judge the moral status of a states' action. Second, through these created virtues, we can form the image of what a Virtuous State would look like. This can be used by states as a moral exemplar to strive towards. Virtue Ethics is rarely

used within the political philosophy and global justice spheres because it has been traditionally focused on an individual actor.

6. However, by successfully establishing the agential theory of moral agency for collective entities, like states, we can talk about states in the same sense that we talk about individual moral actors within Virtue Ethics.
7. Locke wrote that all individuals are equal in the sense that they are born with certain "inalienable" natural rights. That is rights that are God-given and can never be taken or even given away. Among these fundamental natural rights, Locke said, are "life, liberty, and property." Locke believed that the most basic responsibility of the state is the preservation of mankind. To serve that purpose, he reasoned, individuals have both a right and a duty to preserve their own lives.

### **Scholar and philosophical perspectives negating the role of State as a moral agent:**

1. Machiavelli made a clear distinction between distinctions between politics on the one hand and religion and ethics on the other and in doing so he has accorded a subordinate position to the latter. He ignores the ethical purpose of the state. To him, the state is not a means but an end in itself with its own interest. The interest of the state justifies everything. The state has no ethics. State actions are not to be judged by individual ethics.
2. In exercising political power, Machiavelli opines that a ruler should give priority to what is good for the state rather than what is moral or immoral. A ruler should not lag behind even in the employment of violence, cruelty and bad faith. Appreciating the good qualities of a ruler, Machiavelli emphasized that he cannot part with the bad means to be an able leader. He says public morality need not necessarily be identical with private morality because the ends of public morality may not necessarily be identical with those of private morality. Hence Machiavelli prescribed a double standard of conduct for the ruler and for the individual citizens.
3. The main aspects of Hobbes's political philosophy revolve around the contrasting relationship between the state of nature (a state of war) and the State itself as one of peace and cooperation. While dealing with the selfish nature of human beings, Hobbs gives exceptional powers to the state and gives away its requirement to be in a moral obligation to serve the ultimate purpose of securing the right to life of its citizens.
4. Realism school of thought in international relations often site National Interest as the ultimate tool to advance the state policies, irrespective of moral obligations of the state. It can be seen in the context of the Russia Ukraine war, where India is forced to take a balanced stand despite major international opinion against Russian military operation.

### **Conclusion:**

The role of the state in modern times undeniably goes beyond securing the territorial integrity of the nation-state and maintaining law and order. In recent times, mechanisms like Universal Declaration on Human Rights and UN Human Rights Council can be strengthened to implement the moral obligations of the states, for which there needs a broad international consensus.