

dominate

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Proving Moral Obligation

The heart of the resolution is difficult to prove. The government, as it were, doesn't have a beating heart, a conscience, or a soul. How can we expect a soulless heartless monster to have moral obligations? Valid question, and a decent argument against any affirmative, at that. It can be argued quite persuasively that governments do not have moral obligations because they are mere institutions, not people. Governments are systems through which people act, systems through which people voice their opinions, and systems which represent extensions of the people's will. As such, only the actors within the government can be moral and the government cannot have moral obligations in and of itself. Institutions and organizations cannot make moral or immoral decisions and cannot, therefore, accept the burden of upholding moral obligations.

There are several components that can comprise this argument.

1. Moral decisions must be conscious. Morality is notable only in contrast to immorality, and moral choices rest on the fundamental ability of people to discriminate between contrasting choices. If an action came not from a conscious choice between moral and immoral choices, the actor has not made a moral decision, but has become an extension of whatever natural occasion compelled him or her to take that action. We don't say that animals or machines are moral or immoral because we don't think they have that awareness of the differences between situations. Institutions are not conscious beings, and thus cannot themselves make moral decisions, but can only be extensions of thinking actors.

2. Governments have legal, not moral obligations. Corporations, organizations, and governments are all machines to an extent designed for a purpose. Corporations are structured to turn a profit for investors; governments are all at some point designed to garner and maintain power.

Obligations must be tied to consequences levied upon the actor if those obligations are not fulfilled. For people, this universal consequence is guilt, but organizations cannot feel guilt over making an immoral choice. Organizations can, however, be subject to real consequences, legal consequences, such as monetary penalties imposed on them by law. Government, specifically, is bound by an unspoken social contract to do whatever the people ask of it, and those requests may sometimes be moral, and sometimes immoral. For government, its obligation is to fulfill the people's will. When this obligation is not fulfilled, the mental restrictions on the people's hostility is lifted and a revolution becomes eminently possible.

3. The people running the government, whether it be bureaucrats or the people in a direct democracy, are responsible for the actions of the government. Even if the organization was designed with a moral purpose in mind, that does not imbue it with moral choice because it remains an agnostic means to an end. A machine designed to do good is not given the credit for the good work done. The credit goes to the one who designed and built the machine. And blame for misconduct goes to the designer as well.

The reasoning provided above might have felt shaky to you. It is. But how do we prove that government even has the ability to make moral decisions? There are several ways to do so, and we'll go through each one. We'll start with mine, the painstakingly laborious boring one.

The Laborious One

That government can have moral obligation rests on the idea that governments themselves can be moral, which rests on the idea that the actions of a government can be subjected to moral judgment. We can use the model of morality from action or morality from role, but ultimately they both come down to whether the actions of government match a certain ideal. So first, we need to prove that the actions of government can be condemned or praised as immoral or moral.

Premise 1: Morally culpable actions are those with a negative impact, caused by a conscious actor

Warrant: Both sides agree this is true. Earthquakes that kill tens of thousands are never condemned as immoral because there is no consciousness involved, but terrorist attacks that kill mere hundreds are immediately condemned because of the element of conscious decision involved.

Premise 2: Some actions have negative impacts.

Warrant: Both sides concede this.

Premise 3: Government is not a mindless machine

Warrant 1: Government actions are motivated, and thus, government is far from an agnostic actor. It makes deliberate decisions every day towards specific purposes, good and bad. The government as a whole may not express the opinions of all the involved officials, but ultimately governmental actions are the result of conscious decisions—dozens, if not hundreds of decisions, fact.

Warrant 2: Government is nothing but for the people involved. People with brains run government (whether they use them is questionable), and are the defining characteristic of any government; therefore government cannot be blameless for immoral actions. If government made decisions as mere reaction on an animalistic or mechanical level, we would have replaced it long ago with computers.

Obviously people can be held accountable for their actions—no one disputes that. What I am suggesting, however, is that government, literally being nothing more than a group of people, can be held to at least the same responsibility that an individual can.

Conclusion: Therefore, governmental actions can be condemned as immoral or lauded as praiseworthy.

Moral Obligation from Social Contract

The previous argument establishes that governmental actions are not magically free from moral consideration. How do we go on to prove that government has inherent moral obligations?

Premise 1: All governments use force. We realize that for any government to be put into place and for that government to be effective and efficient, there must be laws, and those laws must be enforced. Without enforcement, there is in effect no law and no government. Thus every real

government must require the use of force and violence in order to uphold and enforce the laws of the land.

Premise 2: All critical, defining actions of government, if not committed by a government, would be considered immoral. If I imprison people without a cause, or if I kill people who have not done anything to me, those would be immoral actions. Force and violence are immoral actions per se, and every government must use those immoral actions merely to maintain its existence. Thus, government is always initially immoral.

Premise 3: At this point, the idea of government is on the rocks. To uphold its power, it needs to commit violence. There had better be a really good reason for it to exist. And there is. But there no single answer for what justifies government: some say it is upholding human rights, some say it is promoting general welfare, some say it is carrying out the will of the people. Whatever that answer is, it has to be an extremely compelling and weighty benefit brought to the people care of this otherwise villainous entity. We have a scale. On one side of the scale, all the immoral actions of government tip it entirely in that direction. On the other side, there must be something to balance the scale. It is the need to balance the scale—the need to justify government's inherent immorality—that creates the moral obligation of government.

Thus, the question of the resolution is, in effect, “is mitigating international conflicts a social good that government must deliver to the people to balance out its moral scale?”

Collective Responsibility

Government has more obligation than any individual or group in the country. This idea is a much simpler and more elegant approach to proving governmental obligation. The argument simply says that government is the representative of the collective, and as such, it has unique obligations.

Premise: The government can do more than any individual.

Warrant: Typically groups of people have more force than individuals, but specifically in the case of government, it also has power as a result of being recognized as the authority. The whole is more than the sum of its parts; government is more powerful than the sum of its people, and it has more obligations than masses of individuals combined.

Premise: Moral obligation is proportionate to ability

Warrant: If you cannot help, you have no obligation to help. If you can, you do. Otherwise, we would end up with morally untenable situations like babies getting condemned for not helping the poor. The government is able to give aid on a level that no other entity can, and thus has the obligation to help.

Conclusion: Government, in many instances being the only entity capable of helping, has the moral obligation to help. In addition, government has more responsibility than any individual within its borders because of the authority it claims over its people.

Amorality K

The idea that government has no morality directly links into the mindset of promoting amoral government. If governments have no moral obligations, officials can justify committing any type of atrocities they want under the guise of “legal obligation.” If we divorce anything from the idea of morality, that is incredibly dangerous. We are saying that governments have no ability to be moral. Government now has no obligation to do anything except what the people say, and that allows the government to do anything. Keep in mind the fact that the government is still run by sentient people who are aware of what they are doing and how their actions impact people. We are giving those agents of government the license to commit cruelty in the name of fulfilling legal obligation, and that is perhaps one of the most dangerous mindsets ever perpetuated by debaters and it needs to stop.