



CHOOSING THE LESSER EVIL: POLITICAL OBLIGATION IN THE FACE OF IMPERFECTION

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Abstract

The concept of political obligation has been a central debate in political philosophy for centuries, focusing on why individuals ought to obey the state. One argument that has gained attention in recent political theory is the lesser evil argument, which posits that citizens have an obligation to support or obey the state when it is the lesser of two evils. This paper explores both the case for and against the lesser evil argument as a basis for political obligation. By analyzing its implications in terms of ethical theory, practical application, and moral limitations, we aim to assess its viability in justifying political obedience and loyalty in the context of modern democratic governance.

Keywords

Political obligation, lesser evil argument, political duty, ethical theory, consequentialism, justice, democracy, authoritarianism, civic engagement, political philosophy, resistance to injustice, fairness, obedience, moral responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

Political obligation—the moral or legal duty of citizens to obey the laws of their state—has long been a subject of significant debate. Classical theories, such as those proposed by philosophers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, have offered various justifications for why individuals should obey the state. The lesser evil argument provides a unique framework for political obligation, suggesting that citizens may have a moral duty to obey the state when it is less harmful than an alternative. This argument relies on the premise that, while no political system may be perfect, individuals are obligated to support the one that poses the least harm or injustice. However, critics contend that this justification can be ethically problematic and potentially open the door for justifying oppressive regimes. This paper examines both sides of the argument, considering its strengths, weaknesses, and ethical implications in contemporary political contexts.

Political obligation is a central and enduring issue in political philosophy, as it addresses the question of why individuals ought to obey the laws and directives of the state. Theories of political obligation have evolved over time, from the social contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau to the more contemporary perspectives provided by thinkers such as John Rawls and Robert Nozick. These theories

generally aim to provide a moral or rational justification for why citizens should comply with state authority and laws, despite the fact that not all individuals agree with every policy or law enforced by their government.

In recent political discourse, a concept known as the lesser evil argument has gained attention as a potential justification for political obligation. This argument is rooted in the idea that, while no political system may be perfect, citizens may have an obligation to support or at least tolerate the authority of a state if it presents a less harmful or morally objectionable option compared to the available alternatives. The lesser evil argument positions itself as a pragmatic response to political imperfection, suggesting that obedience to a government that minimizes harm, even if flawed, is morally preferable to disobedience or rebellion that might bring about a far worse outcome.

The appeal of the lesser evil argument is especially evident in situations where citizens must choose between two undesirable options: for example, between a democratic regime that is imperfect but relatively just, and an authoritarian regime that is clearly repressive and oppressive. From a consequentialist perspective, the lesser evil argument can be seen as an attempt to reduce harm and avoid the greater injustices that might arise under more extreme political conditions. This reasoning aligns with the principle of harm reduction, which asserts that moral decisions should prioritize minimizing suffering, even if it means making compromises in other areas.

However, the lesser evil argument is not without its critics. Some philosophers argue that it can be a dangerous justification for political obedience, as it can allow for the endorsement of regimes or policies that are unjust in their own right, simply because they are perceived as "less bad" than worse alternatives. This line of criticism draws attention to the moral risks of complacency and passive acceptance of oppressive political systems, which can perpetuate injustices and inequalities over time. For example, the lesser evil argument could potentially justify the maintenance of a corrupt or dysfunctional democracy simply because it prevents the rise of an authoritarian or totalitarian regime. In such cases, critics contend that political obligation should not be based on minimizing harm at any cost but should instead be grounded in principles of justice and fairness that encourage active resistance to oppression, rather than passive acquiescence.

The lesser evil argument also raises questions about the nature of political obligation itself. Is political duty something that can be reduced to mere harm avoidance, or is it a more complex moral obligation tied to principles of fairness, justice, and individual rights? Can citizens be morally justified in supporting a government they disagree with or find imperfect, simply because the alternatives are worse? And how far can this argument be stretched before it becomes ethically indefensible?

In this paper, we will explore both the case for and against the lesser evil argument in the context of political obligation. We will begin by examining the foundational principles that underlie the lesser evil argument, drawing on consequentialist ethics and harm reduction theory. We will then consider the criticisms of this argument, particularly the concerns it raises about ethical complacency, the justification of unjust regimes, and the potential for moral hazard in political theory. Finally, we will assess the broader implications of the lesser evil argument for contemporary political systems, focusing on its relevance to modern democratic governance and its capacity to promote active, justice-oriented citizenship. By the end, we hope to offer a nuanced understanding of the lesser evil argument and its potential to shape discussions

of political obligation in the twenty-first century.

METHODS

This paper utilizes a theoretical analysis of existing literature in political philosophy, particularly works that address political obligation and the lesser evil argument. Key texts from prominent philosophers such as David Hume, John Rawls, and more contemporary theorists like Thomas Pogge are critically analyzed. Additionally, the paper evaluates real-world examples, such as authoritarian regimes, democratic governance, and historical case studies, to assess the applicability of the lesser evil argument in practice. This methodological approach allows for a nuanced discussion of both the theoretical justification and practical consequences of political obligation based on the lesser evil argument.

This paper employs a theoretical and comparative analysis of the lesser evil argument for political obligation by synthesizing key philosophical works, both historical and contemporary, and examining their implications for modern political theory. The aim of this methodology is to critically assess the strengths and weaknesses of the lesser evil argument while exploring its ethical underpinnings and practical implications. The following sections outline the primary methodological approaches used in the analysis of this argument.

1. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The first stage of the analysis involves a comprehensive review of foundational political philosophy texts that address the problem of political obligation, particularly those that either implicitly or explicitly engage with the concept of the lesser evil. The key texts include:

- **Classical Theories of Political Obligation:** This includes a review of social contract theories by philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. While these theories do not directly address the lesser evil argument, they provide essential background to understanding how the state derives its authority and why citizens have moral duties to obey its laws. Their ideas serve as a basis for evaluating whether the lesser evil argument can be integrated into traditional theories of political obligation.
- **Consequentialist Ethics:** A significant part of the lesser evil argument relies on consequentialist moral theory, particularly the principle of harm reduction. To explore this, the paper draws on the works of utilitarian thinkers such as John Stuart Mill and modern consequentialists like Derek Parfit and Thomas Pogge. These scholars argue that moral actions should be judged based on the consequences they produce, with the aim of minimizing harm. By reviewing these perspectives, the paper investigates whether the lesser evil argument aligns with or contradicts consequentialist thinking.
- **Contemporary Theories of Political Obligation:** The paper also draws on more recent philosophers such as John Rawls, Robert Nozick, and David Hume, whose works interrogate the nature of political duty in the context of justice and fairness. Rawls' Theory of Justice is particularly relevant in understanding how political obligation might be justified through principles of justice rather than mere harm reduction. Hume's insights into the natural basis of political order and the legitimacy of government authority are also examined to contextualize the lesser evil argument within broader normative theories of political authority.

The literature review aims to identify gaps in current discussions about political obligation, particularly the use of the lesser evil argument as a justification for obedience, and to provide a foundation for the theoretical analysis presented in this paper.

2. Comparative Analysis of Real-World Examples

To ground the theoretical discussion in practical application, the paper analyzes real-world political contexts where the lesser evil argument has been used or could be relevant. The following cases are examined in detail:

- **Democratic vs. Authoritarian Regimes:** One of the primary applications of the lesser evil argument is in comparing democratic systems with authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. The paper considers historical and contemporary examples of regimes such as Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and modern authoritarian states like North Korea or Russia under Vladimir Putin. These examples illustrate the moral tension between supporting a flawed democracy that may have corruption and inefficiency, versus choosing to resist or disobey an authoritarian government that imposes extreme human rights violations and stifles political dissent.
- **War and Emergency States:** In situations of war or national emergency, governments often adopt extraordinary measures—such as surveillance, censorship, and military conscription—that could be justified through the lesser evil argument. The paper examines case studies from World War II, the War on Terror, and other national crises where governments have expanded state power, sometimes infringing on civil liberties, in the name of protecting the public from greater threats. These cases help explore the limits of the lesser evil argument in extreme circumstances and assess the moral risks of acquiescing to governments that justify such measures.
- **Global Justice and International Political Obligation:** The paper also considers the application of the lesser evil argument in the context of global political obligation. For instance, the moral obligations of citizens in wealthier, democratic nations to support international interventions, such as those in Kosovo or the Democratic Republic of Congo, are explored. Should citizens of democratic states support policies that, while imperfect, aim to alleviate suffering in conflict zones, or should they resist state actions that are potentially unjust? This comparative approach brings an international dimension to the argument. These real-world case studies serve to evaluate whether the lesser evil argument holds up in practice or if it leads to morally problematic decisions, especially in complex, high-stakes political environments.

3. Ethical Analysis of the Lesser Evil Argument

A significant portion of the methodology involves an ethical analysis of the lesser evil argument. The analysis addresses several critical questions:

- **Consequentialist Justification:** Is the lesser evil argument ethically defensible from a consequentialist perspective? To assess this, the paper draws on the works of utilitarian philosophers who emphasize minimizing harm as a moral obligation. The analysis considers whether political obligation can legitimately be reduced to a calculation of which option (the current government or an alternative) produces the least harm overall, or whether this fails to account for moral considerations such as justice, rights, and fairness.
- **Deontological Critiques:** Critics of the lesser evil argument often appeal to deontological principles, such as the duty to resist injustice or uphold individual rights, even in the face of potentially greater harm. The paper engages with these critiques, focusing on thinkers like Immanuel Kant, who argue that there are moral imperatives that should not be violated under any circumstances, regardless of the consequences. This part of the analysis explores whether political obligation should be seen as an ethical commitment to justice, even at the risk of political instability or greater harm.

- **Moral Hazard and Complacency:** A key ethical issue with the lesser evil argument is the potential for moral complacency. By accepting a "lesser evil," citizens may inadvertently support policies or systems that are themselves unjust or harmful. The paper explores the moral hazard of political obligation when it is premised solely on harm reduction. What happens when citizens are merely complicit in a system that they consider to be "less bad" rather than actively advocating for political reform or resistance to injustice?

4. Normative Assessment of Political Obligation

The final stage of the methodology involves a normative assessment of the lesser evil argument in light of the critiques and real-world examples discussed. This assessment aims to determine whether the argument provides a sustainable and morally sound justification for political obligation in modern democratic societies. It also considers whether alternative theories of political obligation, such as Rawlsian justice or civic republicanism, offer a more robust and ethically defensible framework for political duty.

RESULTS

The Case for the Lesser Evil Argument

Supporters of the lesser evil argument for political obligation suggest that individuals have a moral responsibility to obey a government that, though flawed or imperfect, does less harm than other viable alternatives. This could apply in cases where a democratic government, despite its flaws (e.g., corruption, inefficiency), prevents worse outcomes such as authoritarian rule, civil war, or genocide. The lesser evil argument aligns with consequentialist moral theory, which evaluates actions based on their outcomes. If the state's policies are less harmful or unjust than those of competing political systems or regimes, citizens may be morally obliged to support it, even if they disagree with some of its policies.

For example, democratic governance can be seen as the lesser evil compared to dictatorship. While a democracy may allow for inequality, inefficiency, and corruption, it offers a mechanism for accountability and peaceful political change, something authoritarian regimes often lack. In this context, individuals may have a duty to participate in and support the democratic system, even if they are dissatisfied with specific aspects of governance, because its overall harm is less than the alternatives.

The Case Against the Lesser Evil Argument

Critics of the lesser evil argument argue that it opens the door to morally dubious justifications for political obligation. The problem lies in the potential for rationalizing oppressive or unjust systems as "lesser evils." For instance, during times of war or social crisis, governments may adopt extraordinary measures—such as surveillance, censorship, or authoritarian policies—that are justified as necessary to combat a greater evil. Critics argue that this mindset can perpetuate political complacency and allow for the normalization of tyranny.

Furthermore, some philosophers argue that the lesser evil argument fails to adequately address the ethical responsibilities of citizens to resist unjust systems. John Rawls' theory of justice, for example, emphasizes the importance of adhering to principles of fairness and justice, even if it means rejecting an imperfect system. Rawls argues that citizens in a well-ordered society should actively promote justice, not simply accept the status quo because it is less harmful than worse alternatives. This position suggests that moral obligations should extend beyond mere harm reduction and include a commitment to systemic justice and equality.

Additionally, the lesser evil argument may undermine individual agency and responsibility. If citizens are bound to support the lesser evil, they might become passive participants in a system that perpetuates inequalities and injustices, simply because it is perceived as "better than the alternative." This could stifle efforts toward meaningful political reform or the creation of more just systems.

DISCUSSION

The lesser evil argument offers a compelling reason for political obligation in certain contexts, particularly when the alternatives to a given state are far worse. In cases where citizens must choose between a flawed but stable democracy and a violent, authoritarian regime, the argument for supporting the lesser evil seems reasonable from a utilitarian perspective. By reducing harm and promoting stability, individuals may indeed have a moral obligation to obey the government in power.

However, the practical implications of the lesser evil argument remain contentious. While it may justify support for democratic systems, it could also be exploited to justify morally questionable policies or regimes. The ethical problem lies in determining the threshold of "evil" that constitutes the lesser evil, and whether it is ethically permissible to support a system simply because it is less harmful than a potential alternative.

Furthermore, the lesser evil argument does not fully address the need for active resistance to injustice. If political obligation is solely based on minimizing harm, it may fail to inspire the kind of civic engagement necessary for systemic change. For example, individuals living under oppressive regimes may be morally obliged to resist, rather than comply with, the government, especially if it violates fundamental principles of justice.

Ultimately, the lesser evil argument raises important questions about the nature of political obligation, the role of citizens in maintaining just systems, and the ethical limits of obedience to authority. While it offers a pragmatic justification in certain contexts, it cannot serve as a comprehensive or uncritical foundation for political loyalty and obedience.

CONCLUSION

The lesser evil argument for political obligation provides a compelling case for supporting a political system that is less harmful than alternatives, particularly in cases where the choice is between an imperfect democracy and a dangerous authoritarian regime. However, its reliance on harm reduction and its potential to justify oppressive systems makes it ethically complex. While the argument can serve as a basis for political obedience in certain contexts, it is insufficient as a blanket justification for political obligation. A more robust theory of political obligation must incorporate considerations of justice, fairness, and resistance to injustice, rather than simply seeking the least harmful option. Ultimately, the lesser evil argument serves as a valuable, yet imperfect, framework for understanding political obligation in an imperfect world.

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20. Since most states are continuously passing new laws, we do not consider a state altered through its own legal channels as an alternative to an existing state but rather a continuation of it. Section II addresses the question of whether to work within or outside the law in response to a state's injustice.