

Is Statism an Amoral Philosophy?

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Abstract:

Thick moral terms – such as theft, fraud, and counterfeiting – are terms whose very use implies a definitionally necessary moral evaluation of their content. In this paper, I shall argue that the philosophy of statism – that is, a philosophy grounded in the belief in the normative justifiability and desirability of monopolistic apparatuses of initiatory violence – is necessarily amoral insofar as it cannot apply thick moral terms in a logically consistent manner. By the same token, I shall argue that libertarianism – i.e., the view that only consensual social relations are morally acceptable – is the only general sociopolitical doctrine capable of accomplishing this task, thus, in contrast to statism, making its prescriptions susceptible to genuine moral evaluation.

Keywords: libertarianism, statism, amoralism, thick moral concepts, metaethics.

In this paper, I shall argue that the philosophy of statism,¹ insofar as its endorsement does not stem from any errors of a broadly cognitive nature,² is normatively grounded in amoral reasons – that is, reasons that, despite seeming to be rooted in moral concepts, cannot employ such concepts in a logically consistent manner, thus falling outside the purview of genuine moral discourse.³ By the same token, I shall argue that libertarianism – that is, the only social philosophy that consistently opposes the initiation or threat of institutionalized violence – is the only general world view that allows for putting forward prescriptive sociopolitical proposals couched in explicitly moral terms.⁴

Let me begin by making a rather uncontroversial assumption that there exist so-called thick moral terms, i.e., terms whose very use implies a definitionally necessary moral evaluation of their content [4], [13]. Think, for instance, of terms such as generosity and charity. It is logically impossible for there to be evil generosity or wicked charity. If one's generosity is excessive, wasteful, or otherwise inefficient, then it no longer merits the name generosity – it turns into profligacy. Likewise, if one's charity is based on giving away goods stolen from others, then it no longer merits the name charity – it turns into fencing.

Analogously, think of terms such as theft, counterfeiting, and Ponzi scheming. It is logically impossible for there to be benevolent theft, praiseworthy counterfeiting, or laudable Ponzi scheming. If one's act of theft consists in reclaiming stolen property, then it no longer merits the name theft – it

turns into an act of repossession. Likewise, if one's act of counterfeiting is not backed by stable value contracts or coercive legal tender laws, then it no longer merits the name counterfeiting – it turns into harmless printing of colored paper tickets or creating virtual bookkeeping entries.

In other words, there exist certain terms whose descriptive content implies a logically necessary moral assessment. Of course, this by itself does not constitute a comprehensive argument for moral objectivity, since we might differ in our application of these terms to specific instances of human action.⁵ This, however, is not directly relevant to my line of thinking here.

Now, let us ask a statist – that is, a believer in the desirability of the state and its institutions, including the ones mentioned in the latter part of this sentence – what conditions would need to hold for him to be able to justifiably accuse the IRS of stealing the money of private individuals, the Fed of counterfeiting money, or the Social Security Administration of engaging in a Ponzi scheme.

It seems to me that the statist can offer two relevant answers to this question, both of which leave him in a very uncomfortable position. First, given that the descriptive content of the above morally negative terms appears to match quite well the nature of the activities performed by the above state institutions,⁶ and assuming that the statist wishes to avoid the conclusion that the institutions whose existence he finds desirable engage in inherently immoral activities, he might suggest that it is definitionally and logically impossible for the IRS to steal, for the Fed to counterfeit, and for the SSA to engage in Ponzi schemes. In other words, he might suggest that the very nature of these institutions logically precludes describing their activities in these thick moral terms.

However, since redefining the terms in question so as to make them morally positive or morally thin whenever they are applied to the institutions of the state and their activities would be a semantically arbitrary move, it logically follows that the statist believes that moral categories do not apply to our judgments regarding at least some of the fundamental institutions of the state and their activities. In other words, the statist is logically compelled to conclude that he finds their existence desirable for reasons that are amoral, that is, immune to considerations of morality.

Alternatively, he might suggest that the thick moral terms mentioned above – theft, counterfeiting, and Ponzi scheming – apply only to illegal activities, while the activities performed by the IRS, the Fed, and the SSA are legal. This, however, implies that the only relevant normative difference here is that the state issued a certain declaration (the declaration of legality) with respect to its institutions and their activities, while it did not issue the same declaration with respect to the selfsame activities of private individuals and private organizations. This, in turn, implies that declaring something as legal (by the state, since, presumably, it is a matter of definition that only the state can issue such declarations) means removing the object of declaration from the realm of moral judgment and thus immunizing it to considerations of morality. In sum, the logical conclusion of this train of thought is that legality is an amoral, or, worse still, an amoralizing concept.

Moreover, it would be futile to claim in this connection that various forms of institutionalized fiat appropriation [12] undertaken by the state can be morally justified on account of the state purportedly being the only institution capable of bringing private property into existence in the first place. After all, contending that the state can override the property rights of individuals because it defines and enforces them would make the rights in question purely conventional. This, in turn, would divorce them altogether from the applicability of thick moral terms, hence once again leading the statist into the domain of amorality.⁷

Neither would it do to suggest that the moral status of specific activities – and thus the issue of whether specific thick moral terms describe them in an accurate way – depends on the number of individuals who morally approve or disapprove of them in any particular case. This is because such case-specific numerical considerations do not in any normatively relevant way alter the descriptive features of the activities in question, especially as regards the individuals who are directly involved in them [27]. In other words, the intentional taking of another person's property without that person's permission or consent is theft, regardless of how many people think that the term ceases to apply when

it is X rather than Y (or 1000 Xs rather than a single X) who does the taking. This, as far as I can tell, disposes of the notion that the statist could avoid the indictment of amorality by appealing to the alleged moral significance of following a democratic consensus.

At this point, a consequentialist-minded statist might suggest that even though he disapproves of the nature of the state activities described in the preceding paragraphs, he nonetheless accepts their existence as a matter of practical necessity or utilitarian calculus.⁸ In other words, he might claim that the state does indeed steal, counterfeit, and engage in Ponzi scheming on a regular basis, while at the same time contending that in the absence of the state there would be even more theft, counterfeiting, and Ponzi scheming. And whilst this last point is highly debatable [5], [6], [7], [10], [14], [16], [17], [19], [24], [26], it cannot be denied, the argument goes, that by making it the statist can escape the accusation of amorality.

However, it seems to me that such a position is logically inconsistent insofar as it employs thick moral concepts. After all, if condoning a given kind of theft is supposed to bring about a greater good in the form of preventing a worse kind of theft, then the former should not be called theft in the first place, since it cannot be classified as an inherently immoral and detrimental type of activity, one designated by a thick moral term. And yet, if its purely descriptive characteristics do not appear to allow for classifying it as anything else, then the whole argument seems to fall apart. Furthermore, if all the supposed statist says is that we should reconcile with the fact of institutionalized theft as something practically unavoidable, then he should not be classified as a statist in the first place, since pointing out the putative inevitability of a given phenomenon does not amount to finding it morally desirable.⁹

Nor can the above train of thought be saved by appealing to the notion that the immoral activities of the state can be justified in virtue of the state's supposedly unique ability to address various "existential emergencies". First of all, it can be plausibly argued on the basis of ample empirical evidence that, far from being uniquely able to resolve existential emergencies, the state is uniquely able to create them [21]. After all, it is exclusively large-scale, institutionalized, ideologically clothed physical violence – the essential hallmark of state operations – that can assume the form of global wars, systemic genocides, and other paradigmatic instances of life-threatening events [28].

Moreover, emergencies are by definition unusual, if not singular, occurrences. Meanwhile, the operations of the Fed, the IRS, and the SSA mentioned earlier, as well as the bulk of other state procedures, are routine activities. Thus, endowing them with a unique moral status on account of their purported ability to provide essential catastrophe insurance is an inadmissible move. Further, it has to be noted that the uniqueness of cataclysmic events makes it impossible to prepare for them in any precise and programmatic manner [25]. From this it follows that such events can be successfully confronted only after they happen, which suggests that the greater the number of individuals who can confront them on their own unique terms, the greater the robustness of their collective pool of responses. In this context, a coercive homogenization of such responses imposed by the state can only be counter-effective.

Finally, insofar as emergency situations can be thought of as a variety of so-called lifeboat scenarios, in which individual rights can supposedly be violated in order to secure a putative greater good, statism can in no way be characterized as a philosophy of dealing with emergencies. This is because violating another's rights in a lifeboat scenario, even though it is supposed to bring about highly desirable consequences, still counts as a moral transgression, which requires a punitive response. Given the exceptional nature of lifeboat scenarios, the victim of rights violation can certainly pardon the violator after the fact, but this only further demonstrates that the violation in question, though a pardonable offense, is nonetheless an offense, that is, an immoral act.

Meanwhile, what the statist claims is not that state activities such as taxation, fiat money creation, coercive redistribution, etc., are criminal-though-pardonable, but that they are non-criminal. Thus, what he claims is not that state activities can be retroactively justified on the basis of their purported unique capacity to deal with existential emergencies, but that they do not need any special

moral justification in the first place. In sum, once again, he either employs thick moral concepts without being able to explain why they do not seem to apply to the realm of state operations, or he rejects their consistent use, hence leaving the purview of genuine moral discourse.

To conclude, regardless of which of the answers discussed in the preceding paragraphs the statist decides to choose, it turns out that the justification of his choice has to be ultimately grounded in amoral reasons. In other words, it turns out that, contrary to some prominent anti-statist arguments [15], [20], [22], the philosophy of statism in its cognitively faultless form seems to be based not so much (or not exclusively) on hypocrisy or general immorality, but on amorality.

By the same token, libertarianism – i.e., the view that only consensual social relations are morally acceptable – emerges as the only general sociopolitical philosophy whose prescriptions are susceptible to moral justification. More specifically, it emerges as the only view that condemns anti-social activities in unambiguous and consistent terms, always applying thick moral concepts in a uniform manner and drawing out their deontological consequences with exceptionless regularity [1], [2]. It should come as no surprise that this philosophy, with its unique ability to treat thick moral concepts as genuinely thick as far as the principles of general social organization are concerned, is simultaneously completely thin with respect to more specific cultural and characterological values. After all, this is only to be expected given the assumption that all such values can be truly pursued only by means of consensual – i.e., truly social – activities. This fact, far from suggesting that libertarianism is itself an amoral doctrine, only further demonstrates that it is the only doctrine that allows social life to escape from the domain of amorality.

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Notes

1. Defined as a philosophy grounded in the belief in the normative justifiability and desirability of monopolistic entities whose operations and revenue are based on “institutionalized interference with or aggression against private property and private property claims” [9, p. 2].
2. I consider such errors to include, e.g., the Stockholm syndrome and Milgram-style obedience to authority, which make their victims accept the dictates of various self-proclaimed power figures not on the basis of any consciously articulated moral justifications, but on the basis of fear-driven rationalizations or resigned acquiescence, see, e.g., [11, ch. 6].
3. It is crucial in this context to distinguish between amorality (falling outside the realm of good and evil) and immorality (siding with evil). Admittedly, it would be more than possible to argue that statism is an immoral philosophy, given its central tenet that institutionalized aggression and the threat thereof are supposed to constitute the foundations of any well-functioning society. This, however, is not my goal here, especially since there are already a sizeable number of papers arguing for that conclusion. My present contention is categorically different: namely, to demonstrate that statism cannot meaningfully utilize moral concepts, regardless of its actual moral status as a normative system. For more on the concept of amorality, see [23, p. 146].
4. It is crucial to realize here that libertarianism, far from being a comprehensive moral doctrine, is actually the only sociopolitical philosophy that is fully compatible with every conceivable comprehensive moral doctrine, provided that the latter respects the principle of non-aggression, see, e.g., [3]. Thus, it would be a categorical error to point out in this connection that other non-violent world views, such as, say, pacifism, are equally capable of formulating prescriptive sociopolitical proposals couched in explicitly moral terms, since pacifism is more than a sociopolitical philosophy, having broader metaphysical and personal dimensions as well. In other words, in terms of the categorical distinctions made here, pacifism is to be regarded as a specific variety of libertarianism rather than as its doctrinal competitor. On the most general level of the taxonomy of sociopolitical world views, statism and libertarianism (i.e., organized initiatory violence and organized protective freedom) seem to be the only available options. Hence, if it can be established that the former is necessarily amoral, then on this most general level only the latter can aspire to being part of genuine moral discourse.

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5. Still, it has to be noted that the existence of thick moral terms constitutes a notable prima facie case for moral objectivity.
 6. The ultimate proof of this contention is the fact that the state would treat as a criminal any private individual who would engage in the same kinds of activities.
 7. In addition, it needs to be pointed out here that it is both logically and factually incorrect to suggest that no private property rights can exist outside of the jurisdiction of the state. The historical record clearly indicates that the emergence of private property precedes the formation of states, which is only to be expected, since, technically speaking, states are parasitic entities that subsist on coercively expropriated resources of productive agents, see, e.g., [18].
 8. This point was brought to my attention by Konrad S. Graf.
 9. For an example of an author who makes precisely this kind of „inevitalist” argument, and to see how much of a stretch it would be to call his views and recommendations “statist” (at least according to the definition adopted in the present paper), see [8].