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# SHOULD WE CONSENT TO BE GOVERNED?

A SHORT INTRODUCTION  
TO POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

*Second Edition*

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## Should We Consent to Be Governed?

LIKE IT OR NOT, ALL OF US LIVE IN AND ARE AFFECTED BY THE world of politics and government. It is no exaggeration to say that since the development of nuclear weapons, the lives of everyone on earth depend on the actions and decisions of a small number of political leaders. Likewise, through laws and policies that deal with virtually all areas of public and private life, governments influence the choices we make and the extent to which we can achieve our personal goals. Even people with no knowledge or interest in political issues are affected by political institutions and political decisions. Politics and its effects are inescapable.



Describing our situation in this way makes politics and government sound rather bleak. Many people, however, see political institutions as among the highest achievements of human beings. After all, political institutions often make it possible for large numbers of people with conflicting interests and ideals to live together peacefully. This is no small achievement, and because of it, some people believe that we have a duty to be actively interested in and involved in the political process. So, for example, when relatively few people vote in elections, we frequently hear how bad it is that people don't care enough about politics to vote for candidates for office.

## Personal Choices and Political Philosophies

Even though the effects of political decisions and institutions are inescapable, people do have a choice about their personal involvement in politics. It is up to us to choose the ways we think and feel about political institutions and the ways in which we involve ourselves with them.

Thinking about these personal choices may lead us to the kind of reflections that make up political philosophy. If we want to know how we ought to relate to governments and politics, we need to think both about ourselves and about governments. Here, as elsewhere, philosophical thinking begins with personal concerns: What should you or I do, think, and feel about governments and our relationship to them? The attempt to answer these personal questions often leads to more general, philosophical questions: What is the nature of government? What demands can governments legitimately make of individual citizens? What kinds of duties do individuals have to support governmental policies and to obey the laws that governments create?

These questions are neither new nor easy to answer. Moreover, while they are abstract questions, they are neither

trivial nor purely academic. Their importance is indicated by the fact that many people believe that citizens have a duty to risk their lives for their country, and in fact many people have both killed and been killed when their governments have called on them to go to war. Even in peaceful times, all governments require some sacrifices—in the form of taxation—by their citizens. Indeed, government officials have extraordinary powers: They can send us to fight in wars and take our money, and when we disagree with their laws and policies, they can back them up with the power of police forces and armies.

At the same time, governments can make us secure in our homes, defend us against enemies and criminals, educate us, and provide us with food, shelter, and medical care in times of need. Given the extensive and diverse powers of governments and their impact on our lives, it is not surprising that they inspire conflicting feelings, ranging from devout patriotism to cynicism and hostility; from “My country, right or wrong” to “Don't tread on me.”

Another fact that leads people to reflect on their relationship to government is that governments claim to act in the name of their citizens. In this way, they implicate us in their actions and make us feel responsible for them. If my government engages in worthwhile activities, using my tax money and presenting itself to the world as my representative, then I may take pride in its actions. However, if my government, acting in my name and using funds that I provide, acts in harmful, destructive, and immoral ways, then I may feel ashamed of my involvement with it. Even though you and I do not choose the policies of our government, as citizens we may feel responsible for them.

What, then, should our attitude be toward our own government? In order to answer this question, we need to know at least two things:

First, what are the general standards for judging governments?

Second, what is the nature of the particular government under which we live?



Since this is a work of political philosophy, I will focus on the first, more general question. I want to investigate how we should think about governments in general, and when we have worked this out, we can use these general conclusions to help guide our thinking about our own particular country. My hope is that the arguments and ideas in this book will be helpful to thoughtful people who want to form a clearer idea about their own duties and responsibilities as citizens and as human beings.

## What's Ahead? Four Political Outlooks

As a first step toward solving these problems, I want to identify two related questions that articulate the concerns I have raised in a clear and focused way. These are:

1. Is government power legitimate?
2. Do citizens have a moral obligation to obey the laws that governments create?

My own thinking about these questions has led me to identify four basic outlooks toward government. Each of these views expresses a distinctive attitude toward government and provides answers to these two basic questions. The four views are super patriotism, political cynicism, anarchism, and critical citizenship. Here is a brief description of each view and the answers it gives to these two basic questions.

### Super Patriotism

Super patriotism is the view that government power is legitimate and that citizens have a powerful obligation to obey governmental laws and directives. The saying "my country, right or wrong" is probably the most familiar expression of this view. It tells us that the demands of loyalty toward our own government are so powerful that we

should obey our government's directives in an unquestioning spirit. This outlook is put forward by the Greek philosopher Socrates in a dialogue called the *Crito*. That dialogue, written by Plato after Socrates' death, portrays Socrates in prison, awaiting execution for the crimes of corrupting the youth and preaching false religious doctrines. Since Socrates defended obedience to the law even when it cost him his life, his story provides a powerful depiction of the kind of political devotion that super patriots think is appropriate.

### Political Cynicism

Political cynics reject this kind of devotion to law and government as absurd. In their view, while governments claim to act for the common good, they are in fact tools for serving the interests of those who hold power. Governments are, in this view, a tool which some citizens use to exploit others and to advance their own narrow interests.

This is a familiar view. People often see politicians as out for themselves or as the tools of powerful interests who use the law for their own private benefit. Even among the ancient Greeks, there were people who held this view, as we will see in examining the views of Thrasymachus, a Greek thinker who plays a role in Plato's *Republic*. The cynical view was also developed by Marxist thinkers like V. I. Lenin, the Russian revolutionary who brought communism to Russia and established the Soviet Union.

### Anarchism

Anarchists take seriously the cynical view of the nature of government and have developed a comprehensive anti-political philosophy. Anarchists put forward three radical claims about governments and our relationship to them. First, no governments are legitimate; second, no one has a moral duty to obey the law; and third, human beings would be better off if there were no governments at all.

Anarchists do not deny that governments often have the power to force us to do what they want us to do, but they deny that such governmental power is ever legitimate.



While we don't meet too many genuine anarchists in everyday life, this view has been impressively defended by some interesting thinkers. The contemporary American philosopher Robert Paul Wolff developed a moral argument against government legitimacy while the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin argued for the possibility of life without government.

### Critical Citizenship

The critical citizenship view does not give a simple, unequivocal answer to our questions about the legitimacy of government and the duty to obey the law. Its advocates claim that one cannot reasonably decide either that all governments are legitimate or that none are. Neither is it reasonable to think that we are always morally obligated to obey the law or that we are never morally obligated to do so.

According to people who hold the critical citizenship view, some governments are legitimate and some are not, and whether we are morally obligated to obey the law and respect governmental authority depends on the features of the particular government we are facing and the particular laws that we are being told to obey. So, sometimes critical citizenship advocates favor obedience to laws, and sometimes they favor disobedience. The American reformer Martin Luther King, Jr. defended such a view in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

This view has a common sense appeal to it, but it is not without its difficulties. After all, if each citizen has the right to decide whether a law should be obeyed or not, that may seem to be the equivalent of anarchism. Governments and laws cannot survive if everyone simply does what he or she thinks is best. Critics charge that that is the equivalent of having no laws at all. They do not think that the kind of middle ground that critical citizenship advocates attempt to develop is actually coherent. For these critics, critical citizenship is not a genuine option. The only choices, these critics say, are super patriotism or anarchism.

## Making Our Own Choice

Each of these views has some plausibility. There are probably times when each of us agrees with the super patriot and thinks that our country and its laws deserve our unwavering support, even when we disagree with particular judgments or decisions. We think it is wrong when others deny this and claim for themselves the right to decide whether they should be subjected to rules that apply to everyone. On other occasions, however, we may look distrustfully at people in power and wonder whether they care about our well-being at all. On such occasions, like the cynic, we will think that we owe them neither respect nor obedience. Or, like the anarchist, we may simply think that we should do whatever we think is best and that we have no reason to attach any special importance to laws and governments. Finally, there are times when it seems obviously correct, as the critical citizenship view says, that under some circumstances people do owe allegiance and obedience, while under other circumstances these are inappropriate.

One reason for engaging in philosophical reflection about these issues is to see whether we can arrive at one consistent view, rather than simply having different and conflicting views at different times. Since it is obviously impossible for all of these views to be true, it would be good to know which of them provides the correct answer to our questions.

It is possible, of course, that there is some view other than the four I have considered that is the correct one. I do not want to claim that these are the only possibilities. However, these views seem to capture the main options that are available. For example, if we ask whether governments ever have legitimate authority, there would appear to be only a small set of possible answers. We can say "Yes, they always do," which is the answer of super patriotism, or "No, they never do," which is the answer of anarchists and cynics. Or we can say "Sometimes they do, and sometimes



they don't," which is the answer of critical citizenship advocates.

Likewise, if we ask whether citizens have a moral duty to obey the law, there is a similar set of possible answers: "Yes, they have a duty always to obey" (as the super patriots say), "No, they never have a duty to obey" (as anarchists and cynics claim), and "Sometimes they have a duty to obey and sometimes not" (as advocates of critical citizenship urge).

So only a small set of basic answers to these questions is possible. Different thinkers will, of course, develop and defend these views in their own individual ways, and I do not want to deny that refinements and variations on these outlooks are possible. Nonetheless, we can be confident that no basic types of options are being omitted because the four views cover the logically possible set of basic answers to the questions we are considering.

Which of them, then, is the strongest and most reasonable view? Which view should you or I adopt? In the following chapters I will examine each of them and try to answer these questions. I will describe each view in some detail and try to present the most important reasons why thoughtful people have found them plausible and attractive. Then, I will consider arguments against each view and try to assess how well it answers our basic questions about the relationship between citizens and governments.



## Super Patriotism

I WANT TO BEGIN BY DESCRIBING A VIEW THAT THE GREEK philosopher Plato articulates in a brief but powerful dialogue called the *Crito*. I begin here both because this work is one of the earliest discussions of our problem and because it expresses a strong view about citizenship in a very vivid way.

In this work, Plato describes a conversation between Socrates and his friend Crito. Socrates has been convicted by the Athenian court of preaching false doctrines about the gods and corrupting the minds of the youth. He has been sentenced to die and is awaiting execution in an Athenian jail. As his execution date approaches, Crito urges Socrates to save his own life by escaping. Crito assures