Ethical Government  
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America’s Social Contract

Often, the negative’s approach on the resolution becomes a ‘what if’ argument. Even with examples, their argument tends to boil down to a case of all the ways preventive war can be used unethically, twisted and abused to harm society at large. For instance, a common objection with preventive war is that there is no imminent threat, so when governments claim that future conflict is inevitable they are disregarding a very real possibility of peace, of fear-mongering and seeking out battle.

This case seeks to preempt those arguments, by arguing that the only way to determine if preventive war is ethical is to look at governments who otherwise want to act ethically. The justification for this is that there is a big distinction between an unethical government and an unethical policy, and when we examine unethical governments it becomes really hard to determine whether individual policies they have are ethical or not.

But how do we know if a government is otherwise ethical? As per my value backed by the social contract, a government can only be ethical if it seeks protect citizens’ rights first and foremost, placing them above both its own power and the rights of people across borders.

The argument these concepts create is that, since we are only considering ethical governments who protect their citizens’ rights when in danger, and, as per the definition and first contention, we’re dealing with situations where citizens’ rights are invariably threatened, we can safely assume that whatever government response is taken will be in the name of citizens’ rights. In turn, when government selects preventive war, they are deciding that the best way to protect those rights is to utilize preventive war, which implies that preventive war is ethical.

To attack this case, you need to break down one of its warrants. You could challenge the idea that government’s only obligation when citizen’s rights are threatened is to protect those rights, perhaps with a theory like just war theory which lays out set things a government can and can’t do in trying to protect these rights. Another option is to challenge the idea that we shouldn’t consider unethical governments, which requires you to prove that preventive war being used unethically by unethical governments amounts to preventive war as a general theory being unethical.

Ethical Government

I stand resolved that **preventive war is ethical**. To understand why this is true, we first need to go over a few definitions.

# Definitions

## Preventive War

The United States Department of Defense defines preventive war as:

**“A war initiated in the belief that military conflict, while not imminent, is inevitable, and that to delay would involve greater risk.”[[1]](#footnote-1)**

A preventive war seeks to shut down a threat which a government has decided is inevitable, or guaranteed to happen. We engage in preventive war because, even though the threat is not imminent, a government has determined that delaying in war would pose a greater risk to the nation.

## Ethics

The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University defines ethics as:

“Ethics is **based on well-founded standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues.**”**[[2]](#footnote-2)** Velasquez, Manuel, et al. “What Is Ethics?” *Markkula Center for Applied Ethics*, 1 Jan. 2010, www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/what-is-ethics/.

Narrowing that down, ethics has to do with what we “ought to do.” As noted here, obligation is a way of expressing ethics, and when we say we are obligated to do something we are really saying we ethically *must do it*.

# Resolution Analysis: Ethical Governments Only

Here’s my argument: when asking if preventive war is ethical, we should only consider its use by otherwise ethical governments. Why? To illustrate why I believe this, let’s consider Nazi Germany. I know, the Nazis aren’t a very persuasive example in Lincoln Douglas debate because they are so extreme, but that’s exactly why I want to talk about them today! It’s because Nazi Germany is *so* unethical that it allows us to see why extremes aren’t useful. Here I want to make a distinction: there is a difference between an **unethical government** and an **unethical policy**. Nazi Germany was an *unethical government*, responsible for the hateful slaughtering of millions, both of its own citizens and foreign ones.

Now, Nazi Germany also had policies. They had laws. They had taxes, an army, an economy. It would be easy to say that, because Nazi Germany was so evil, those laws, those taxes, their economy were all unethical by nature, and yet we know laws aren’t unethical by nature. When we look at such unethical governments, we’re no longer able to discern between that distinction I made earlier: is this really an unethical policy, or just an unethical government using it? In order to determine if preventive war, or any form of foreign or national policy, is ethical, we need to consider governments that are otherwise ethical, seeking to fulfill their obligations.

# Value: Citizens’ Rights

Citizen’s rights should be our value today because the protection of those rights is the government’s first responsibility and obligation. Protecting their citizen’s rights is something a government has to do before *any* other obligations, which always come after the government has made sure their people are safe. This is supported by John Locke, who argued the concept of a social contract **[[3]](#footnote-3)**: the people give up some of their rights, agree to pay taxes, and subject themselves to the laws of the government. In turn, the government’s first and highest duty is to protect those citizens.

# Contention 1: The Military Conflict We Fear Is A Threat To Citizens’ Rights

The definition of preventive war notes that the government believes ‘military conflict’ is inevitable and growing more dangerous as we allow the enemy nation to develop. What are the implications of this military conflict? When a nation chooses to attack us, their goal is simple and clear: undermine our nation’s sovereignty in some way. In doing so, they both make it more difficult for our government to protect our rights *and* potentially violate those rights themselves. If our nation were to lose this inevitable conflict, the citizen’s rights would be at the mercy of a foreign power, something our government absolutely cannot allow.

The impact of all of this is that, as we’re asking whether preventive war is ethical, we must remember that preventive war by definition is an action taken by government *in response to a threat to citizen’s rights*.

# Contention 2 – What Best Protects the Citizen’s Rights Now?

We’ve established that we are talking about situations where a government has deemed the citizen’s rights to be in danger. Furthermore, from the social contract, the government is obligated to make sure the citizen’s rights are safe before taking any other action. Since fulfilling obligation is ethically required, the most ethical action by government is that which best protects the citizens’ rights now. So, who decides what action best protects the citizens’ rights?

# Contention 3 – Government Is The Highest Authority On How To Protect Citizen’s Rights

Governments know more than we do. I know, looking at ours this may be hard to believe, but it’s true. They have specific, applicable intel on any given situation that isn’t shared with us or the philosophers, that’s classified. When they decide to engage in a war, they are making that decision based on information we don’t actually have. In turn, when a government decides preventive war is the most effective way to protect citizens’ rights, neither us nor political commentators nor the philosophers actually possess the information to disprove that decision.

When a government chooses preventive war, they are saying two things:

1. The citizen’s rights are threatened
2. Preventive war is the best way to protect citizen’s rights

Since governments have more intelligence and authority than their citizens, this translates to the highest authority on war having determined that, in these cases where preventive war is chosen, it is the best way to protects citizens’ rights. This is why I stand resolved that **preventive war is ethical.**

Opposition Brief: Ethical Government

# Citizens’ Rights

All UN governments are ethically and legally bound to protect human rights

*“The Foundation of International Human Rights Law.” United Nations,* [*www.un.org/en/sections/universal-declaration/foundation-international-human-rights-law/index.html*](http://www.un.org/en/sections/universal-declaration/foundation-international-human-rights-law/index.html) *Accessed 17 Nov. 2019.*

Today, all United Nations member States have ratified at least one of the nine core international human rights treaties, and 80 percent have ratified four or more, giving concrete expression to the universality of the UDHR and international human rights.

International human rights law lays down obligations which States are bound to respect. By becoming parties to international treaties, States assume obligations and duties under international law to respect, to protect and to fulfil human rights.  The obligation to respect means that States must refrain from interfering with or curtailing the enjoyment of human rights. The obligation to protect requires States to protect individuals and groups against human rights abuses. The obligation to fulfil means that States must take positive action to facilitate the enjoyment of basic human rights.

1. "Preventive war." Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms. 2005. US Department of Defense. <https://www.bits.de/NRANEU/others/jp-doctrine/jp1\_02(05).pdf>. Accessed 12 Sept. 2019. More recent publications do not define Preventive War. There is no further context, and this is defining Preventive War directly. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Velasquez, Manuel, et al. “What Is Ethics?” *Markkula Center for Applied Ethics*, 1 Jan. 2010, www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/what-is-ethics/. Accessed 17 Nov. 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tuckness, Alex. “Locke's Political Philosophy.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 11 Jan. 2016, plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke-political/. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)