

Introduction: This paper is a standard, “compare, contrast, and evaluate,” prompt, a kind that is very common in political theory. William Paley and Christopher Wellman are two political theorists, writing in different times, who give different explanations for why the state is justified in coercing its citizens to do things (i.e. pay taxes). In this paper I make the argument that Wellman’s argument is the stronger one and articulate why in the process of explaining the two arguments. Demonstrating that I had command over the readings was important to this paper, but the key was the evaluation element. Simply commenting on the differences and similarities between the theorists would be insufficient; I had to articulate which one was better and why. In addition, the paper had to be organized around my argument, as opposed to consisting of one large section devoted to each argument and then another to comparing and contrasting. In his comments on this paper, the professor’s emphasized the paper’s “critical engagement.” He also called for more detail in the introduction, so as to outline more clearly what the paper would go on to discuss. This paper received an A. Sections of this paper, mostly pure summary of Wellman’s argument, have been omitted to prevent plagiarism. Those sections are marked by – [XXX].

Prompt: Compare, contrast, and evaluate William Paley’s and Christopher Wellman’s arguments as to why citizens of modern states have a right to rule their citizens. Be sure to clearly identify and explain the main differences between their approaches.

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Paper 1 - prompt 2

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The writings of Christopher Wellman and William Paley bridge centuries but both make strong arguments for the right of the state to rule its citizens. Both theorists are confident that the existence of the state is ultimately best for humankind. Paley’s argument is simple and focuses on the positive nature of the state’s existence without detailing the exact benefits with which it provides its citizens. Wellman’s theory of statism takes a more negative perspective and bases itself on the dangers of life in a world without a political state.¹ While both arguments are compelling, Wellman’s analysis of the relative values and ailments of the state is made stronger by its detail, balance, and its limited scope².

¹ Here I begin by briefly comparing and contrasting, explaining the broad differences between the two arguments.

² I go on to evaluate. “Detail, balance, and limited scope” are the elements that, I argue, make Wellman’s argument stronger. I structure my paper around these arguments, organizing it in my own terms, rather than in Paley or Wellman’s.

Paley's analysis of statism is based in utilitarianism – the theory of morality stating that the right thing to do is the course of action that maximizes human happiness. Paley justifies utilitarianism by saying that, “it is the will of G-d that the happiness of human life be promoted” (Paley, 240). While, in this day and age, an argument based on the will of G-d may not be as strong as it was in Paley's day, the modern reader may substitute a simple fundamental moral truth for the will of G-d. Paley goes on to assert that “civil society conduces to [the happiness of human life]” and that civil society “cannot be upholden, unless, in each, the interest of the whole society be binding upon every part and member of it” (Paley, 240). The only means by which such all-encompassing order and stability can be established and maintained is with the force exercised by the state. Therefore, “so long as the interest of the whole society requires it...it is the will of G-d ... that the established government be obeyed” (Paley, 240). Paley's argument is an umbrella, justifying all state action as long as it promotes society's general wellbeing. However, he doesn't explain why it is indeed best for the general human happiness that “the interest of the whole society be binding upon every part and member of it.”³ What is it about the state that conduces to human happiness?⁴

Wellman writes more specifically⁵ on why the existence of the state is important. The “benefits” the state provides are more than Paley's human happiness. Though human happiness is certainly part of the equation, the issue that is more consequential to Wellman is the alternative to the state⁶. He begins by saying that, “it seems unrealistic to think that life without a state would be anything but a horribly chaotic and perilous environment where one would lack the security necessary to pursue meaningful projects and relationships” (Wellman, 6). The absence of “a clear and uniform set of rules” (Wellman, 6) and an “effective system of criminal punishment” (Wellman, 8)⁷ would create a never-ending spiral of conflict amongst even the most well meaning of people.

³ It's appropriate to cut quotes down (you don't need to insert the complete sentence) and phrase them in with your own language as I do here. At other times it's appropriate to simply say “Paley says that...” but mixing other styles of quote usage can help demonstrate an effective synthesis.

⁴ In this paragraph, I explain Paley's argument in some detail. His argument is much shorter and simpler than Wellman's so I devote less space to it. If you are going to argue against an argument it's important to first explain it.

⁵ Even a few words like “more specifically” can be helpful to make clear which argument is stronger and why.

⁶ I go on to articulate a fundamental difference between the two.

⁷ Using quotes to explain the author's argument is very important. Undoubtedly, the author does a more precise job of articulating that argument than I can. Using quotes proves that my analysis is accurate. The reader can't take my word for what the author did or did not argue/believe. That being said, you must not allow the author to make your argument for you; quotes are evidence for your argument. The best way to accomplish this balance is by choosing quotes that explain the point succinctly and effectively and then inserting some of your own explanation and analysis following them.

This would be, Wellman says, citing Thomas Hobbes, the “state of nature,” or the order of the world in the absence of political structure. Wellman’s analysis of the right of the state to rule gains some of its strength from juxtaposition with the perils of the state of nature. The way Wellman portrays it, the modern state is the only alternative to living in a bloody and lawless world. Paley’s argument frames the state only as a way to increase human happiness, a way to promote the interests of the entire community, while Wellman’s more detailed articulation of the “benefits” of the state paints an effective and powerful⁸ picture of the state as the only way to save humanity from misery and strife⁹.

Wellman acknowledges, in a way Paley does not¹⁰, that the state does indeed “demand considerable sacrifices from [its] subjects” (Wellman, 17). It engages in substantial nonconsensual coercion (primarily taxation), not only to ensure its continued ability to fulfill its primary purpose- “the creation, enforcement, and adjudication of laws” (Wellman, 17), but also to provide for its own mere existence. Paley’s argument suffers from this omission. To Paley’s claim that the state conduces to human happiness a citizen might respond “I am not happy when I am taxed!” Wellman acknowledges this dissonance and goes on to explain why the citizen’s complaint is, in the scheme of things, unimportant.¹¹

[XXX]

On the other side of the coin, the cost of the coercion is still extremely significant. Wellman concedes that “the state would not be justified in coercing its citizens if [the] coercion [was] unreasonably costly...*even if [it was] the only way to rescue everyone from the state of nature.*” (Wellman, 22-23). Wellman uses slavery as an example of a situation in which the costs of nonconsensual coercion, in that case the complete and utter loss of liberty, would be excessive. Paley also acknowledges that states are sometimes unjust, saying that government is unjustified in its actions and should not be treated as legitimate when “more advantage will... accrue to the community from resistance”

⁸ Words like “effectively” and “powerfully” help me point out why Wellman’s argument is stronger. Here what makes Wellman’s argument effective and powerful is his “detailed articulation of the “benefits” of the state.” In order to prove this point I earlier demonstrated that Wellman “writes more specifically on why the existence of the state is important,” quoting him explaining more sharply and directly that not only does the state contribute to human happiness but it also helps avert human suffering.

⁹ In this section, I compare, contrast, and evaluate all at the same time.

¹⁰ Again, small phrases demonstrating where the difference between Paley and Wellman becomes a deficit on Paley’s part. Pointing out where an author or theorist does not address an aspect of the argument can be a powerful way to prove that theory’s inadequacy.

¹¹ Here I put the two theorists in conversation with one another. This is a fairly common technique to use in a political theory paper. It’s okay to extrapolate and assume the voice of one author or the other, in order to make the disagreement between the two more vivid and tangible. In this paper I spend more time in Wellman’s voice attacking Paley’s argument.

(Paley, 240) of it. He calls this balance between benefit to the public and cost of conflict “public expediency.”¹²

Paley’s positive approach and the idea of “public expediency” would indicate that the government is justified in taking any action that contributes to the general wellbeing of society. This can be construed broadly. National parks, museums, the National Endowment for the Arts, and public radio and television are all things, funded partially or entirely by the state, that can be said to benefit society and contribute to its general wellbeing. They are, however, “not in fact necessary to save others from the state of nature” (Wellman, 32). Is the contribution to human wellbeing that these things provide worth the state coercion necessary to attain them? Wellman might say no¹³. According to him, the nonconsensual coercion that the state perpetrates is justified *only* because it is the only way to rescue any part of human society from the dangers of the state of nature. While Paley argues more broadly that the state is good because it promotes human happiness, Wellman takes pains to limit the coercive abilities of the state as much as possible, saying first that “political coercion would not be justified unless it were indeed necessary to eliminate the perilous chaos of life in a state of nature” (Wellman, 32).

Paley sets a considerably lower bar for the legitimacy of government. In fact, Paley’s theory makes allowances for government abuses on the very grounds of “public expediency.” He writes that, “not every invasion of the subject’s rights, or liberty, or of the constitution; not every breach of promise, or of oath; not every stretch of prerogative, [or] abuse of power. . .justifies resistance, unless these crimes draw after them public consequences of sufficient magnitude to outweigh the evils of civil disturbance” (Paley, 241). Wellman does also acknowledge, quoting John Simmons, that “our rights may sometimes be infringed in the performance of important duties or to prevent extremely unhappy occurrences” (Wellman, 22)¹⁴. However, whereas Paley says that the government may infringe upon the rights of citizens until the cost of the infringements outweighs the cost of the instability that accompanies resistance, Wellman limits the legitimacy of infringements to only those things that contribute to the rescue of human kind from the dangers of the state of nature. [XXX] Certainly, Wellman and Paley would agree that censorship of the press is unjust, but only Wellman would label it as an illegitimate exercise of the power of the state, given that it is not necessary to save

¹² It’s important to define terms originated by each author if you intend to use the terms in your argument. Another example in this paper would be “the state of nature.” The section where I explain it was omitted to prevent plagiarism.

¹³ Extrapolating the arguments to an outside example can be helpful in demonstrating how the differences between the arguments are consequential.

¹⁴ Here is a section where I compare the two arguments by acknowledging similarities between them. I then go on to talk about where they diverge and explain how that divergence makes Paley’s argument weaker.

society from the dangers of life without a state.¹⁵ To Wellman, it is simply the existence of the state, with its clearly adjudicated set of rules that everyone must follow, that is important. In fact, nonconsensual coercion of the citizen, even for the purpose of rescuing society from the state of nature would be unjustified if: "...the crucial benefits could be secured by some other, less coercive means" (Wellman, 24)

Paley's argument in favor of the state's legitimacy is weaker than Wellman's because it neither details the considerable benefits provided by the state, nor acknowledge that states do, regularly and procedurally, coerce their subjects in order to maintain their existence. Paley then allows for any coercion, or infringements on the rights of citizens that is not egregious enough where resisting, or overthrowing the state would be more costly to the general wellbeing than the established status quo of rights violations. This is an extremely broad construction of the legitimacy of government rule. Wellman's argument is a stronger, more reasonable one, as it prudent, balanced and limited, making important concessions where necessary¹⁶.

¹⁵ I use this example to prove that, not only is Wellman's argument more limited but also the unlimited nature of Paley's makes it permissive to unacceptable lengths.

¹⁶ Summarizing in detail the points made in the body of the paper is important. You can also use the conclusion to synthesize the points you've made into a broader, more general idea about the subject matter.