

Can the Purpose of the State Be to Ensure the Happiness of Its Citizens?

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Abstract This essay explores the complex question of whether the purpose of the state is to ensure the happiness of its citizens. Anchored in historical and philosophical perspectives, it examines the interplay between the state, the individual, and the concept of happiness. The analysis begins with Louis XIV's declaration, "The State is me," as a point of departure to discuss the state as both a political structure and a moral ideal. By dissecting classical notions from Plato and Aristotle, the essay considers the evolution of statehood and citizenship, including their capacity to foster collective or individual happiness. It critiques Enlightenment-era and Renaissance thinkers like Machiavelli and Thomas More, who challenged and reimagined the state's role in achieving an ideal society. The discussion extends to modern democracies, questioning whether their moral elevation parallels the divine authority once claimed by monarchs, and whether they serve the happiness of the people or a privileged elite. Ultimately, the essay argues that happiness is a subjective and individual phenomenon, one that no state can guarantee. Instead, the relationship between state and citizen is inherently a negotiation of mutual obligations, with happiness remaining an elusive ideal shaped more by individual agency than by external structures.

Keywords: State, happiness, governance, citizenship, utopia, individual freedom, societal organisation, democracy, moral ideal, collective aspiration, subjective experience

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1. Introduction

The State is me! - once said Louis XIV, the Sun King. A much quoted phrase and not without reason. But how does this relate to the happiness of citizens? How does it relate to the action of the state as an organ or medium of authority through which the individual may still achieve self-actualization and the freedom to pursue personal happiness? In this essay, I will try to illuminate how the question posed in the title is completely untenable and I will further argue that in fact the state has no obligation, nor even the means, to ensure the happiness of its citizens. Indeed, so fallacious is the presumption of the question that, in terms of interest, it shrinks in comparison to the essay's opening statement – the claim of Louis IV: The state is me! Not only is it one of the most famous examples of arrogant royal hubris, but also alarming in that, by dint of this assertion the state is transformed into a subject, a person. It is the subject of the sentence that declares this about itself, but if we analyse it further, we can see that the state can also become the subject of the sentence. However, pressing beyond a grammatical analysis of the sentence, its philosophical depths are much more problematic than even they first appear.

2. State Utopias

How can a person be a state? To make sense of this sentence, and to make sense of our question *through* the sentence, we need to explain the definition of the state itself. If we start by establishing a workable definition of what, conceptually, constitutes 'the state, we can catch sight of some noteworthy principles and carry on from there. Alas, the problem is that each time one asks for a definition, a different attempt at clarity is proffered, usually resulting in more opaqueness. What can be taken for granted is that if it is a territory where a community of people live, and this community performs its daily tasks and rituals under one body – often a single body – of leadership, it can arguably be labeled as a 'state'. But what kind of state? If we further dissect the concept of the state, we may refer as far back as Plato, who argued that the state is nothing more than a formation or structure that must be an integral part of man's life, without which he would not be able to live his life. Plato goes further and explains that the state is a community of men where each man does the work according to his own talents and nothing else, ergo each man works in his own field and at his own level [1].

Today, given the intricacies of our interwoven cultures, Plato's view of separate, mostly unintegrated skills may seem impractical if not naive. But what he is describing is the organisation that is created between the people who perform different tasks and jobs, and which is intended to regulate the relationships between them. Can we consider organisation in general, or only a certain level of organisation, as the state? For, if we start from this question alone, we may wonder whether or not the indigenous Indians of the Amazon, who live at the tribal level, constitute a state. And, if we consider organisation to be the basis of the existence of the state, then we must include the minimalist level of organisation of these small communities. But if we say that the level of organisation – in order to rise to the degree of being considered 'a state' – must meet certain standards accepted by more 'evolved' or 'civilized' or 'modern' societies, then we enter into the realm of arbitrary value judgments, vague nuances, and pure bigotry. We then must argue that the so-called minimalist or 'primitive' communities can no longer be considered to be a state, since they are not at the level of organisation that gives the meaning of a state in the modern sense.

Another side of the concept needs to be clarified, and that is whether by this idea we mean a territorial unit? In many cases, we are confronted with the fact that a group of people who form a community because they have their own level of organisation and their own independent appearance or learned traits and behaviours, do not form a state. These groups and communities exist as part of a larger state, not as independent entities, although they have all the conditions that would allow them to exist as independent states.

Plato's idea of the state posed questions about the construction of an ideal state that would ensure happiness for all, or at least a livable life, which has long defined the state ideals of subsequent ages and has become a kind of barometer for the construction of the state. Aristotle attempted to provide coherent answers to Plato's propositions and to argue for the establishment of what *he* considered to be the ideal state. Aristotle was the first to formulate the thesis that man is a 'zoon politikon', i.e. a communal being, and that he is naturally inclined to social organisation and association [2]. He also distinguished three basic types of this association: the marriage relationship, the master-servant relationship and the father-son relationship. Plato considered only one form of state to be ideal, the aristocracy, while he described four other versions as bad: oligarchy, timocracy, democracy and tyranny. Aristotle, on the other hand, considered three forms of government suitable for the common good, for the happiness of the citizens: kingship, aristocracy and politeia. Like Plato, he considered democracy, tyranny, and oligarchy to be bad.

The state doctrines and ideas of the two Greek thinkers have long influenced the state doctrines and concepts of the state in later times. Their influence cannot be ignored, but we can take it as a fact that neither of these ideas delivered what was expected of them. It was proved that the ideas of the peripatetic school of thought and the scholastic philosophy which later built upon it were not and could not be capable of creating a state which could secure the happiness of all its citizens.

To return to our question, we must now turn to a new concept, the definition of which may be a more serious puzzle than the state itself. This new concept is the citizen, which in principle covers or means an individual who is a full member of the state and has all the rights and duties that the state makes available to its free citizens. Of course, in return for these rights, the modern state expects a great deal of benefit and consideration from its citizens, which raises the question of whether this relationship between man or citizen and state is symbiotic, i.e. mutually beneficial for both parties, or whether one party is better off than the other?

If we consider the role of the citizen, it is that person who, by virtue of his upbringing, lives a respectable life and observes in all circumstances the organisational rules of the State, that is to say, of the community, the mutual system accepted by all members of the group; this in turn makes it possible for normal life to exist between people, between groups of people. But what is a citizen? The individual with fundamental, inalienable rights? Or it is the person who, fully aware of his responsibilities as a citizen, is capable of acting on his own behalf, making choices and decisions, with the necessary constraints of the presumed benevolent state? In other words, is his freedom to operate solely the result of his citizenship, or must he serve the state in order to earn the freedoms it promises?

The modern-day equivalent of the citizen began to emerge during the Renaissance and was completed with the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment gave countless great thinkers the space and opportunity to express their ideas, which challenged the scholastic, church-centred philosophy that was prevalent at the time. Machiavelli was one of these pioneering Renaissance thinkers who, in contrast to St Augustine's statesman, formulated his ideas about the ideal state and its citizens [3]. Machiavelli opposes the doctrine and philosophy of the Catholic Church and asserts that it is not possible to create and establish the ideal state, since individuals, citizens and the aristocracy that provides leadership, in a web of bargains and business-political interests, would be incapable of creating anything of the kind. Another important aspect that makes it impossible to create an ideal state is the distortions of the individual's own personality. In his view, Machiavelli thought that a man is so driven by self-interest that he is incapable of leading, or even creating, a system that can provide good and happiness for all in a selfless way. In contrast, Thomas More created a completely idealised Utopia, in which he envisaged a democratic, but in fact quasi-socialist state based on social unity, where the Platonic idea of everyone doing what he or she does best, while on the other hand, operating on the assumption that such a state can be capable of providing for the needs of the people [4].

Campanella outlines a similar idea of the state in his work "Sun City", where, in addition to the division of labor, the tasks of leadership are shared among citizens, which is intended to exclude the development in society of self-interest and immoral forms of behaviour [5]. Renaissance thinkers go beyond the forms of government outlined in ancient Greek doctrines and envision an ideal state that can provide a happy life for all. The common feature of these visions is that the citizen as an individual is represented in the structure of the organisation of the state. The citizen,

uninhibited in deciding his destiny, his work, his activities, is nevertheless always obliged to observe the sometimes strict rules imposed by the ideal society.

3. The Ethics and Phenomenology

Let's go further and leave the pile of questions around the concept of citizen for a moment and try to understand happiness. Happiness, by which we mean a complex yet simple human feeling that gives pleasure and a sense of being free from harm and disappointment, is a condition which Dezső Kosztolányi tried to express in this way. "Why? I leave it to you, the analysts of my soul, to find out. I don't care about suppressed and liberated reasons, about unconscious and pre-conscious symbols. I have no desire to dissect myself as long as I live. Let what I am remain closed, whole and secret. May it continue to cause me such incomprehensible torments and pleasures. And with my death, let it be completely destroyed, like an unopened letter. Believe me, it is worth more than all knowledge. All I want to say is that happiness is only this. It is always born in the midst of extraordinary suffering, and it is as extraordinary as the suffering that suddenly passes away. But it doesn't last long, because we get used to it. It is only a transition, an interlude. Perhaps nothing more than the absence of suffering."

Kosztolányi has approached the concept in a sensual way. His title character, Kornél Esti, has no idea what we are supposed to understand by happiness, what we are supposed to think when we are happy [6]. Plato, by contrast, says that one's happiness must be based on justice, which is the highest virtue of all. The Platonic virtues are wisdom, courage and temperance, and when all these are in harmony and in harmony with each other, the virtue of justice can be developed. But this can only be achieved if wisdom is the virtue that creates the conditions for harmony between the virtues. We can go on with this question. Is the happiness of the individual to be understood in itself, or can we define happiness in terms of the feeling that arises in a person in relation to the other members of the group? [7]. Is happiness a subjective feeling, or can it also be felt by the masses? If the latter, then happiness passes from the subjective repast of the individual into some sort of shared banquet sponsored by the state.

If we go back to the original idea of our question, that the State has a duty to ensure the happiness of its citizens, and if we continue along this line of thought, the question arises, by establishing an order, among individual entities and social groups, based on the principle of justice, does the State, by this step, ensure the happiness of its citizens or does it only open the way to the happiness of its citizens? If only the path to happiness, is it the responsibility of the individual to ensure his or her own happiness by starting and walking along this path, or is it the role of the State to guide individuals along this path? [8]

If we go back to our basic sentence, "The state is me", we can venture beyond the concepts explained earlier, and continue with the other half of the sentence, which contains its predicate: "I am". [9] A similar phrase from the Bible will be familiar to everyone, most notably from Genesis, when God declares to Moses, "I am who I am!" This means nothing less than the I, that is, the one who

made the statement, Louis XIV equals I Am. The Being who is God himself. In so doing, he raises himself to the status of the divine [10]. This was not, we know, unusual in the social conditions of the time, since the power of the leader enthroned at the head of every aristocratic state from antiquity onward came directly from God, from the gods. In many cases, it could be said that the ruler was both God and the vicegerent of the God or Gods. If we recall our phrase: The state is I!, this can also be interpreted as the state being God himself in one person. If God himself is God, then he is also the earthly vicegerent or kinsman of God, the ruler. [11]

If we accept that 'I am God himself' as spoken by God, then it follows that the man who makes the same statement is tantamount to 'God himself', even if he is (only) a man. But if God is the state, and the state is God, then on the one hand we are already touching the foundations of theology and questioning it, since God, despite His ability to manifest himself in every man cannot actually live the life of every man because in that case no man would be allowed the freedom of choice, which God assures us that we have. On the other hand we are raising another problem. If the state is equal to God, one of its names is such as 'I am', then the state as an abstract concept will appear to people not as an organisational form, but as a moral ideal [12]. But did Kant not argue convincingly that the state cannot be anything other than an organisational form that determines the life of a community, which, by making laws, by creating law, constitutes the rule of law? In his conception, the rule of law cannot go beyond these limits and become a moral ideal, because then the purpose of the state's existence would be defeated. According to Kant, the purpose of the state must be to provide its citizens with the *possibility* of self-realisation, to create the *possibility* for the citizen as an individual, as an entity, to create his own happiness [13]. If, on the other hand, the state directly seeks to create the happiness of its citizens, it inevitably becomes a moral ideal [14]. It becomes a moral ideal like the personality cults of the dictators of totalitarian regimes, where the object of the personality cult is the dictator at the head of the state, who is also the state in one person, and in this capacity, we can even claim, with reference to our earlier reasoning, that he is also God [15].

In this context, one of the great problems of our time is democracy and its existence as a form of state, i.e. whether democracy can be considered the best possible form of state in which the happiness of citizens can be guaranteed to the fullest extent by the state. Democracy, if we take the term literally, means rule by the people [16]. In his Utopia, Thomas More writes of a similar state organisation, in which the people are governed by elected representatives, and these leaders hold power for a short period of time, but their main purpose in power is to ensure the best living conditions and social status for the people. This theory, which is in stark contrast to Plato's idea of the state, outlines a new direction along which we need to rethink our understanding of the statement we have been making so far [17]. If we look at the contemporary conception of democracy, we find that it is formulated and stated not as a construct of state but as a moral ideal. This, in my view, is an achievement of 'divination' assuming yet another 'state' identity, whereby

democracy can be said to be one of the many names of God. As soon as we confer divine attributes on democracy as the only existing form of state capable of ensuring the happiness of its citizens, we can say that we have moved away from the rule of law as previously formulated by Kant and its neutral meaning, or at any rate a meaning limited to the organisational level. In the baldest sense, it is akin to saying that one religion is 'better' than another, a subjective assertion that is bound to be buried in nuances of relativity; conversely, if such a conclusion is imposed arbitrarily, the state reverts to being a dictatorship [18].

Returning to our original thesis, namely, whether the purpose of the state is to create happiness for its citizens, we come to an interesting conclusion. If the state is one of the names of God, and we base the statement of the Sun King on the biblical revelation, then this god is the anointed king himself, the ruler and possessor of the kingdom [19]. The state thus becomes a moral ideal, the effect of which is that the citizens of the state must pay homage to the state, that is to say, to God, on the altar of the state, and seek his favour and do everything possible to make the state, that is to say, God, happy when he lives his daily life as a governor on earth in the palace of Versailles. So ultimately it is up to the people to make him happy. But our fundamental problem is: is it the purpose of the state to ensure the happiness of its citizens or is it the duty of the citizens to appease the appetites of the state, no matter how unjust or whimsical they may seem? Democracies today suffer from the same problem. The purpose of the people is nothing other than to ensure the happiness of the state, which is what the citizens do with no small contribution, financial and otherwise [20]. But by elevating democracy to the status of divinity, i.e. to a moral ideal, everyday rhetoric has only consolidated the privileged position and place of the actual shapers and formers of democracy [21]. The Sun King lived in immense splendour and luxury, while the people of the country had to secure this happiness, the external conditions leading to happiness [22]. Is the result, the sum total of all processes, any different in democracy? [23]

In my view, this is no different in a democracy, since the people must again provide the happiness or the conditions leading to happiness, but not for a single person who considers himself the state, ergo God, but for the members of an elected representative body, who in turn collectively consider themselves the state, ergo God [24]. Thus nothing changes, since this representative body, which we call Parliament, or the National Assembly, does and expects nothing more than that the citizens should provide the resources necessary for their happiness. In this way, the state does indeed ensure the happiness of a privileged group, since the state directly pays and grants privileges to this group, but this also raises the problem of the essence, that is to say, the interpretation of democracy [25]. Therefore, it can be argued that the state cannot guarantee universal happiness; it can only to a limited extent, provide any source of happiness for a narrow group of people. Increasingly, this narrow group seems defined by The Corporation even more specifically than by the Body Politic [26].

4. The Religious Viewpoint

Religious tradition tells us that God's purpose for all religions is to provide happiness and the possibility of eternal life for those who believe in him. The state as God in this capacity can only fulfil this task to a limited extent, since it cannot give total happiness to anyone, not even to a single citizen, much less eternal life [27]. Although this is not a fair way of putting it either, since eternal life can be guaranteed to the citizen subliminally and vicariously by the building of statues and inculcation of historical memory – much the same way as mothers and fathers seek a kind of perpetuity (if not immortality) by having children and encouraging their children to have children of their own. Happiness is a more complicated matter, because the state cannot guarantee the happiness of all its citizens; that is a physical impossibility on its part, whether we think of it as a god-man or as an organisation [28]. It can do no more than promise and advertise the ideal toward one and all while lavishing a group within the community with all earthly goods and providing them with the guise of happiness through articles of enjoyment and pleasure [29]. However, if this is all the state does or ever intended to do in the first place i.e. make one small group out of the whole community happy, then it can be said that, as a state, it has failed to ensure the quality of life, happiness and well-being of its citizens [30]. If we look at it as a God-man, then theology can explain our assumption. Theology emphasises divine love instead of the happiness that comes from physical existence, so that if the God-man loves people, his subjects, his citizens, then the citizen can feel happy, since this is the building of a special, personal relationship between the individual and the state, i.e. the God-man, and the state can feel happy too, and feel fully justified in providing its citizens, if not the full bounty of God, at least a Vision of God. Indeed, the state has been marketing itself in this manner since time immemorial.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we retain a full awareness that part of the reasoning presented here is based on semantics; however, the purpose has been to elucidate the relationship between state and individual in the relentless pursuit of happiness that, beyond mere survival, is at the core of human existence, especially in modern culture where, if we might mention Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, people in developed nations live high on the food chain to the extent that happiness becomes more of an issue than in ruder, cruder times when life was 'nasty, brutish, and short.' Happiness therefore can be seen as something as of luxury, just as the gradual emergence in history of the concept of 'romantic love'. From a psychological standpoint (also the brainchild of modern civilization) it could be argued that 'happiness' can never be bestowed by any outside force, which is to say that it exists or does not exist within our own minds and nowhere else. By this definition, a man sitting on death row may be happier than the CEO of a huge company. Happiness, in this respect, comes neither from state nor God, but from the unique perspective of the individual, each on a solitary journey.

The content and concepts of the question were developed from a completely different approach and along

different lines. Even if we have not found the answer, we have described the push-pull between the individual and the state, and why it is important for the individual, the citizen, to make the state happy, and why it is important for the state, the God-man, to make his citizens happy – at least in theory.

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