

# What Is Government?

Stephen R. C. Hicks

A government is a unique social institution, making the morality of its actions of special importance.

Governments have the power to *make rules* and *enforce them*, but so does every other type of social institution. A school has rules and enforces them, as does a sports league, a church, or a business. But a government does so in two ways that are different from every other type of social institution.

The first is that government rules apply to *everyone* in the society, whereas the rules of a school, league, church, or business apply only to *some* members of society—those who choose to participate in the smaller group. That is to say, a government's rules apply *universally*. Everyone in the society is subject to them.

This first difference highlights an important ethical question about the government's powers: *What rules are so important that everyone in society must live by them?*

A government is different in a second way: Its rules are enforced by *compulsion*. If a government rule is broken, the government has a police force to arrest the rule-breaker, to use physical restraints and weapons, to turn the rule-breaker over to the judiciary, which may decide to fine the rule-breaker, put him or her in prison, or, in extreme cases, execute the wrongdoer.

By contrast, no other social institution may use physical force against its rule breakers. Schools, leagues, churches, and businesses are *voluntary* associations, and the worst they can do to their rule-breakers is to expel them from the group. A rule breaker can be cut from the team, fired from the job, or excommunicated from the church, but the league, business, or church does not have the power to fine, imprison, or execute the rule-breaker.

This second difference also highlights an important ethical question about the government's power: *What rules are so important that physical force may properly be used against those who break them?*

It is one thing to say that a rule is optional for *some* people—but quite another to say that *absolutely everyone* must follow it. It is also one thing to say that if people don't agree about a rule they can go their separate ways—but quite another to say that the police can *compel* them to follow the rule.

Government power is thus an awesome power. It can be a power to do good, but it is a power that can be—and often is—used in error and abused. Consequently, government power should be subject to the highest ethical standards and scrutiny. We want to grant government the power it needs to accomplish its legitimate goals—but no more.

\* \* \*

Excerpted from [Political Ethics White Paper](#).