

## Captain America: Civil War – Regulation and Freedom

Out of all the Marvel Cinematic Universe movies to come out in the last 11 years, the one that provokes most ideological and philosophical discussions is Captain America: Civil War. Earlier dismissed as an out and out action flick, CACW gained quite a reputation when people started discussing the inherent conflict represented by differing ideologies of the two lead characters on what constitutes good for people en masse. Iron Man believes that any organization tasked with the welfare or protection of general populace should have an overseer to guide and monitor its activities, whereas Captain America believes that to do good, you should not require anyone's permission or validation. This ideology is encompassed with all its panache in the one line uttered by Captain America, a fan favorite in fact, 'The best hands are always our own'.

The central aspect of this conflict is from the point of view of governance of a state. On one side we have the view, as supported by Iron Man, that any organization involved in the matter of state should always be under the purview of a body of bureaucrats. These officials, whether elected or appointed by the state, will inherently know how to differentiate between good and evil. They will have the ability to make a judgment on where intervention is needed especially in the matters of providing military assistance or a peace-keeping task force. A similar view is explored in the context of philosopher-kings by Plato in his seminal work, *The Republic*<sup>1</sup>. These philosopher-kings go through a rigorous training program in philosophy and governance. They are meant to live a simple life developing a love for wisdom and dispensing the same in the affairs of the state. A unique feature of such a life is that the philosopher-kings will be separated from their progeny at birth so that they do not develop any kind of partiality for their kith and kin when resolving conflicts between their subjects. Iron Man's reliance on the overseer organization does find its roots in this utopian way of being and governance.

On the other side of the coin, we have the view of freedom and autonomy, as championed by Captain America in the movie. A firm believer in people's right, Captain America argues throughout the movie about the freedom a person should have in pursuing what he thinks is good. No amount of bureaucracy should stop an individual in following a path he thinks will lead to the greater good of society. In matters of civil unrest or natural disasters, especially in places where a state doesn't hold jurisdiction or concern, a person of power and means should be able to intervene and start the process of peace and restoration. Similar ideas, in the context of whistle-

blowing, are shared in the book, *Information Liberation*, by Brian Martin of University of Wollongong<sup>2</sup>.

In the movie, Captain America expresses his displeasure towards the prescribed "Sokovia Accords" which will result in tighter control over Avengers and the missions they can undertake on foreign soil. His ideas against government control and right to individual expression can be thought of having an echo in Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*<sup>3</sup>. Though not as extreme as the idea of Minimalist State, Captain America does speak in favor of having a degree of power in hands of people when deciding what is the best course of action in situations of conflict resolution. Rather than the state sacrificing the rights of an individual to advance its agenda, the individual should have a higher degree of autonomy in choosing what they want to do without the fear of backlash from the government. In a nutshell, between state vs individual, the balance of power should largely reside in favor of the latter.

A view often taken by people in support of Iron Man is that the initial actions of Avengers, Captain America in particular, in Sokovia and Lagos actually led to the United Nations prescribing a need for tighter control over their operations. It is the collateral damage resulting from the need to "do good" and "eliminate evil" that resulted in Sokovia Accords in the first place. Had the Avengers followed international protocols in their dealings, there never would have been incidents like the death of diplomats from Wakanda during their operation in Lagos. These unsupervised, irresponsible courses of action taken on behest of Captain America is summed up very well by Iron Man when he proclaims that in their fight over evil, they never cared about dropping a building on a group of individuals caught in the crossfire. Hence there exists a need for a regulatory body which can prescribe what operations Avengers can and cannot undertake to minimize collateral damage. Such an organization will reach its decision to intervene only after due consideration of geopolitical scenarios and member states' interest.

It is interesting to note, that at the heart of Iron Man's argument, does lie the need for protecting an individual's right to live. He does see that in the quest for the greater good of society, we should not leave behind the individuals who actually constitute it in the first place. However, his way of going about it is by introducing a higher level of control over anybody engaged in activities, altruistic or otherwise, that the state deems to have a potential for unrest/harm. Also, Iron Man's advocacy for the whole world to be a sort of 'Surveillance State' has been a common theme in other movies, namely Avengers: Age of Ultron.

Captain America's supporters, on the other hand, advance the argument made in the movie that there can be instances of great human-right violations or the citizens of a country suffering under a tyrannical rule which cannot wait for a regulatory body to weigh in its options and then decide whether they should intervene or not. The delay caused by members of such a group due to giving their agendas a higher preference is unethical and prolongs the suffering of people stuck in such situations. In the case of a dysfunctional dictatorship versus public revolution to overthrow it, there could be an international body tasked with deciding whether to intervene to help the movement or not. One of the members of this group can have allegiance with the dictator and some personal interest at stake. Such a member can then employ tactics like suspension of trade relationships or withdrawal of financial/militaristic support to other member nations to dissuade them from providing any assistance. Supporters argue that in situations like these, any individual with necessary means should do everything in his power to resolve the conflict and alleviate the suffering of the general populace. To not take any action in such situations is equivalent to purporting injustice and emboldening the evil. This thought is very well encompassed by Edmund Burke in his quote, 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing'<sup>4</sup>.

As evident from the argument, the core of this ideology is also built on an individual's right to live and have a peaceful existence. However, the way it should be implemented is by people taking the matter in their own hands in the hour of extreme peril. They should not wait for approval from a regulatory body to fight for their rights or the right of others in their community. It might be the case that such actions can have unintended consequences, but this would be a small price to pay for freedom and upholding the values of liberty and justice. Hence, under no circumstance, an individual should be stopped from helping another person due to concerns over international protocols or societal view in general about the nature of the conflict. Also, the idea of constant surveillance violates an individual's right to privacy and leads to paranoia in society. In a highly surveilled state, individuals always have a fear of backlash in case they hold a dissenting view to their present government. Under this view, such controls and surveillances are inherently prohibitive and put a chokehold on the enterprising spirit of humans to make independent calls.

Both these viewpoints make for a compelling case of Value Pluralism. By following the principle of an overseeing authority to decide on one's behalf, we fear losing the freedom to choose the best for ourselves. However, at the same time, such authority might be necessary to prevent society from descending into anarchy. An ethical monist with pro-establishment ideologies will see the loss of personal freedom as a

necessary sacrifice for greater order and prosperity. To him, the needs of many will always outweigh the needs of few. Such a viewpoint can support the increase of surveillance or control over an individual's activities to maintain peace. On the other hand, an absolutist strongly in support of basic human rights will view the loss of freedom of even one individual as a great travesty and the erosion of the moral fabric of the society. No organization/government, whether elected or otherwise, has the right to ignore the needs of a person. This view is strongly hinged on the principle that for the greater good of society, people should be seen as means to the end and not just ends-in-itself.

An ethical pluralist in situations like the one highlighted in the movie will tend to have a differing approach towards the whole problem. In the center of pluralist ideology lies the need to evaluate every situation on its own merit and then choosing a possible path that confirms best to an ethical or moral principle as applicable to the case. This approach is best idealized by Black Widow in the movie. A supporter of Iron Man's ideology of having a watchdog over Avengers as part of Sokovia Accords, she lets Captain America escape to fulfill the second plot point of the movie to find the real culprit behind the UN bombings. She understands from the principle point of view that a group as powerful as Avengers probably needs an overseeing authority to prevent them from becoming corrupt and reckless. Such a check is good in the long run to avoid incidents like Sokovia or Lagos with greater accountability to the people and governments of the world. However, on the other hand, she also understands the situation of UN bombings to be more than what meets the eye. She evaluates that apprehending Captain America will stop him from uncovering the truth. Though in line with government directives, this will frame an innocent (Bucky Barnes) unjustifiably whereas the real villain will succeed in his agenda. She shows a remarkable amount of wisdom in supporting both viewpoints i.e. bureaucratic/government intervention and personal freedom by evaluating both cases in hand and choosing the greater good depending on the moral principle applicable to each. A very interesting take on Freedom and Bureaucracy and the presumed conflict is explored by Larry M. Preston in his article of the same name<sup>5</sup>.

Ethical/moral pluralism comes in many flavors. We have pluralist absolutist, who advocate the applicability of more than one moral principle in any case and evaluating a situation from the viewpoint of all of them. Another school of thought in pluralist ideology is supported by W.D. Ross. This is the view of non-absolutist pluralist which talks about a set of 'Prima Facie' duties, not in any particular order, that one has to consider when thinking about a philosophical problem. Some duties can be more important than the others depending on the problem in hand and it is our wisdom to choose the more important duty out of the set to resolve the conflict.

Ross, a non-consequentialist, believes that what makes an action right is inherent in the action itself. This and the related ideas are explored in his article, *What Makes Right Acts Right*<sup>6</sup>. In my opinion, Black Widow's character is closer to this way of thinking about the problems presented in the movie.

The age-old conflict of regulation versus freedom is captured in all its swash-buckling glory by CACW. No matter which side of the fence one stands, the movie succeeds in evoking many thought-provoking questions and make us challenge our own beliefs regarding freedom and the price we need to pay for it. With this central conflict coupled with an ensemble cast of interesting characters, CACW will go down as one of the most philosophically interesting movies in Marvel Cinematic Universe.

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## References

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