

# On the Ontological Existence of States: A Comparison Between Countries and Anthills

Written by Niels Verster

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The point of this paper is not only to prove that we *can* treat the state as a separately existing entity in academic research and analysis, but also that it actually is a separate entity of which a deeper understanding is required. This will be argued for first on the basis that there is a uniquely high degree of indivisibility and continuity behind the concept of the state.

As a general theme, a constant comparison between the state and anthills will be given, as anthills help illustrate both the core-features of a collective-being and the extraordinary factors that then start to differentiate the human state from animal/insect organization.

The idea of the state as a thought-person will be shown as the most useful conceptualization of the being of the state and consciousness in a phenomenological sense will be a determinative in the internal rather than external being of the state.

However, as this is still limited to the existence of the state rather than the functioning thereof, Wendt's social constructivist ontology will be deployed to make sense of this, mainly by focussing on the state as a collective cognition under emergence-theory, which will help explain continuity and indivisibility of the state. The functioning of the collective cognition will be explained using theories such as Hegel's dialectics and cultural narrative building. Foucault's normalization theory will be discussed as the enforcing factor of the narrative of a collective cognition.

The conclusion will contain a glance at future possible inquiries, focussing on the potential that such a method of conceptualizing the state as a whole has.

### The Indivisibility and Continuity of the State

In the first place, the state being 'something' must be established. It is important to note that when talking about the state, a singular government is not what is being referred to. Rather, the state refers to something more aligned with the concept of country. Traditionally, when the separate being of a state (or other entity) is elevated above the sum of its parts, a sort of Aristotelian 'Third Man' counter-argument is given, stating that a group should not be seen separate and individual from those who make up the group, as the group can be broken up into exactly its constituting parts[1].

In certain cases, at least for analytical purposes in the first instance, we are able to and should, in fact, see the 'third man' as a separate entity. To give an obvious example: Teeth are combinations of atoms, but that does not mean that we should replace dentists with physicists to cure tooth-aches. States are similarly *individual* groups (from *dividuus* 'divisible'), as they are uniquely indivisible into its parts in a practical sense: A state without a territory, population or government is hardly a state. Therefore, although useful to study geography, sociology and governance, it makes sense to treat states as separate concepts as well and to study what 'the third man' actually is in this case.

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The indivisibility of the state already provides for an initial gauge for individual being: There is extensive continuity of states that exceeds all of its individual parts. The formal Montevideo Convention criteria for statehood could be used as a categorization of the separate state parts – a state is made up of a territory, population and government. If we apply this to a hypothetical country, say *Formica*, it becomes apparent that *Formica* itself will not disappear if it's population is drastically reduced or replaced over time; it's territory expands, shrinks or even temporarily disappears altogether (think for instance as a result of foreign occupation or even ecological causes); or it's government in its entirety falls and is replaced with a new government, made up of new people sometimes even with a completely new government form (for example, France is currently in its 5<sup>th</sup> French Republic).

This continuous force is also what allows us to speak of *Formica* as a whole, even when there are no concrete similarities between past-*Formica* and present-day-*Formica* in terms of elements that constitute the particular state. This notion of the state as a corporate personality became common in the West around the 18<sup>th</sup> century and is still clearly perceivable in everyday civilian, policymaker and media language[2], when we, for instance, write “the US’ killing of Soleimani”[3] or “Iran bears responsibility for this attack”[4] by which a state is already being described and referred to as if it were a person.

The continuous ‘force’ at play in *Formica* and its longevity is unique to the state. Although easy to speak of the state as an arbitrary social construct without real intrinsic value, states are at the core of human civilization[5]. This signifies their almost permanent degree of continuity within human society, especially when compared to other groups of organization and cooperation. To paraphrase Waltz’ question, would you rather expect The Netherlands or Phillips to be around in a century from now?[6]

## A Social Constructivist Ontology for Determine Person-Being of the State

Evident from these descriptions, is that the state is more than just a “useful fiction”[7] or a “mere metaphor”[8] used to make sense of world politics. So, what is *it*? Assigning psychological person-being (or *Geistesorganismus*[9]) to the state can be done in two senses, internally and externally[10]. Externally assigning it is least challenging, as this only requires outside recognition of person being: It is comparable to international recognition of sovereignty, which can also be given to states like Somalia that lack stateness in the general sense. Although using only the external requirement for person-being would be sufficient for certain descriptive purposes, it does not signify much more than the state being a social construct, which is still a considerably thin conceptualization and corresponding ontology of the state.

For the internal determination of person-being of the state, consciousness can be used as a determinative. Although it is inherently difficult (or even impossible) to describe what exactly consciousness is, it is possible to apply consciousness in the Husserlian, phenomenological sense, meaning that consciousness and psychological being is defined by the phenomenon of always being aware of something independent of itself[11]. This phenomenon can actually be perceived (as opposed to consciousness directly), for when *Formica* finds itself neighbouring *Apiary*, it would show awareness of this and relate this to its own being, visible by *Formica* and *Apiary* either co-existing peacefully or starting hostilities. Regardless of the interaction that follows, recognition of the other’s existence is given. This is a symptom of actual internal person-being, rather than external recognition of person-being.

Wendt sets out three possible ontologies for this internal person-being of the state: reductionism, supervenience and emergence[12]. Reductionism essentially reduces the state to its constitutive individual citizens, which is limited in application as it requires these individuals to be similarly intentional actors that are committed to the shared cause of the state[13]. This is too presumptuous of the real world and too circumstantial to form a solid ontological foundation of the state: Group-think theories have shown that a group can take a course of action without the constitutive members of a group necessarily agreeing to said course of action[14]. Supervenience argues that similar to how a mind is supervened by a brain and how two exactly similar brains will result in a similar mind, two identical ‘micro-states’ will establish the same identical ‘macro-state’[15]. State-persons and collective action are then something real and separate from individuals in the collective and not reducible strictly to those individuals. Here we see the first glimpse of a separate ontology for the state itself. However, in supervenience the state or ‘mind’ is still inherently linked to its micro-state or ‘brain’ and does not surpass it, thereby sharing the same physicalism as in

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reductionism[16]. Emergence takes it a step further: collective cognition, reliant on distributive cognition, assigns cognition to sites or tools external of the individual[17], comparable to a person with a smartphone and internet connection having access to near unlimited information and thereby expanding his own cognition with a device external to its own being. Collective cognition replaces devices and tools with other people in a community[18].

When properly functioning, the collective thought-being that is created and maintained is larger than the sum of its parts, and a public domain of information is created to and from which individuals part of the group may submit and extract data, information and goals. To illustrate this phenomenon: Based upon the observations of A, B discuss a strategy with C, upon the result of which A will then change where and how he makes his observations, which will impact the formation of the next strategy. This is essentially how a collective cognition is created and maintained. It's unique worth and what separates it from a one-term cooperation (A makes observation, B and C discuss and that is it) lies in the fact that all actors actively uphold this cycle of knowledge production. The essential component is not that B and C outsource the observation part and can as a result specialize in strategic-thinking. Rather it is continuous dialectic progression as described by Hegel[19] that allows B and C to advance thoughts further than they could otherwise do had they been uncooperative, singular actors. Because of the new and improved observations of A, B and C will be able to come up with a more accurate strategy that will lead to better observations, and so on. The data that enters the collective-cognition becomes better and the brain becomes smarter. Essentially this phenomenon can be described as "picking someone's brain".

When this is upscaled to the size and real-time pace of for example the USA's federal government (employing two million people instead of a mere three), an actual state-person with a collective cognition is observable. Exactly this nature of the state-person explains the earlier described continuity of states and is crucial for making generalized statements about state-persons: They are not only directly maintained by government institutions but also by the overall population (scientists, bureaucrats, civil servants, blue colour workers, lawyers, etc.).

## The Functioning and Continuity of the Collective Cognition

Based on this social constructivist ontology, characteristics can be assigned to what has now been established to be a state-person. The theory of emergence by itself only justifies that we may speak of the state as an actual, continuous, collective cognition *thing*. However, it does not explain *how* exactly this super-organism functions and maintains its existence. An anthill should also be understood as a super-organism, yet one may expect the human state to be more sophisticated in its functioning than an anthill, so the conceptualization of the state must become thicker.

For anthills, deterministic genetics are useful for the continuity of collective-persons, given that genetics are hard to argue against as an individual ant. This essentially makes the collective super-organism self-perpetuating: as long as the colony does not literally die out, it will continue to be or even expand[20]. States are different in this regard, as existing and navigating within a state is (often) done consciously by individuals: There are *generally* opportunities to choose which role to take within a state, and even which state to fulfil that role in.

The notion of a state is kept alive through human interactions and products: For example, history, culture, institutions, knowledge production and international agreements. In the most basic form, this passing-on of the above-mentioned societal-features takes the shape of a community member learning which berries are safe to eat and which ones are not from a communal source of knowledge and contributing self-found berry-related knowledge back into the tradition of the collective cognition. Such a culture (defined as "how and why we do things around here"[21]) is inherently linked to a state person's collective consciousness: The 'how' refers to a regime that dictates conduct – rules regarding not only behaviour (which berries to eat), but also norms for knowledge production (when do we consider berries to be safe to eat); 'why' refers to the justifying narrative upheld by the community that constitutes a collective cognition; 'we' refers to the members of a specific community that constitute a state-person; and 'around here' to the spatial designation of that specific community (a territory)[22].

It is important to reiterate that a collective consciousness does not communicate from any central point[23]. When the collective cognition becomes sturdy over time it forms a 'narrative'[24] that is able to answer the above-mentioned

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questions of how, why who and where. We may then regard processes like Foucault's social normalization and disciplining as what upholds this narrative. As homogeneity in the narrative of a culture is established, people will bend their individual behaviour to said norms in order to become and stay part of the group[25]. As a result, instead of how an anthill collectively communicates who should do what through the hormones of individual ants, the state-person communicates through individual humans' protection of the "self-erected boundaries"[26] of the collective cognition's norms.

## Concluding Remarks

There is noteworthy potential in recognizing that firstly, the state is, in fact, an important, stand-alone concept within International Relations theory, deserving of its own, separate analysis. Elaborating on this idea of the state being something, the most suitable perspective on the nature of the being of the state is that it is a psychological-being. The underlying and cohesive factor of the thought-being that is the state, is collective cognition. Collective cognition is able to both explain the functioning of the state and also the continuity thereof when we analyse the normalizing aspects of a cultural narrative.

Having shown these aspects inherent to the state and the state can be regarded as a thought-person, fundamental strains of philosophy could be applied to the state, such as existentialism (think that of Sartre[27], Hegel[28], Camus or Durkheim). This enables the possibility of assigning actual characteristics to specific states. Besides the explanatory potential this has, it could be especially useful for feminist-theory such as that of Sjoberg, in explaining and assigned gendered roles to states as actual thought-persons; for Marxist theorists such as Gramsci, in expanding on the notion of how social relations are created within a collective cognition and who influences this process most; for the relation between knowledge production and power as described in Post-Structuralism, by looking at the normalizing functioning of the collective cognition; and finally it could potentially become possible to apply ethics directly to states, given that the collective state exceeds the will of just a political leader and his decisions, which could then carry legal consequences for the entirety of the state (for example war-reparations for and by all constitutive parts of a state).

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## Notes

[1] An anthill is thus as a group inherently different than say a wolf-pack, which as a whole resembles an hierarchically organized *crowd*, given that individuals directly impact the collective. An anthill actually forms a 'super-organism': An organism in every way, except in that if the anthill deceases, the individual ants will still continue to exist, and the anthill itself cannot reproduce in the physical sense. (Wendt, "The State as a Person," 310.)

[2] Wendt, "The state as a person," 289.

[3] Aljazeera, "Iran's Soleimani killed."

[4] Vox, "France, Germany, and UK"

[5] Historyworld, "History of Civilization."

[6] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 95.

[7] Wendt, "The State as a Person," 290.

[8] Buzan, "The Logic of Anarchy," 112.

[9] Hutter, "Organism as a Metaphor," 293.

[10] Wendt, "The State as a Person," 293.

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[11] Grey O'Dwyre, "Existentialism and Wendtian Ontology," 6.

[12] Wendt, "The State as a Person," 298.

[13] Wendt, "The State as a Person," 298.

[14] Janis, *Groupthink*, 9.

[15] Wendt, "The state as a Person," 300.

[16] *Ibid.*, 300/301.

[17] *Ibid.*, 303.

[18] *Ibid.*, 303.

[19] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Hegel's Dialectics."

[20] *In researching material for this paper, I have found that certain species of ants, like the Argentine Ant, can form mega-colonies, some of which have spread out over six continents and several islands.* (Ndivhuwo Mord Luruli. "Distribution and impact of the Argentine ant," 79.)

[21] James, "Despite the Terrors of Typologies," 178.

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] Knorr-Cetina, "How Superorganisms Change," 142.

[24] Ringmar, "On the Ontological Status of the State," 452.

[25] Foucault, "Discipline and Punish," 184.

[26] Csikszentmihalyi, "The Psychology of Optimal Experience," 91.

[27] O'Donohoe, "Why Sartre Matters."

[28] Jackson, "Hegel's House, or 'People Are States Too'."

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