

# The Justification of Secession: An Argument from G. H. Von Wright's Philosophy of Action

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*Received: 14 December 2020 Accepted: 5 January 2021 Published: 15 January 2021*

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## Abstract

Secession is one of the major issues in contemporary politics. Regarding its analysis, three main approaches have been developed: the conflict-oriented approach, the right-oriented approach and the dynamic-oriented approach. In this paper, my main interest is with the second approach that is the right of the group that decides to secede to do so. I am analyzing the question here from a logical point of view, from the angle of arguments for secession. An argument is formulated from G. H. von Wright's philosophy of action. The argument, constructed from three ingredients - namely a first-person practical inference, a minimal concept of change and a theory of anti-determinism - shows that secession is justified because man is free, which includes the freedom to leave the political union. The paper ends with some recommendations on how secession could be prevented.

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***Index terms***— secession, action, determinism, freedom, right, G. H. von Wright.

Abstract-Secession is one of the major issues in contemporary politics. Regarding its analysis, three main approaches have been developed: the conflict-oriented approach, the right-oriented approach and the dynamic-oriented approach. In this paper, my main interest is with the second approach that is the right of the group that decides to secede to do so. I am analyzing the question here from a logical point of view, from the angle of arguments for secession. An argument is formulated from G. H. von Wright's philosophy of action. The argument, constructed from three ingredients -namely a first-person practical inference, a minimal concept of change and a theory of anti-determinism shows that secession is justified because man is free, which includes the freedom to leave the political union. The paper ends with some recommendations on how secession could be prevented.

Secession is one of the major issues in contemporary politics. Recent and current cases illustrate this: Catalonia in Spain, Kashmir in India, Hong Kong in China, Scotland in the United Kingdoms, Kurdistan in Iraq, Abkhazia in Georgia, Ambazonia in Cameroon and Tigray in Ethiopia, etc. Ashan Butt observed three years ago that in the last seven decades, there have been about twice as many nationalist civil wars (ninety-five) as interstate wars of any kind (forty-six), leading to the conclusion that such wars, often called secession wars, are the "chief source of violence in the world today." (Butt, 2017, pp. 2-3) This does not mean that secession is always synonymous to war, as we can see for instance from the recent cases of Quebec, Catalonia or Scotland. But even when there is no war, the intensity of violence and disagreement shows that breaking up is hard. A detailed analysis of secession must be multidimensional, and it is almost certain that this cannot be done in a paper. Three major approaches have been developed: the conflict-oriented approach, the right-oriented approach and the dynamic-oriented approach. Under the first approach, "One cares about how the interplay between internal actors and external actors would affect conflict settlement" (Lu, 2018, p. 6). With the second, the main question is about the right of the group that decides to secede to do so (Busquets, 2020; Cohen, 2006). Lastly, the dynamic-oriented approach aims at understanding the phenomenon of secession proper, through the question: why do people desire to secede? (Bartkus, 2004; Casertano, 2013) In this paper I am not concerned with the first approach. I am mainly interested with the second approach, and incidentally with the third one.

### 3 LET'S FOLLOW THEM ON THESE POINTS

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45 More precisely, I am analyzing the question here from a logical point of view, that is from the angle of arguments  
46 for secession. In this line, secession is an interesting object of analysis for the logician since it represents an  
47 extreme case of disagreement among people, entailing a necessary "conflict of commanding wills" to use von  
48 Wright's terminology. (von Wright, 1963, p. 203) Butt defines secession as a demand by an ethno-nationalist  
49 group for either independence from, or significant regional autonomy within, a modern nation-state (Butt,  
50 2017, p. 3). This definition is reductive as it does not capture recent movements many of whom are multiethnic.  
51 By secession, I will mean, broadly, the act of withdrawing from membership of a political union, irrespective  
52 of the homogeneity of the group that decides to initiate the action. My choice of using G. H. von Wright with  
53 relation to arguments for secession is motivated by the fact that his position also sheds some light on the roots  
54 of secession, which means that if his view is well articulated, it might help to understand the phenomenon of  
55 secession more generally and perhaps to see how it can be prevented. I will begin by highlighting the unresolved  
56 question of the right-oriented approach which motivates a new answer to the question. And then, I will try to  
57 construct von Wright's answer to that question. Lastly, I will show, through some concluding remarks, how von  
58 Wright's view can be used to prevent secession.

## 1 II.

### 2 The Justification of Secession: An Unresolved Question

61 Much of the debate about secession focuses on issues of right, both philosophical and legal. As the title of a  
62 recent book, *Morality and Legality of Secession* (Busquets, 2020) rightly summarizes the debate, secession is  
63 mostly seen under the angle of its evaluation from a moral and a legal point of view. Unfortunately, this right is  
64 never guaranteed at the national level. As Riegl and Dobos (Riegl & Dobos, 2017) have indicated, the right to  
65 secede is not recognized under contexts other than colonization.

66 Recent secession movements are not to be classified under the colonial category as they are internal conflicts,  
67 what Philip Roeder calls national secession (Roeder, 2018).

68 From a moral point of view, it has been claimed that secession should be based on the principle that each  
69 person has the right to self-determination. In turn the right to self-determination is guaranteed by legal texts  
70 under international law. There is then a circular justification of the right to secede. If morality is to be guaranteed  
71 by the law, it is by no way natural, that is why it becomes an argumentative issue. The problem, however, is  
72 that in matters of arguments, international laws generally conflict with internal laws. Most often, the right to  
73 secede is not internally recognized. This is what we may call the dilemma of secession. The dilemma runs thus:  
74 arguments for or against secession seem to necessitate a choice between two norms, the norm that there should  
75 be a territorial integrity for the State to be sustained and the norm that people should freely choose and control  
76 their destiny. In other words, the territorial integrity principle can only be maintained through a certain control  
77 by the central government on the lives of the communities and the citizens, that is, with the rejection of their  
78 right to self-determination.

79 However, as no state will ever grant autonomy without any violence, issues of right become useless to  
80 understand the roots of secession. As Ahsan I. Butt (Butt, 2017) lucidly puts it, the level of violence of the  
81 central state in responding to secession initiatives is proportionate to the consequences, in terms of the stability of  
82 the state, of the secession act. And this violence is often conducted with clear violations of international laws.  
83 This shows enough that the legality which is supposed to guarantee the morality of secession is flawed and makes  
84 the question of the justification of secession unresolved.

85 Some authors have seen it right that the problem may be resolved by simply shifting the attention from  
86 issues of justification. In a book that announces this shift (Closa Carlos et al. (Eds), 2019) from moral to  
87 amoral considerations about secession, Carlos Closa says: "We use amorality in order to escape the terrain of  
88 the justification of secession." (., p. 1) It is then surprising to see the following assertion, just on the next page:  
89 "Despite the different approaches taken by the contributors, the connecting thread linking the chapters of the  
90 book lies in the critical distinction between the 'democratic theory of secession' and the 'theory of democratic  
91 secession'" (., pp. 1-2). This is quite surprising because the definitions of "democratic theory of secession" and  
92 "theory of democratic secession" seem to indicate that the issue of justification has not been evacuated. Here are  
93 the definitions:

94 The democratic theory of secession argues the existence of a fundamental value which ultimately justifies  
95 secessionist claims, in a sort of "teleological justification" (?) while the theory of democratic secession legitimates  
96 relying on procedures, that is the instruments used to achieve secession (Ibid., p. 2. My emphasis.) Now I  
97 wonder whether these two theories escape the original problem. I think they do not. Therefore, our authors are  
98 very prompt, after announcing that they are trying to escape the justification approach, to tackle the problem  
99 of secession from the point of view of political philosophy and from the point of view of legal theory.

### 3 Let's follow them on these points

101 We will begin with the legal theory, just to recall a point we mentioned earlier. This is the contradiction between  
102 international law and internal law. The question here is: if there are international laws that guarantee people's  
103 right to self-determination, why does secession always go with violence?

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104 My answer is that while the international law guarantees secession from a country formerly under the rule  
105 of a colonial power, it does not guarantee anything when it comes to secession that does not imply any foreign  
106 country. If colonies were free to break from the colonial master, it seems that communities are not allowed to  
107 break from the central government. This is the principle of the integrity of the state. Of course, we should make  
108 the difference here between natural and artificial or political freedom.

109 Debates on secession, at a political level, do not make clear the type of freedom they talk about. Some  
110 contract theorists think that individuals give up their natural freedom to gain an artificial freedom in the contract.  
111 However, as Rousseau pointed at the opening of his *On the Social Contract*, "Man is born free; and everywhere  
112 he is in chains." ??Rousseau, 2003, I, 1). This shows that the artificial freedom here is not freedom at all (at least,  
113 in the mind of a contractualist like Rousseau). I suspect that political communities have later confused between  
114 this artificial slavery and natural slavery. That is why they resist whenever some members of the community  
115 want to leave.

116 From observation, modern political communities tend to rely on the naturalness of the State, both historically  
117 and geographically. But at the same time, they seem not to be ready to totally endorse this position since they  
118 will rely on the national constitution, which very often defends the principle of territorial integrity, to override  
119 people's right to leave. It may sound contradictory, but it is not. The artificiality of the state obtained as the  
120 result of a social contract quickly changes to become natural. One will not doubt this if he observes for instance  
121 the treatment that was given to those who threatened the sacred character of the society. Indeed, it seems to be a  
122 common fact among contractualists to accept death penalty when the society's harmony is threatened. Consider  
123 the following examples.

## 124 4 Ibid

125 Though Locke admits the right to revolution ??Locke, 1980, § 224), he linked the death penalty to natural law:

126 In the state of nature, has a power to kill a murderer, both to deter others from doing the like injury, which  
127 no reparation can compensate, by the example of the punishment that attends it from everybody, and also to  
128 secure men from the attempts of a criminal, who having renounced reason, the common rule and measure God  
129 hath given to mankind, hath, by the unjust violence and slaughter he hath committed upon one, declared war  
130 against all mankind, and therefore may be destroyed as a lion or a tyger, one of those wild savage beasts, with  
131 whom men can have no society nor security. (Ibid., ?? 11) As this suggests, the political society that is born of  
132 the social contract inherits this natural right of self-defense and can make use of it by eliminating a criminal for  
133 the common good.

134 Montesquieu, following Locke, also places capital punishment in the perspective of natural law. Attaching  
135 the principle of retaliation to the "relations of equity prior to positive law", he concludes: "They are a kind of  
136 retaliation, by which the society refuses security to a member who has actually or intentionally deprived another  
137 of his security. These punishments are derived from the nature of the thing, founded on reason, and drawn from  
138 the very source of good and evil." (Montesquieu, 1777, XII, 4).

139 Rousseau, too, does not question capital punishment. In *On the Social Contract*, he considered it to be  
140 justified by a clause implicit in the founding pact (or "treaty"), a clause which he formulated as follows:

141 Again, every malefactor, by attacking social rights, becomes on forfeit a rebel and a traitor to his country; by  
142 violating its laws, he ceases to be a member of it; he even makes war upon it. In such a case, the preservation  
143 of the State is inconsistent with his own, and one or the other must perish; in putting the guilty to death, we  
144 slay not so much the citizen as an enemy. ??Rousseau, 2003, II, 5) I don't know if these elements are convincing  
145 enough to justify the rejection of the right to secede, but I suspect that they have deeply contributed to the focus  
146 on the right aspects of secession analysis. However, as I said earlier, we should not much rely on law when talking  
147 about secession. Internally, the right to secede is never guaranteed, externally, secession wars hardly motivate  
148 external interventions. Roeder gives some interesting data to support our view here. Between 1945 and 2010,  
149 there has been 171 national secessions around the world, with only 26 successful. More important, out of the  
150 26, only 7 have motivated external intervention namely Bangladesh, Bosnia, Eritrea, Kosovo, Montenegro, South  
151 Sudan, and Timor Leste ??Roeder, 2018, p. 30) Given that the question of justification (both legal and moral)  
152 has not been given a definite answer, should we conclude that there is no convincing answer to the question? G.  
153 H. von Wright's philosophy of action seems to offer an acceptable solution to the problem. I shall now turn to  
154 examining his view.

## 155 5 III.

## 156 6 Von Wright on the Right of Secession

157 There are at least three reasons why one may be surprised to see G. H. von Wright's philosophy applied to the  
158 question of secession: 1) to my knowledge, the term "secession" does not appear in any of his writings; 2) by  
159 his insistence on the norms as being legal (the obligatory, the permitted and the forbidden), he seems to give a  
160 preference to legal normalcy, which rejects secession as we said earlier; 3) von Wright puts much emphasis on the  
161 individual action, and since a person alone cannot decide to secede, it is difficult to see how any analysis of the  
162 individual action may help to understand a collective action like secession.

163 However, against 1), the expression "selfdetermination" appears at different places in his writings (von Wright,  
164 1998, pp. 6, 12-14, 31). Against 2), we could say that "there is a sense in which the human individual can 'break'  
165 the rule of custom and in which the course of nature cannot 'break' its (causal or statistical) laws." (von Wright,  
166 1963, p. 8) And this should be coupled with another assertion found in the article "Laws of Nature": "Knowledge  
167 of laws of nature should not count as genuine 'knowledge of the future'" (von Wright, 1984, p. 145) which shows  
168 that even the regularities in the natural laws are not immune to future refutations; they are, von Wright would  
169 say, "open" (Ibid., p. 146). Against 3), it suffices to indicate that collective actions are reducible to the action of  
170 individuals (von Wright, 1963, p. 77).

171 This means that though G. H. von Wright has never expressed any argument for or against secession, some  
172 points of his philosophy may be put together to analyze the issue of justification of secession.

### 173 7 a) The primacy of the individual

174 In Practical Reason (von Wright, 1983), von Wright sets himself the task of elaborating a theory of practical  
175 inference by developing the practical syllogism already put forward in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (Book  
176 Seven) through the concept of "deliberate choice" and by sorting out the invariants of all human action. In  
177 fact, the two projects are carried out simultaneously in the book since it is the development of the practical A  
178 deliberate choice, he says, involves three elements: an end to be achieved (x), an action to perform in order to  
179 achieve that end (y), and finally the establishment of the necessity of the action to be carried out. The scheme  
180 of a practical inference is therefore as follows:

181 x is an end to be achieved x cannot be achieved unless y is accomplished. So, y must be accomplished (Ibid.,  
182 p. 2) For example:

183 A person wishes to make a house habitable But the house cannot be made habitable if electricity is not  
184 installed. So, we must install electricity in the house. There are some difficulties to be noted at this level.

185 ? The first is that of the difference in nature between the premises and the conclusion, the premises being  
186 descriptive and the conclusion imperative.

187 There are doubts about the validity of a first-person inference, at least as formulated above. ? Another  
188 difficulty is the determination of the unavailability of another action to be accomplished to achieve the desired  
189 end. If there is indeed more than one way to achieve this end, there can no longer be any need to perform the  
190 indicated action, but another action could just as easily be performed in order to achieve the same result. ? A  
191 third difficulty is related to the passage from the necessity of the action to its performance. Even if one derives  
192 an imperative conclusion from descriptive premises indeed, it does not follow that the action thus indicated in  
193 the conclusion will be accomplished.

194 Let's start with the last difficulty. This difficulty may only be for third person practical syllogisms. For the  
195 first person, it is obvious that if I identify an action as the means by which I must achieve an end that I desire  
196 to achieve, I will necessarily accomplish the action, unless I am prevented from doing so by a force above my  
197 own. Given that all action is always the action of an individual, even in the case of collective actions. It follows,  
198 then, that practical inferences are first-person inferences and their conclusions are actions. This elimination of  
199 practical inference in the third person allows von Wright to formulate, after Kant, the first principle of practical  
200 inference: whoever wants to achieve an end must also want to use the means necessary to achieve that end (Ibid.,  
201 p. 9).

202 In this line, von Wright highlights a few determinants of human action and notes that the most important is  
203 the agent's aptitude to perform an act. The aptitude determines the action negatively, by placing restrictions  
204 on it (Ibid., p. 48). An action may be intentional and conform to social norms, but it is only made possible by  
205 the agent's ability to perform it. Von Wright adds to this third invariant a fourth one, the opportunity, which he  
206 presents, however, as an occasional determinant. Opportunity determines concrete action by being states already  
207 present or absent. Suppose, for example, that my intention is to open a window and that this window is already  
208 open.

209 The opportunity to open an already open window disappears and the action then becomes impossible.

210 The most important factor in determining the action is the ability or inability of the person acting to perform it  
211 (von Wright, 1998, p.3). And the modalities of capacity or incapacity are learning, difficulty, means, permission,  
212 right, aversion, opportunity, time and obstacles. I may be unable to do a thing either because I haven't learned it,  
213 because it presents an internal difficulty, because I don't have the means to do it, because I don't have permission,  
214 because I dislike it, because the opportunity to do it doesn't present itself, because I don't have the time, or  
215 because obstacles stand in my way (Id.). A distinction must be made between those modalities that apply to  
216 generic actions, i.e. actions that I cannot take in general because I have not learned to do them, and those that  
217 apply to individual actions because I do not have the means to take the action in question or because obstacles  
218 stand in my way. We can call the first generic modalities and the second individual or restrictive modalities.  
219 This distinction is important because it shows that one can be called upon to take an action that one can  
220 take generically, but that one cannot take individually. Also, individual modalities take precedence over generic  
221 modalities (the main one being the learning modality) because they ultimately determine the reasons why an  
222 agent has or has not acted.

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## 223 8 b) A Minimal Conception of Change

224 Von Wright identifies three types of facts: states of affairs, processes and events (von Wright, 1963, p. 26). He  
225 excludes the last two types of facts from the logic of change because, for them to be otherwise, we would have  
226 to consider a time and space other than those in which they take place or have taken place, and that, in lending  
227 ourselves to such a game, the result will not be different in any case. But even if he rejects them, he nevertheless  
228 thinks that they can be taken as moments of a special kind of description of states of affairs. Consider a simple  
229 gesture such as opening a window. This opening can be described as a transition or process of change that took  
230 place between two business states, an initial state (or event) in which the window was closed and a final state  
231 in which the window is open. Demonstrating the interdependence between these three types of events will allow  
232 von Wright to introduce an important symbol of the logic of change, the symbol of transformation/transition or  
233 T. The use of T is done by inserting it between two states of affairs, each representing a generic proposition, the  
234 initial and the final, and to show the passage from one state to another. Suppose for example that f means the  
235 window is closed and  $\sim f$  the window is open (or not closed). We can then symbolize the opening of the window by  
236  $fT\sim f$  (the transition of the states from the closed window to the unclosed window) or the closing of the window  
237 by  $\sim fTf$ . Likewise, "the window has remained open" may be represented by  $\sim fT\sim f$  and "the window has remained  
238 closed" by  $fTf$ . The four symbols we have just presented,  $fT\sim f$ ,  $\sim fTf$ ,  $\sim fT\sim f$  and  $fTf$ , represent the four elementary  
239 and exhaustive transformations of the logic of change. Von Wright gives the reason for this in these terms: On  
240 a given occasion the world either has the feature described by p or it lacks it; if it has this feature it will on the  
241 next occasion either have retained or lost it; if again it lacks this feature it will on the next occasion either have  
242 acquired it or still lack it. (Ibid., pp. 29-30)

243 What is important to remember about the logic of change is that, by going beyond static logic, it puts forward  
244 the concept of freedom. This leads us to another central point of von Wright's philosophy, that of the Necessity  
245 of Freedom.

## 246 9 c) The Necessity of Freedom

247 Von Wright defends a compatibilist theory of freedom since he defends that human freedom is compatible with  
248 determinism. Here is a passage that nicely summarizes the position: I have already argued that whereas one can  
249 be by physical obstacles prevented from doing various things - as, for example, a chained prisoner from escaping  
250 - and thus compelled to forbearance, one cannot rightly be said to be physically compelled to do anything, and  
251 therefore one cannot be physically prevented from forbearing anything either. This is a noteworthy asymmetry  
252 inherent in the concept of free action. (von Wright, 1998, p. 6)

253 Rosaria Egidi said that this version of compatibilism is "very special" because it is the result of a dynamic  
254 vision in which man is "an agent who is at once the subject and the object of the natural forces he controls  
255 and by which he is controlled" (Egidi, 2016, p. 124). The particularity of von Wright's compatibilism is that it  
256 claims, as Egidi has indicated, that "man without nature could not be free" (Ibid., p. 125).

257 To understand this special version of compatibilism, it is from 1971 onwards that this question must be  
258 explored in von Wright's writing. That year was marked by the publication of *Explanation and Understanding*  
259 (von Wright, 1971), which was completed three years later by *Causality and Determinism* (von Wright, 1974).  
260 Both works aim to promote the same thesis, according to which one cannot speak of a universal determinism on  
261 the scale of human action.

262 The first book is mainly a conceptual clarification whose aim is to show the difference between the natural  
263 sciences and the humanities, in order to avoid the confusion often made between explaining a phenomenon and  
264 understanding it. It is often accepted that understanding a phenomenon means being able to explain it, just  
265 as explaining a phenomenon means having understood it. For von Wright, however, these two verbs mark an  
266 epistemological difference with immense implications. The natural sciences, he says, are based on the principle  
267 of explanation, while the humanities are based on the principle of understanding. The fundamental difference  
268 that leads to this distinction is the fact that the social sciences and humanities study a being endowed with an  
269 intention, a being that carries meaning and therefore acts according to the goal it has set for itself. The teleology  
270 of human action is therefore what gives it a fundamentally different trait from other actions that one can have  
271 in the world.

272 One can understand von Wright's position by going back to the conceptual clarification he makes in Chapter  
273 III, which leads to the assertion that the human sciences do not provide causal explanations (von Wright, 1971,  
274 p. 153). To understand this proposition, one must distinguish between a number of concepts, causal explanation,  
275 teleological explanation, quasicausal explanation and quasi-teleological explanation. And when defining these  
276 concepts, one must keep in mind that they are situated within the framework of von Wright's temporal logic.  
277 Causal explanations refer to the past and try to retrace the circumstances preceding the occurrence of a state  
278 of affairs and on which this occurrence could depend. There is a causal relationship between the antecedent  
279 and the following one. Teleological explanations exhibit the same connection between two states of affairs  
280 except that they refer to the future, for which an action was taken by an agent, his intention. Some causal  
281 explanations are given in the form of teleological explanations, which are then quasiteleological explanations.  
282 Other teleological explanations, on the other hand, are formulated in the form of causal explanations, they  
283 are quasi-causal explanations. There is therefore a parity relationship between causal and quasi-teleological

284 explanations, on the one hand, and teleological and quasi-causal explanations on the other. Von Wright explains  
285 the difference in the following terms:

286 A conceptual difference between causal and quasi-teleological explanations, on the one hand, and quasi-causal  
287 and teleological explanations, on the other hand, is thus that explanations of the former type depend for their  
288 validity upon the truth of nomic connections whereas explanations of the latter type depend upon the truth of  
289 the truth of nomic connections. Although the examples taken by the author to illustrate these differences are sometimes difficult to untangle, it seems more important to understand  
290 the point here: to show that there are things that depend on us and that we cannot, by invoking the principle  
291 that we would be manipulated, remain passive and observe the course of events unless it is intentional. Once  
292 again, the author convokes the difference between the experimental sciences and the humanities to support his  
293 position. He explains that the systems that the experimental sciences study can be manipulated by an external  
294 agent. This agent has learned how to reproduce the initial states of systems under conditions where they would  
295 not otherwise have come into existence. The systems studied by social scientists cannot, as a rule, be manipulated  
296 by external agents; instead, they can be manipulated by internal agents (Ibid., p. 164).

297 This point is important for understanding von Wright's overall project since it marks a reversal of the situation;  
298 instead of using determinism as an excuse to claim agent irresponsibility, the author uses it instead to reinforce the  
299 idea of absolute agent responsibility. The fact that the agent acts intentionally and that a teleological explanation  
300 for his action can always be provided shows that the agent's behavior can always be explained and, therefore,  
301 that he can be held accountable for it. A deterministic position, he notes, far from calling into question the idea  
302 of responsibility, is on the contrary necessary to justify it correctly (Ibid., p. 166).

303 The conceptual arsenal used by the author to defend his thesis of the absolutely responsible agent consists in  
304 replacing the idea of cause, by the idea of condition. On the basis of this remodeling, von Wright asks himself the  
305 question whether a human agent can be the sufficient condition by which an event occurs in the world and answers  
306 in the affirmative. And he explains it more concisely by showing that antideterminism is built by isolating a  
307 part of the world on which we act voluntarily and present as responsible for effects that without our intervention  
308 would not be present. The idea that causality is possible on the scale of a portion of the world is crucial because  
309 it allows von Wright to recognize that not all causes are attributable to man since there are many points in  
310 the universe in which man's intervention is almost absent. The idea of causality does not presuppose a priori  
311 the human will. This nuance allows von Wright to dismiss as a justification of determinism the non-correlation  
312 between the will of a man and the order of the world. Instead, he insists on the idea that this will can be exercised  
313 locally.

314 Accordingly, the world is organized into small worlds or systems in which an agent can intervene for a specific  
315 system without ever being able to act on all these systems at once (Ibid., pp. 81-82). Thus, even if we cannot  
316 act on the world as it is globally, it does not mean that we are entirely passive on the course of the world. Von  
317 Wright argues that our answer to the question of how we learn to isolate a fragment of world history into a closed  
318 system and to know the possibilities (and necessities) that govern developments within a system is as follows:

319 We learn this partly by repeatedly putting the system in motion through acts of producing its initial state and  
320 then watching ("passively") the successive stages of its development, and partly by comparing these successive  
321 stages with developments in systems originating from different initial states. (Ibid., p. 64)

322 The illusion has been nourished, von Wright notes, by our tendency to think, that man in a state of pure  
323 passivity, simply by observing regular sequences, can record causal connections and causally related chains of  
324 events that, by extrapolation, penetrate the universe from an infinitely distant past to an infinitely distant future.  
325 This perspective fails to notice that causal relationships are relative to fragments of world history that have the  
326 character of what can be called closed systems (Ibid., p. 82). The main idea of Explanation and Understanding  
327 is therefore that since we are part of a system on which we can intervene, we are ultimately responsible also if we  
328 do not act. If we stick to the author's definition of restraint, an intentional passivity (Ibid., p. 90), we must then  
329 conclude that, for him, we are in any case responsible for what happens in our system, either by intervening in  
330 it or by refraining from intervening in it.

331 In Causality and Determinism, the author extends his argument by focusing this time not on the notion of  
332 causality as such, but on the link that can exist between this idea of causality and the affirmation of a universal  
333 determinism. Indeed, von Wright's aim is no longer to make a difference between causality in the experimental  
334 sciences and causality in the humanities. He now wants to devote himself exclusively to causality on the scale  
335 of nature in order to show that such causality does not in any way imply a universal determinism, particularly  
336 on the human scale. He points out that the concept of causality is intrinsically linked to the theory of human  
337 action. He also notes that this conception of causality is based on an atomic organization of the world in which  
338 independent states of affairs are linked in the logic of succession that the author calls the logics of tomorrow and  
339 yesterday. Finally, he leads a fierce struggle against determinism whose veracity, he says, must remain an open  
340 question. The argument of this second work is summarized as follows from the first pages of the first part: "And  
341 this implies, as I shall try to show, that the idea of causal determinism, associated with this idea of causation, can  
342 There is thus, in the background of these two works, a critique of determinism. The major idea of determinism,  
343 that there are no causal alternatives in the development of the world outside the internal necessity of the world  
344 itself, is strongly questioned by von Wright, who sees in this the idea that the world is governed by laws against  
345 which no intrusion is possible. Determinism advocates a linear view of time. But as our author notes, a difference

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346 must be made between an ontic determinism and an epistemic determinism. His argument could be schematized  
347 as follows:

348 The world would be entirely determined if we knew it in its entirety and not only in certain parts. We do not  
349 know the whole world, but only parts of it. It follows that the world is not entirely determined.

350 One could well admit an ontic determinism, following the model of a universe previously organized by a divine  
351 intelligence, which surpasses the human intelligence and finally makes that, all that men do and believe to act  
352 freely must finally be located in this project conceived before their existence. But such determinism cannot  
353 exclude human action, for men do not share with God the same form of intelligibility. On a human scale, some  
354 things are known, and others are not. An epistemic determinism implying that men necessarily know what  
355 tomorrow will look like cannot be admitted on a human scale. Now, since it is not on the divine scale, but on  
356 the human scale that action matters, it must be concluded that there is no determinism. Or, to use von Wright's  
357 schema, the fact that there is an ontic determinism does not in any way preclude an epistemic indeterminism.  
358 For our author, therefore, the defenders of the thesis of determinism on a human scale make a serious confusion  
359 between what man knows and what he does not know. The fact that man has more or less specialized knowledge  
360 on a small scale of the universe does not make him a being whose intelligibility can extend to the entire universe.  
361 It seems clear to us that it is this idea that von Wright wants to express by the formula that determinism can  
362 only be established on the scale of fragments of the world (Ibid., p. 136).

363 He even goes so far as to suggest that epistemic determinism should rather make us optimistic, because it  
364 teaches us that there are fragments of the world that we can know and therefore act upon. That these actions  
365 are within the logic of an intelligence which is superior to our own is not something we should be concerned  
366 about. There is thus, in von Wright, the idea that epistemic determinism, considered in a fragmentary way,  
367 creates epistemic indeterminism, considered in a global way, and finally creates ontic intrusions. This is what he  
368 summarizes in the last paragraph of the book when he states that "What action presupposes is only the epistemic  
369 certainty which, as long as it is not undermined, entails belief in the ontic contingency of some changes and thus  
370 takes for granted a certain margin of indeterminism in the world." (Id.) How should we interpret these views, in  
371 relation to secession?

372 Secession is generally considered unjustified because it threatens the harmony of the collectivity by promoting  
373 locality instead of nationality.

374 Let's examine a) above. We have seen with von Wright's conception of practical inference that an action  
375 is ultimately individual, even when it takes place in a given community. And there are indicators that this  
376 individualization of the human action is nothing but normal as human beings act essentially at the local level. I  
377 agree that there is some kind of reductionism here. However, we can easily understand it as the goal of the action  
378 is put first in the practical inference and has greater chances to be achieved if the action is performed at a local  
379 level. With the minimal conception of change defended by von Wright, basic actions are the most important as  
380 they bring the most observable changes or consequences in the world. This is to say that, the promotion of the  
381 local in place of the national is in no way abnormal. And if this might lead to secession, then secession is normal  
382 too. Many arguments in favor of secession hold this fact that the actions at more local levels have more impact  
383 than actions at national level for actions are performed here in such a way that we can see the results and, more  
384 important, we act with close people whom we trust. As Buckley defends:

385 If we split apart, we'd be more likely to find ourselves living with people whom we trust and with whom we  
386 share bonds of solidarity. We'd be more prosperous, since we'd find it easier to rely on people to keep their  
387 promises, and we'd be more willing to look after each other with generous social welfare programs. ??Buckley,  
388 2020, p. 26) As for the second point, we have seen that there are no conditions of freedom. In von Wright's view,  
389 freedom is absolute. Arguments against the justification of secession often claim that once the constitution is  
390 established, people are not free to leave. But we have seen with von Wright that determinants of action which  
391 include the permission and the right to perform a certain act are axiologically less important than the agent's  
392 aptitude to act. And this aptitude, if it is not materialized at the national level, can still be perceived and  
393 implemented at the local level. Now I agree that these arguments will hardly be new. Then, how do they help in  
394 understanding the desire to leave? The answer is that we should distinguish between social and natural normalcy.

395 Generally, secession is socially abnormal. This comes from the fact that the norms of a society generally put  
396 that society above the individuals. Even in the case of anonymous norms such as the customs, it is clear for  
397 individuals that some actions are forbidden, even if they don't know how the forbearance came about. When  
398 the custom becomes a prescription, and is clearly indicated in the legal code, its normative pressure is even  
399 more important as the sanction is already existing to punish the malefactors. The necessity of sanctions here  
400 is very much in line with von Wright's view. As he recommends in *Norm and Action*, "it is essential that the  
401 authorities should be able to back their prescriptions to the citizens with effective threats of punishment in case  
402 of disobedience. When this condition is not fulfilled the legal order collapses or dissolves, as when there is a  
403 successful revolution." ??von Wright, 1963, p. 128) Socially then, the normalcy of secession is hardly established.

404 But the problem with this reductive perception of normalcy is that it does not recognize what individuals  
405 are naturally able to do. Naturally, as we have indicated, the laws of the humanities are norm-like propositions,  
406 different from natural norms (Ibid., pp. 8-9). Freedom as a natural determinant in von Wright's conception  
407 takes precedence over social norms. This is the shift one must understand to be able to aptly appreciate the

## 10 IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS: UNDERSTANDING THE ROOTS OF SECESSION

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408 justification of secession. The fact that individuals are free also means that they are free to leave, even with the  
409 forbearance of the norm authority since the human norm is not above the nature's norm.

410 To summarize the argument then, secession is justified because human beings are free and because the social  
411 norms that see secession as abnormal are subsumed to the natural norms that bring that freedom to the fore.  
412 Now that we have shown the normalcy of secession from von Wright's philosophy of action, what do we learn  
413 from this, as far as the roots of the secession are concerned? This is the question I will answer in the concluding  
414 remarks of this paper.

### 415 10 IV. Concluding remarks: understanding the roots of seces- 416 sion

417 My concluding remarks will consist of four points:

418 (1) We have seen that the individual is free and responsible. This means that the paternalistic attitude should  
419 not be promoted in politics. Paternalism here refers to the tendency to think that the rulers are necessarily  
420 more informed than the governed and therefore that they know best what the population needs. Through this  
421 tendency, many political leaders tend to underestimate the people, which leads to a clear break between elites  
422 and the rest. This break is the reason why the rulers feel less and less concerned with the future of the people  
423 and are more inclined to take arbitrary laws.

424 (2) As the practical inference is valid for the first person, it becomes crucial to lay emphasis on the individual's  
425 place in the society. This seems paradoxical, but the collectivity is maintained when the individuals feel  
426 valued. Besides, practical inferences show that individuals are rational as they carry calculation of the means  
427 corresponding to the ends. If this is so, then irrational norms, that is norms that are arbitrary, cannot stand for  
428 long as they are constantly challenged by rational agents to whom obedience is requested. The existence of norms  
429 and their preservation presupposes the rationality of those norms as well as that of the normative authority and  
430 agents. And this is possible only if the normative authority drops the paternalistic attitude described in (1)  
431 above. (3) Given that change is, first, initiated at the individual level, it gives an indication about the fact that  
432 the locality must be promoted when it comes to resource exploitation. The resources of the community must first  
433 benefit the local community. (4) Lastly, the existence of freedom despite the constraints gives some hope that we  
434 can do something. Secession indicates that people have lost hope in the future, that they think it is their duty  
435 to find a better place where they will bring that hope back. This is the sign that secession is painful for those  
436 who want to secede. They are ready to take the risks of losing so many lives without any guarantee of success  
437 only because the despair is already greater than the benefits of staying together. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Justification of Secession: An Argument from G. H. Von Wright's Philosophy of Action © 2021 Global Journals



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