

**A Virtue Ethics Analysis of Evo Morales's Push for Domestic Lithium Extraction in the Salar de Uyuni**

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By

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **Introduction**

As the primary component in batteries, lithium presents itself as a key player in the global energy transition. The demand for lithium has risen dramatically since the start of the adoption of electric vehicles and renewable energy sources, and countries with significant lithium reserves have quickly tapped into the market. Amongst these countries is Bolivia, home to the Salar de Uyuni, the world's largest salt flat. Beneath its salt flats, Salar de Uyuni contains over 50% of the world's lithium supply, creating the potential for Bolivia to be the "Saudi Arabia of lithium" (Ahmad, 2020). The push for domestic lithium production in Bolivia was the forefront of President Evo Morales's campaign.

Evo Morales was elected President of Bolivia in 2005 and sworn-in in 2006, becoming the country's first President of indigenous descent. Morales, along with the backing of his political party, Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS, or the Movement Towards Socialism), pledged to reduce poverty amongst the country's indigenous population by renationalizing the nation's energy sector. By tapping into the lithium supply at Salar de Uyuni, he promised to bring jobs to the indigenous communities surrounding the flat and bring income to the country by becoming a national leader in lithium exports (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018). However, Morales went against his initial promises by straying from domestic production and involving foreign actors, resulting in seldom jobs being offered to the native people due to exploitation. Some have argued that the lack of jobs offered was due to little local interest in lithium operations, but interviews with the locals reported that they had been asking to be a stakeholder in these operations for years at that point, indicating negligence. Additionally, in making the decision to involve foreign actors and furthering lithium production efforts, Morales also failed

to effectively communicate the risks associated with lithium production and report voiced opposition to the pilot plants in construction.

Many scholars have recognized the lasting effects of Morales's lithium production efforts, including an unstable economy, civil unrest, and environmental damage. However, the morality of the decisions made by Morales has yet to be questioned. Evaluating Morales's decision-making through the lens of virtue ethics will provide a greater understanding of resource nationalism, and specifically, the civil unrest that followed. Ultimately, evaluating the morality of Morales's decisions will determine whether he should be held responsible for the lasting effects of the extraction operations.

In this paper, I will be assessing the ethics behind the push for lithium-extraction by President Evo Morales and his political party, MAS, through the lens of virtue ethics. Virtue ethics, in summary, focuses on the nature of the person making the choices, not the choices themselves. The goal of virtue ethics is to act morally so that one achieves the "highest good". Within virtue ethics, I will focus on the cardinal virtue of justice and determine whether as a government official, Morales upheld the virtue of justice regarding equitable treatment of the indigenous population, and as such, whether he should be held morally responsible for the damage following the operations. My analysis will contain two main subsections pertaining to Aristotle's view of justice in political theory: lawfulness and equity.

## **Literature Review**

The lasting political, economic, and environmental effects of lithium operations in Bolivia have been a highly discussed topic amongst political scientists and human rights

activists. Prior work by scholars that highlight these issues are helpful in guiding the assessment of the morality of President Morales's decisions associated with the operations.

Al Bouchi and Caraway in their paper, *The Political Ecology of Bolivia's State-Led Lithium Industrialization for Post-Carbon Futures*, review the socio-ecological costs of development around Salar De Uyuni. Al Bouchi and Caraway note the communities around the Salar being the poorest in the country. These communities, as well as local wildlife, rely heavily on the Salar for water supply, grazing, and agriculture (Al Bouchi & Caraway, 2023). Although the indigenous population was no stranger to exploitation for the natural resources they live by, they put a lot of trust into President Morales as his origins are the same as theirs. However, the government designated the Salar as a fiscal reserve, indicating that it has exclusive rights to use. Al Bouchi and Caraway argue that this decision allows the government to bypass consultation with the 329 communities surrounding the flat, leading to a lack of offered jobs and straying from solely domestic production (Al Bouchi & Caraway, 2023). In the government's eyes, "[lithium] is only the latest export promising economic growth and development at home". The authors confirm that the decisions made by the government during Morales's term were not in the best interests of the local communities, going behind their original plan and avoiding proper consultation with all the actors involved. This source also provides insights towards the public opinion of President Morales at the beginning and end of his terms (notably, the protests that forced Morales out of office), adding additional context to the treatment of the indigenous population involved in lithium operations. The evidence presented is vital in assessing whether the indigenous population was treated with equity.

Similarly to the work done by Al Bouchi and Caraway, Evan Melendez, in his work *Lithium Extraction and Hydropower Development in Bolivia: Climate Mitigation versus*

*Indigenous Environmental Justice*, questions whether the promise to save the world from climate change is at the expense of indigenous environmental degradation. Notably, in response to local opposition towards the extraction operations, the MAS's response was summed up as "it belongs to you, to the state, and you should not be against the state" (Melendez, 2023). Melendez also highlights how in the official documents regarding development of the extraction pools, there was no use of the term "consultation". Additionally, the land degradation from mining operations, pollution, and intense water usage, "blur the lines between environmental justice and climate justice" (Melendez, 2023). Melendez's work supplies additional evidence to be used in questioning proper risk communication and equitable treatment by the government.

Both articles discussed extensively highlight the damage lithium extraction brought to the indigenous populations around Salar de Uyuni and provide ample evidence for the forthcoming analysis. What both articles fail to question, however, is the ethics behind President Morales's decisions making, and how future leaders can be more ethical in their decisions surrounding global exports. While reporting the concrete damage done to the indigenous land and population is important, I will use virtue ethics to question whether President Morales should be held morally responsible for the damage done.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The morality of President Morales's decisions during his term will be based on the treatment of the indigenous population involved with the pilot lithium extraction operations, specifically regarding their rights as Bolivian citizens. An ethical framework known as virtue ethics will be used to guide this analysis. Virtue ethics, first concretely defined by Aristotle, focuses on the nature of the person making the decisions and outlines the traits people should develop to act morally (van de Poel & Royyakers, 2012a, pp. 95–99). In this analysis, the

decision-making person is President Evo Morales. According to Aristotle, the final goal of human action is to strive for the highest good, or *eudaimonia* (“the good life”). Aristotle notes that *eudaimonia* does not refer to receiving pleasure from given circumstances, but rather the happiness and fulfillment that comes from being a good person. A key concept of virtue ethics is that the traits that define being a good person are not given at birth, but rather are developed through experiences. These traits are described as the middle between two extremes, or as Aristotle described, “the middle ground”. These desirable traits can be summarized within four key virtues as described by Thomas Aquinas: prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude (van de Poel & Royyakers, 2012a, pp. 95–99)

Aristotle described justice as the application of all virtues. Justice, in a political sense, is respecting the laws and following them (Ebrahimpour et al., 2017). More broadly, justice is the assurance of equity- if all actors involved are being met with justice, then all actors are being given the resources they need to achieve the same thing. Aristotle emphasizes justice as the moderate of two extremes: selflessness and selfishness. Thus, ensuring one is not acting with selfish intent ensures equitable treatment of all parties (Shiner, 1994).

Applying virtue ethics, the following analysis will assess whether the push for lithium extraction by President Morales was done justly. I will first analyze the risk communication done by President Morales and MAS to the local communities surrounding the Salar to determine whether the knowledge share surrounding lithium extraction operations was equitable. I will then research whether the opposition towards domestic lithium production was considered in the government’s decision-making process, indicating whether those with opposing viewpoints were treated lawfully. Through these analyses, I will determine whether President Morales should be

held morally responsible to for the resulting socio-environmental damage from the lithium operations during his term.

## **Analysis**

In addition to virtue ethics, Aristotle was one of the most influential thinkers in political science, evident in his thesis, *Politics*. In his words, “the most important task for a politician is, in the role of a lawgiver, to frame the appropriate constitution for a city-state”, ensuring laws, customs, and institutions for the citizens. His constitutional theory is heavily based on his theory of justice. In *Nicomachean Ethics* Book V, he outlined two different senses of justice: lawfulness and equity (Miller, 2022). Lawfulness refers to the common advantage of all citizens, or in other words, safeguarding all citizens’ interests. An example of lawfulness includes every citizen having the right to vote or the right to an education. Lawfulness can also include fair consideration of all citizens’ wants or needs and not valuing some actors over others (Miller, 2022). Tying lawfulness back to virtue ethics, a lawful leader is one that acts with their people’s best interest at heart, resulting in common advantage. Equity refers to treating all actors with fairness and providing the resources they need to reach said common advantage. An equitable leader is one that treats all citizens of a city-state with the same amount of respect and consideration (Miller, 2022).

As a person in power, President Morales was tasked to uphold laws, customs, and institutions for the people of Bolivia. According to Aristotle, a politician that fails to do so puts the city-state in a position of not achieving *eudaimonia*, thereby failing to uphold the cardinal virtue of justice (Miller, 2022). The following analysis will highlight examples of President Morales failing to act with equity and lawfulness. These examples will convey Morales’s lack of

justice for his people, indicating that he should be held responsible for the resulting exploitation and environmental damage from lithium extraction operations.

*Equity: Effective Risk Communication and Equal Opportunity*

Risk communication refers to informing the public about risks and hazards. Risk communication must be honest, respect the autonomy of people, and only inform, not attempt to persuade the public (van de Poel & Royyakers, 2012b, pp. 236–237). Commonly, the idea of risk communication is conveyed in the world of engineering, as engineers must inform the public about the potential risks associated with a technology or process. However, the idea of risk communication is also highly relevant in the world of politics, especially when the person in power is the one pushing the development of a new technology. As such, President Morales, when heavily pushing for domestic lithium extraction, had a moral responsibility to effectively communicate the social and environmental risks associated with the process. The two main environmental risks associated with lithium extraction operations are the amount of water the process requires, and the chemical waste produced (Al Bouchi & Caraway, 2023). However, it was largely evident that the communities surrounding the Salar were unaware of these risks, or the importance of lithium in general.

Robert Draper of *National Geographic* traveled to the Salar in 2019. He noted that the two populations near the Salar, the Quechua and Aymara, are still regarded as lower-class citizens. Upon interviewing Aymara locals near the flats, he uncovered that these communities had little to no information on what these operations entail. Salt farmer Hugo Flores stated that “[they have] received no information from the government. [They] do not even know what lithium is, what its benefits are, what its effects are” (Draper, 2019). However, lithium was the center of Morales’s campaign. It’s possible that these indigenous communities do not readily



have access to news sources that may have reported Morales's claims about lithium as he was campaigning, including his insight on the benefits and risks. However, failure to extend his campaign to those directly surrounding the site of the operations is the inherent opposite of risk communication. As defined previously, equity is ensuring every party gets the proper resources to reach the same level; in this case, Morales acting with equity would be ensuring that the communities surrounding the Salar had the same level of knowledge about the lithium operation as everyone else. Therefore, President Morales's lack of effective risk communication does not align with the cardinal virtue of justice due to the lack of equitable share of knowledge.

Although the Aymara communities live adjacent to the Llipi pilot plant, they were not actually being offered their promised jobs. President Morales pledged to bring jobs to indigenous communities such as the Aymara and it was the center of his campaign (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018). However, councilwoman Cipriana Callpa Díaz said that “no one in [the Aymara] municipality is working on the lithium project. [They had] thought there would be work for [their] people here, with good salaries”. Draper reported the councilwoman's sentiment to the Llipi plant director, who stated that there are little jobs for unskilled workers in lithium processing (Draper, 2019). At the time of his campaign, however, Morales did not explain any barriers to getting these jobs. Denying jobs to those without easy access to an education, which includes the indigenous population, violates the concept of equity. I argue that if these jobs had been previously advertised to the indigenous people, they either did not require prior working experience, or this was merely a campaign tactic to win majority support- either reasoning for not offering the locals their promised jobs indicates not treating them with equity, further exemplifying the lack of justice displayed by Morales.

One may argue that the lack of job offerings could be attributed to a lack of interest by the locals in being involved in the operations due to their skepticism about the operations. As exemplified prior, the locals had little idea of what benefits and risks the operations offered. However, Draper had interviewed Ricardo Aguirre Ticona, the council president of Llica, which is the capital of the province the Salar lies in. Ticona reported that they had been asking the government for a facility of chemical science for a very long time to give young people a future in these operations. He also noted that Morales had not been around in a long time to hear these demands (Draper, 2019). By not offering the educational resources the indigenous population has wanted, and needed, for years to properly benefit from the extraction operations, Morales was not acting as an equitable leader. Most of the benefits from the operations were instead being given to workers from other areas of the country and the government itself, clearly violating the principle of equal treatment of all citizens. Therefore, the lack of jobs offered is not necessarily due to a lack of interest, but rather unfair treatment of those living near the flats, violating the virtue of justice.

#### *Lawfulness: Constitutional Upholding*

As stated by Aristotle, the most important task of a politician is to uphold the constitution of the city-state. The Bolivian constitution, adopted in 2009, puts citizen participation at the forefront of its theme (Carlos Solon, 2022). To “uphold” the constitution, the state-owned company in charge of the industrialization of lithium held brief public hearings once a year to provide scarce updates on production, but these hearings were far from open floor consultations. These hearings generally consisted of a 10-20 slide presentation and no open comment period. Additionally, in 2018, a public consultation was held regarding the construction of a new lithium carbonate plant, attended by 152 people. The participants expressed their concerns about

construction, including water consumption, environmental pollution, and sources of employment for the locals near the plant. The final meeting minutes published, however, reported none of these concerns and included endorsements for the plant's construction by government officials (Carlos Solon, 2022).

The misreporting of the contents of the public consultation is a clear violation of Bolivian constitutional rights of citizen participation, and an even larger violation of justice. As mentioned, lawfulness involves safeguarding the interests of all citizens. By only reporting the endorsements by high-ranking government officials with the goal of getting the plant built, the concerns of the citizens involved with the process are not being actively guarded. This indicates that the government was only interested in advancing their wants- in this case- a profit from the lithium carbonate plant- and not the common advantage of their people. Furthermore, while it was a state-owned company that stifled the complaints of the citizens, I argue that President Morales is still responsible for failing to uphold the constitution by not holding the state-owned company accountable for their actions. If Morales had properly attended these consultations and flagged the state-owned company for aggressively pushing forward with construction, he would have been acting with the common good in mind- instead, his actions violated the cardinal virtue of justice, and he should be held responsible for the damage following construction. The civil unrest that resulted from constant suppression was a key factor in Morales's ultimate forced resignation in late 2018 (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

Applying the concept of virtue ethics, and more specifically, the cardinal virtue of justice, I have argued that President Evo Morales acted immorally during his push for the domestication for lithium production. Aristotle stated in his political theory that a just political leader is

responsible for acting equitably and lawfully. By failing to communicate the risks associated with the lithium extraction processes to the native communities surrounding Salar de Uyuni, in conjunction with going back on his initial promises of bringing jobs to those communities, Morales exemplified his failure to act as an equitable leader. Furthermore, the state-owned companies (which are ultimately the responsibility of Morales) continuously stifled opposition to the progression of lithium operations, as noted in the lack of complaints reported in a 2018 consultation meeting minutes. Being a lawful leader means seeking the common advantage for all people, something that Morales also failed to do during his term. Morales's shortcomings as a leader through the lens of virtue ethics prove that he should be held responsible for the aftermath of the operations, including environmental damage and civil unrest.

Understanding the moral implications of Morales's damage is crucial to the success of future Bolivian leaders. It is not untrue that Bolivia's lithium reserves possess great economic opportunity for the country, especially as lithium demand continues to rise higher than it has ever been. If future leaders want to fully tap into extracting and processing, they must consider all actors involved during the exploration process to be able to sufficiently progress the operations as they envision. By failing to act as a just leader, there remains room for civil unrest, and Bolivia will remain a state of instability.

Word Count: 3,285

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