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In Defence of Associative Political Obligations: Part Two

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This article continues the defence of associative political obligations begun in Part One. It does so by sketching an argument that supports commonplace ideas about our having a special, ethical relationship with the polity of which we are members. The argument begins by showing how non-voluntary groups in general can have value, and then seeks to identify the generic good of a polity: that good is the provision of order and security. While this is a necessary condition of associative political obligations, it is not sufficient. It needs to be supplemented by an argument explaining why we have obligations to the particular polity of which we are members. This 'associative' argument has two sides to it. The first explains how membership of a polity is for most people something like an ascribed status; that is, an identity or role that a person is taken to occupy without having chosen it. The second suggests how, through a process of identification, we incorporate membership within our self-understanding. The article concludes with some brief remarks about anarchism and why political obligation matters.

How are we to understand the idea of political obligation? What sense can we make of the claim that, by virtue of their membership of a particular polity, people have obligations to it? Can this idea be elucidated in a way that is coherent and plausible, and is not open to decisive objections on moral or other grounds? Is it reasonable for most people to think of themselves as having political obligations? In what follows, I explore this cluster of questions in the context of one kind of 'answer' that has been given to them: that political obligations are best understood as a form of 'associative obligations'.

While explaining political obligations in terms of associative obligations has been subject to a number of criticisms, I have tried to respond to the most important of these in Part One of this article, and do not address them again here.[1] Instead, I focus on the positive task of setting out a plausible case for associative political obligations. The relationship between the two parts is that the first, by seeking to undermine some apparently powerful objections to the whole idea of associative political obligations, indirectly lays the ground for the arguments of the second. However, by 'laying the ground' I do not mean that the arguments here *depend upon* the earlier arguments, or that the arguments of Part One imply those that are advanced here. Rather, the way in which the earlier part lays the ground is primarily by trying to loosen the grip of some common objections and preconceptions that stand in the way of accepting the very idea of associative political obligations, thus seeking to make the potentially sceptical reader more receptive to the arguments set out here.

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It may be helpful to begin with two preliminary points. The first concerns the scope of the argument. Although I shall talk quite generally about 'polities', I have no very clear view about the relevance of what I have to say to forms of political society radically different from that of a modern state. The circumstances that I principally reflect on are those of a world of largely independent states. Such states do not have to be entirely separate from one another, but they will normally possess a significant measure of at least formal sovereignty. *Mutatis mutandis*, the argument may well apply to other forms of polity, but I would not want to hang anything on whether, or how far, that is so. States, too, of course, differ from one another in a variety of ways. These differences do indeed make a difference to the precise content of political obligations, but at the level of generality at which my argument is conducted, they will often be irrelevant, or involve only marginal adjustments to the story that I go on to tell. In particular, it should be noted, this account of political obligation is not limited to liberal democracies or any other supposed political ideal. The second point is of a 'methodological' kind, and develops a point made in Part One.[2] The questions with which I began use terms like 'understand' and 'make sense of' in relation to my project, and do not, for instance, refer to providing a compelling *moral justification* of political obligations. I prefer not to present what I am doing in these terms, although quite what is at stake in distancing my project from this way of formulating matters is not entirely perspicuous. Perhaps the best I can do for now is to say that my principal aim is simply to show how the conception of associative political obligations that is developed here provides an intelligible and plausible way of understanding political obligations within a modern state; that is, that they can be explicated in a way that renders the concept of a political obligation a generally reasonable and cogent one to employ in thinking about our relations to the particular polity of which we are members.[3] More ambitiously, though, I also want to suggest that, at least in the routine circumstances of the modern state, dispensing entirely with the idea of membership, and a corresponding political obligation, is rather more difficult than some philosophers seem to believe.

The challenge to which this article responds is one posed very broadly by A. J. Simmons when he writes:

> Many people feel, I think, that they are tied in a special way to their government, not just by 'bonds of affection', but by *moral* bonds. While they complain loudly and often, and not without justification, of the shortcomings of government, they feel that they are nonetheless bound to support their country's political institutions and obey its laws, in ways that they are not bound to the corresponding institutions of *other* countries. Yet it is difficult to give any substance to this feeling of a special moral bond. It seems to me that the problem of political obligation is precisely the problem of explaining the nature and scope of such moral bonds (if any such exist) (Simmons, 1979, pp. 3–4, emphasis in original).

While basically accepting Simmons' outline of the problem, I reject the answer that he gives: this is that 'most of us have no political obligations' (Simmons, 1979,

p. 194), and that the vast majority of people who think that they do have such obligations are simply *mistaken*. My aim is to show that, on the contrary, there need be nothing 'mistaken' about such a belief, which makes perfectly good sense for most of us. This does not, though, mean that it is necessarily unintelligible or impossible to reject membership of a polity. There may indeed be circumstances where this is not only reasonable but also more or less forced on us, although I shall not have much to say about that here.[4]

According to Christopher Wellman, what is distinctive about associative obligations in generic terms is that 'they (1) obtain only among special associations (as opposed to general duties that are owed to all of humanity); and (2) are neither explicitly agreed upon nor consented to (contrary to specific obligations generated through discrete actions or agreements)' (Wellman, 1997, p. 182). The account of political obligation that I go on to articulate meets both of Wellman's conditions.[5] What is significant in the context of political obligation is that there is some sort of ethical relationship that holds by virtue of membership of a polity, which members mostly do not voluntarily choose to join.[6] In insisting that political obligation is an ethical relationship, I part company with someone to whom my position is in many respects quite close. Margaret Gilbert, taking up this point, writes:

> It is of course quite standard to interpret the problem of political obligation as a problem in moral philosophy, having to do with what is referred to as 'moral obligation'. In my own specification of my own topic and in my further discussion, however, I shall drop the presumption that the bonds in question are moral bonds (Gilbert, 1996, p. 362).

While sharing some of her doubts about simply interpreting political obligation as 'a problem in moral philosophy', and accepting of course that Gilbert can define her own topic as she pleases, I do not think the matter can be left at this.[7] If political obligations are denuded of any ethical dimension then one is faced with two problems. First, the kind of demand that political obligations make on us is left worryingly opaque. While Gilbert has an interesting and original story to tell about how we come to have an obligation, through her theory of 'joint commitments' (Gilbert, 1989; 2006), the force of what makes the obligation compelling remains obscure.[8] If one starts, as Gilbert does, from the observation that most people believe themselves to have some special bond or relationship with their polity, then it is highly doubtful that their belief can be adequately explicated in the absence of any ethical dimension. This leads to the second problem, which is that if all moral content is evacuated from the idea then the sting would seem to be removed from the dispute between defenders and critics of associative obligations. However exactly one wants to characterise her conception of political obligations, critics may be fairly relaxed about them, if they have no ethical import, for it is *that* claim to which they typically object (Higgins, 2004, pp. 173–8). So, unlike Gilbert, I continue to treat political obligation as having an essentially ethical component.

Let me begin with some commonplaces, some 'reminders', that should be largely uncontroversial. We relate to the polity of which we are members in a myriad of complex ways. We think and speak of *our* government or country. We distinguish members from non-members of our polity, and our actions reveal the significance of that distinction in a wide range of circumstances. We see our government, at least in many contexts, as acting in our name, and our relation to it as involving an ethically significant connection: our government's actions can *commit* us, both prospectively and retrospectively, as well as merely having consequences for us. We may be answerable in various ways for the actions of our government, whether or not we approve of what it does, and whether or not it is 'democratic'. We recognise that our government is entitled to make claims on us and we may have legitimate expectations of it, which cannot be explained without reference to the thought that it is *our* government. We pay taxes (which are morally and conceptually distinct from, for example, charitable donations and from theft), and in doing so, however reluctantly, recognise that the threat of punishment if we do not is fundamentally different in kind from a threat of harm by, say, an overenthusiastic collector for Oxfam. Moreover, this remains true even if we would prefer the money to go to Oxfam and think that they would make better use of it. We acknowledge that over many areas of our life our government has *authority*, which means that we recognise that it has the right, within very broad limits, to make decisions that we are under an obligation to accept as legitimate (whether or not we agree with them). It makes sense to feel pride or shame in relation to the actions of our polity and fellow members: these are characteristically emotions indicating some sense of being part of, or identifying with, our polity. Not all of this is equally true for everyone; but much of it is true for a great many of us. Our membership of a particular polity not only shapes our lives in a causal sense, it also enters conceptually and morally into the way we think about ourselves, our relationships with others, in what we feel and how we think about what we should do.

I refer to these as 'reminders'; but what, it may be asked, are they reminders of? They are reminders of a few of the many and diverse ways in which our membership of a polity figures in our lives. They also remind us that membership of a particular polity is not a 'bare' fact about us. That is, it is not a fact like how tall one is or one's date of birth, facts that under normal circumstances have no ethical significance for us. They are facts that already have an ethical colouring. In understanding ourselves as members of a particular polity we employ 'thick' ethical concepts and ideas to characterise that understanding, and what we take to be the fact of our membership of our polity figures routinely in our ethical deliberation and argument.[9] These reminders do not of course 'prove' that we have political obligations (whatever that might mean), but they are an important part of any remotely accurate phenomenology of our ethico-political experience: they show how we commonly think and act *as if* we were members of a polity. In doing so we acknowledge that being a member of a polity has ethical significance for us, a significance partly cashed out in terms of responsibilities and

obligations. But, more than this, they show how deeply implicated we are in such ways of thinking. For these are not marginal or trivial features of our lives, but play a central role in the way in which we locate and orient ourselves in relation to other individuals, to groups and to institutions. In short, they form part of the conceptual and ethical fabric of our political life.

How then is it possible for us to think this way, and is it reasonable to do so? How is it that we are able to think of ourselves as having political obligations? To what features of our circumstances does political obligation speak? Basically, there are three broad lines of argument that I sketch in response to these questions. The first concerns the general significance of membership of groups that we do not voluntarily choose to join. The other two lines of argument engage more directly with the polity as a distinctive form of association. One explores what it is that is generically valuable about a polity. The other, which in turn has two distinct but related strands, concerns our relationship with the particular polity of which we are members. In pursuing these arguments, my aim is to try to bring out what it is to be a member of a polity, and how and why being a member supports the idea that we have corresponding, 'associative', obligations.

To begin with it is necessary to say something about what is meant by a group or association, although what follows is brief and approximate. In particular, a group or association (and I shall use the terms interchangeably) must be distinguished from a mere *category*. A good place to start is with Andrew Mason who writes that 'a group is a collection of individuals who either act together, or who cooperate with one another in pursuit of their own goals, or who at least possess common interests' (Mason, 2000, p. 21). In addition, some sort of structure and persistence over more than very brief periods of time marks the kind of groups that are of concern here. Groups are real in the sense that, *inter alia*, they can act and be the subject of actions, people define themselves and are defined by others as members or as excluded from the group, and they routinely figure in practical reasoning and deliberation, including moral reasoning and deliberation (Graham, 2001). What groups there are, and on what criteria they are based or organised, vary between societies and cultures, and also temporally. Groups come into and go out of existence, although not always at a precise moment in time, exist for some purposes and not others, and their membership can, to some unspecifiable extent, be indeterminate and contested. While all this is rather vague and very general, the kind of groups that I am concerned with are usually easily recognised, if not necessarily so easy to define.[10]

There is nothing especially problematic in the idea that membership of groups or associations can, at least under some circumstances, give rise to obligations. Indeed, it is hard to see how any human society, certainly any remotely complex society, could exist without this being the case. However, membership of many groups is the result of a voluntary choice to join, and in such cases it is the voluntariness of the decision to join that may be thought to play a crucial part in explaining any corresponding obligations. Typically, it is said, these are obligations

that we have chosen to take on for ourselves, and because we have taken them on voluntarily they do not offend against modern, individualist ideas of personal autonomy. The difficulty with political obligations is that, notwithstanding some heroic attempts to show otherwise, it does not seem that they can be explained in this manner at all convincingly.[11] Most of us do not voluntarily decide to join the polity of which we are members. We do not standardly choose our polity from a range of options, either from a variety of different polities or between a polity and some other kind of group or association.[12] Rather, as we might say, we *find* ourselves to be members of a particular polity; and in a straightforward sense most of us are 'born into' our polity. It is this idea, that we could acquire obligations to a particular group or association that we did not voluntarily choose to join, that is liable to meet with resistance.[13] This resistance may be directed towards all such obligations, or focused specifically on political obligations. On the latter view, it is conceded that although some non-voluntary groups, perhaps the family, may give rise to obligations, it is claimed that this is true only for small, closely knit, face-to-face groups, of which a modern polity is clearly not one. It needs to be shown, therefore, that not only can we have obligations arising from membership of groups we have not chosen to join, but also that a polity is one such group, although establishing the existence of *any* associative obligations is already an important step in that direction.

Let us then return to the general thought about the indispensability of at least some groups, membership of which gives rise to obligations. Could we envisage a society in which only those groups that we voluntarily choose to join give rise to obligations? I do not think so: we are necessarily born into a web of social practices and relationships that already structure our lives. For instance, although something that we would recognise as 'the family' may not be universal, there will always need to be some institutional arrangements for raising and educating children. Moreover, it is very hard to see how any such institution could entirely eschew some sort of ethical bond between its members (including obligations of mature children towards those who have been responsible for raising them). But, even if this could somehow be envisaged, it is still harder to see why anyone should want to insist that we *must* reject the thought that membership of such groups can give rise to obligations.[14] For it certainly seems that not only are non-voluntary groups integral to social life, they can (and often do) have value for us. And this is at least sufficient to support the claim that we can intelligibly and defensibly understand ourselves to be ethically bound to non-voluntary groups.

One response might be that while this shows that voluntarism is not the only option, it does not show that it is *membership* of non-voluntary groups that explains any corresponding obligations. In the case of the family, for instance, it may be a principle of gratitude, and with respect to political obligations it could be something like reciprocity or fair play (Dagger, 2000; Klosko, 1992). This is not a point I can respond to fully here; but, without denying that these principles can also play a part in our deliberations about how we should act towards our parents

or our polity, they do not appear to be the whole story. With respect to our parents, they cannot account for one thought that also figures in such deliberations: that this particular person is *my* parent, and it is just this that has moral significance. In thinking about our obligations to parents, characteristically, it is not simply, for example, a matter of assessing which of the many individuals who have helped us in various ways we have most reason to be grateful to. However any putative calculation of gratitude might turn out, it can be enough simply to identify a person as 'my father' or 'my sister' for their moral claims on me (and of course *only* on those who stand in that relationship) to be established. The obligation is partly constitutive of the relationship – a dimension of the shared concern and commonality that *is* that particular relationship. This is not to imply that such a relationship is immune from moral criticism, or that general moral principles or other moral considerations are irrelevant: it is, though, to insist on its own distinctive moral standing.

However, these general points about the value and significance of groups that we do not voluntarily choose to join are certainly not sufficient to clinch the argument for associative political obligations. For one thing, it may be that the polity is not one of the groups to which these arguments are relevant. At best, the argument so far only shows that there can be *some* groups, with respect to which the idea of associative obligations offers a highly plausible explanation for the ethical bonds that characterise them, and it will be rightly said that a family is in many respects a very different sort of group to a polity.[15] Indeed, it would show too much if the argument established that any and every group that one is 'born into' entailed an ethical bond. The argument so far, therefore, needs to be supplemented by showing that a polity is indeed the kind of group from which associative obligations can arise. There are two aspects to this. One is to show how a polity is a form of association that can have value. However, while an argument along these lines is necessary, it is not sufficient. Such an argument is well adapted to showing why we can plausibly think of ourselves as having obligations to *a* polity, but less so to showing that we stand in a special relationship to *our* polity; that is, to the particular polity of which we are members. It can, perhaps, say something about why it will often be contingently true that the polity of which we are members is of greater consequence to us; but it is the wrong sort of explanation to account for the distinctive nature of that relationship. This requires an explanation that focuses not just on the generic good of a polity, but the character of the relationship between *our* polity and us. The latter I refer to as the 'associative argument'. But let me first briefly sketch the argument about the value of a polity, which for convenience can be labelled 'the Hobbesian argument'.

What is it about a polity that could lead us to acknowledge obligations towards it? Or, to put it slightly differently, what explains the notion that the polity is the kind of non-voluntary group to which it is reasonable to think that we could have obligations? One crucial feature (or set of features), I want to suggest, and one that

explains the most distinctive element of the polity as a form of human association, is the need for an effective coercive authority to provide order, security and some measure of social stability. Some anarchists apart, it is almost universally accepted that if human beings are to live together, certainly in groups that extend beyond those that could be held together by bonds of natural affection, there needs to be some reasonably effective regulatory body. The basis of the need for order and security, backed by coercion, is to be found in the many differences between people – differences of belief, morals and interests – which lead to conflict, hostility, insecurity and violence. This is not to assume that human beings are naturally selfish or evil, but only that, on any plausible assumptions about human relations, there will always be contention, partiality, competition, dispute and problems of coordination. Without a body that establishes a set of common rules, which adjudicates when there is disagreement about how they are to be interpreted and applied and which, when necessary, enforces them by protecting people against their violation, there is no realistic, long-term prospect of a minimally secure, let alone prosperous, life together. If human beings are to flourish, on any remotely plausible account of what it is for them to flourish, certain minimal conditions must be established and maintained. Principally, there needs to be a recognisable and viable social order – some measure of predictability and security, some level of reliable expectations and some degree of trust – which enables people to have confidence in and cooperate with each other, and to develop complex and stable social institutions and predictable patterns of behaviour. This, I claim, is the generic good of a polity: it is what gives a polity value, and gives it value for all its members.[16] Of course, many people will want much more from their polity, and many polities will furnish more, but whatever else they want, they will need the generic good of order and security. It is the particular nature of this generic good of a polity that also explains the indispensable role of coercion within a polity. For, the possibility of coercion is *essential* to a polity's *raison d'être*.

In saying that something like this minimum core is essential for a polity to have value, I should not of course be understood to be asserting, *a priori*, that every polity necessarily possesses this minimum core, and that therefore every polity must in fact have value. There are compelling reasons for believing that many polities in human history have failed to meet even this minimal standard, and that some today continue not to do so. Assessments about whether this minimal standard has been met in any particular case can only be a matter of practical judgement, and not of philosophical assertion. But, and this is an important but, to have this value a polity does not need to be very admirable, and certainly does not need to be democratic or just, or even nearly just. A polity may have this minimal value while being, for instance, thoroughly illiberal and undemocratic. In this respect my argument differs fundamentally from that of Ronald Dworkin. For Dworkin, associative obligations of membership are tied to conceptions of fraternity and the integrity of a political community that turn out to be extremely demanding moral requirements. For example, he writes that 'members must

suppose that the group's practices show not only concern but an *equal* concern for all members' (Dworkin, 1986, p. 200, emphasis in original). However, in terms of my argument, this *must* has no warrant: a polity may provide the generic good for all its members without showing an equal concern for each of them. We may hold that such equal concern is morally desirable, but it is not essential for the realisation of the generic, core good of a polity.

It is a mistake, therefore, to tie political obligations generally to any particular favoured political *ideal*, rather than to meeting a minimal threshold of value. Two points in particular are worth making. First, we should remember that most polities in human history have been inegalitarian, and have been neither liberal nor democratic; and, indeed, on any moderately strenuous account of what these involve, probably none, even now, truly possesses these qualities. However, many illiberal and inegalitarian polities have successfully secured the minimal conditions of order and security, and therefore have had value for their members. Second, to agree that a particular polity realises this generic value is not at all to say that people must uncritically accept the polity as it is; that they should not seek to change its political structure or ethos. There is no such conservative agenda implicit in this view. Arguments about the best form of a polity or about how any existing polity should be reformed are not matters of concern here, but proposals for radical political change, and actions to bring such changes about, are certainly not precluded by anything that I have to say. All that is being claimed is, once a polity is accepted as having value, that provides an ethical basis for the claim that it is the kind of association to which members can have obligations: it gives specific substance to the thought that a polity is a non-voluntary group that can have value for its members. And the nature of that value plays a crucial role in explicating, in general terms, the form and content of the associated obligations.

However, in accepting that a polity does need to have at least minimal value for its members, if they are to have obligations to it, I may appear to be disagreeing with another sympathiser with the idea of associative obligations, Yael Tamir. She claims that if 'only morally valuable communities could generate associative obligations, the latter would become a meaningless concept' (Tamir, 1993, p. 102). The context of this remark is one of expressing her dissent from Dworkin's position, whose view I too have rejected. In so far as his argument is the target, then the appearance of a disagreement between us may be misleading. That there may be no real disagreement between us is further supported by the example she gives of the Mafia. This presents no challenge to *my* argument, because there is no reason to think that membership of the Mafia must be without any value. Indeed, historically, one of the reasons the Mafia was able to flourish in parts of the US, for example, was because it provided 'protective services' (and not only against itself!) for otherwise vulnerable Italian Americans. Moreover, it is not entirely clear how exclusive Tamir intends her focus on *moral* value to be: does this allow that a group should have some other sort of value? Presumably, too, she would not want to imply that having moral value actually *disqualifies* a group as

a candidate for associative obligations. However, it may still be that she wants to claim that a non-voluntary group can have no value at all, and yet still generate associative obligations among its members. *If* this is her view then there is indeed a disagreement between us. For, if a non-voluntary group is entirely without value, then I do not see what there is about it that gives rise to moral obligations among members who have not chosen to join.[17]

What seems to motivate Tamir's claim is the worry that, if one concedes that a group must have moral value if it is to generate obligations, there is no useful work left for the concept of associative obligations to do, and it 'would become a meaningless concept'. After all, it may be said, what then explains the obligation is not really membership of the group, but its value – in the case of a polity, the value of order and security. It does not seem to me, though, that this follows; the fact that a group has value may be necessary but not sufficient to explain the obligations, or it may not account for all aspects of the obligations. And so it is; for while this argument seeks to explain what it is about a polity that makes it valuable, as it stands it does not explain why we have a special relationship to the *particular* polity of which we are members. It is generally true that the locus of the order and security that is likely to be of most value to us is that of the polity in which we normally reside and conduct most of our lives. However, this does not take us far enough in understanding the particular bond we have with *our* polity. It is, though, precisely this 'particularity requirement' – our having political obligations specifically to our polity – that is central to political obligation (Simmons, 1979, pp. 31–5). The account so far, therefore, needs to be supplemented by an argument that is addressed specifically to the relationship between a polity and its members.

This is where the 'associative argument' comes in. This argument weaves together notions of group, membership and identity. The general philosophical underpinning of this kind of argument is, perhaps, familiar enough.[18] It is that our self-understanding, and the way that others understand us, is shaped and constrained in fundamental respects by the various social contexts and practices, including our membership of particular social groups, which constitute the fabric of our lives. Only some ways of living and understanding ourselves make sense in the societies in which we live. Contrary to some individualistic fantasies, we cannot be just whatever we want to be. In Jim Jarmusch's film, *Ghost Dog*, the eponymous hero, who lives in contemporary urban America, seeks to live in accordance with the code of 'The Way of the Samurai'. While a few features of this code, in a more or less mangled form, can be adapted to the circumstances in which Ghost Dog finds himself, he cannot *be* a Samurai. This is not just because he does not try hard enough, or because of other failings on his part, or even because the life of a Samurai is a very demanding one to live (although some or all of these may be true). It is simply that the social context for such a life is absent. He cannot adopt the identity of a Samurai because such a way of life is not a meaningful option in late twentieth-century, urban America. But, just as some

social identities are effectively precluded, so others, I want to suggest, 'come with the territory', so to speak. This, of course, is a more controversial claim. Moreover, there is one important difference, which is that it may be possible to find a way of rejecting or escaping such an ascribed identity. However, the very fact that this is the most 'natural' description of what is going on in such cases presupposes that the identity already has some purchase. To renounce or repudiate an identity is always to engage with it in some way or other, even if only negatively. Lest this should appear to concede too much, it is important to grasp that the possibility of rejecting an identity does not presuppose that it must have been voluntarily chosen in the first place. This can be seen clearly enough in the case of the family: the possibility of rejecting my relationship to my family of origin does not imply that I must initially have voluntarily chosen it. And nor is it sufficient merely to *say* that one rejects a particular identity; for we can of course say all kinds of things. If one is serious, however, then one has to act (for the most part) consistently with that rejection. So, in relation to familial bonds, one cannot coherently repudiate any association with one's parents, and then appeal for their aid when in difficulties on the very grounds that they are one's parents.[19] To sever the familial bond, if it is to be more than a merely rhetorical gesture, or adolescent play-acting, *is* to cease relating to other members of the family in a certain sort of way, as *father* or *mother*, as *son* or *daughter* or as *brother* or *sister*. This is a point I shall return to specifically in the context of political obligation later.

Notwithstanding liberal suspicions, the idea that we acquire identities that we have not chosen is neither metaphysically suspect nor morally objectionable. It is simply the way things are, a consequence of being born into the world at a particular time and place, with specific forms of social life in which we find ourselves already situated: we all start from somewhere, and that somewhere is not of our choosing. Alasdair MacIntyre eloquently expresses the point when he writes:

> [W]e all approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity. I am someone's son or daughter, someone else's cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this guild or that profession; I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be good for one who inhabits these roles. As such, I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its own moral particularity (MacIntyre, 1981, pp. 204–5).

Thus, too, are we born into a particular polity; and, as members of that polity, we assume an identity and acknowledge a relationship to its institutions and other members that shows itself in the myriad ways described earlier. So, for instance, if I cease to be a British citizen (perhaps by becoming a member of another state), I come to lose that particular political identity. My relationship to those who were my fellow citizens and what was once my government change. That government is no longer *my* government. I may still approve or disapprove of its actions, but

I am no longer connected to it in the same way. It will no longer be acting in my name. There are claims that I can no longer justifiably make against it, and demands that it can no longer legitimately make of me. Similarly, people who were formerly my *fellow citizens* are such no more; and various kinds of concern or lack of it towards their well-being, and that of my polity, take on a different ethical colouring. In short, one dimension of my life does not remain unchanged if the connections that constitute membership of a polity are severed: my understanding of myself and of my relations to others, and how others see and relate to me, are in various respects transformed.

There are two aspects, or sides, to this associative argument, which might be labelled loosely the 'objective' and 'subjective'. The objective side draws attention to the fact that membership of a polity is normally something that is simply assumed in accordance with the established conventions. Nothing particular needs to be *done* in the vast majority of cases to acquire such membership, which is, in a perfectly straightforward sense, non-voluntary. (The mistake of tacit consent theory lies not so much in the account it gives of the conditions of political obligation as in the attempt to present these as the outcome of an implicit voluntary choice.) For example, membership may be conferred by place of birth or through descent. In this sense the political identity that derives from membership of a polity can be understood as a kind of ascribed status; in the contemporary world, typically that of a citizen. This is one's political identity, determined by membership of a particular polity. Thus one has, say, the status of a British citizen, and this carries with it certain rights and duties, legal expectations and suchlike. The precise content of such rights and duties inevitably changes over time and varies between polities, reflecting differences of circumstance, history, culture, political system and so on. I call this the 'objective' side because from this perspective political identity does not depend upon the sentiments, emotions, attitudes or point of view of the member. But it is real; and it has moral and political implications. These include expectations about behaviour, held by both the government and other members of the polity, including the expectation that the authority of the law be recognised.

If, however, this understanding of membership is not to be one-sided, but shared by both the member and the polity, this ascribed identity will need to be complemented and supported by an acknowledgement of membership by the member. This will involve at least a minimal of sense of belonging to, or identification with, the polity on the part of the member. This is 'subjective' in the sense that it relates to a more or less explicit self-understanding, incorporating moral sentiments, emotions and attitudes. 'To *identify* with a group and its practices is', Andrew Mason says, 'to commit oneself to it in a way that normally involves endorsing its practices and seeking to promote its interests, whilst regarding one's well-being as intimately linked to its flourishing' (Mason, 2000, p. 23, emphasis in original). While broadly agreeing with Mason, the qualification *normally* is significant with regard to identification with a polity. It is a mistake, or

at least very misleading, to draw the connection between identification and *endorsement* at all tightly in this context. First, because a polity is a large and diverse group, endorsement of the many practices that comprise it is always likely to be qualified and partial. It would be a singularly unreflective person who endorsed *all* the practices of their polity. But, secondly, in any case this does not seem necessary, even in groups much more limited than a polity. We are all familiar with the figure of the internal critic, the insider, devoted to the group but forever critical of it. Identification with one's polity can be expressed in a variety of ways, some more minimal and less positive than others, but does not require endorsement of its current practices, although an ongoing and comprehensive refusal to embrace *any* of its practices or values would, to say the least, raise serious questions about whether, or in what sense, someone could truly be said to identify with it.

Generally, endorsement or approval of its practices and values, therefore, is less central to identification with a polity, and hence to political obligation, than might be thought. More important than either to such identification is the acknowledgement of a common political authority: this is the core content of political obligation. This in turn may be embedded in something like a shared narrative, undoubtedly open to differing interpretations and emphases, but in which the history, actions and future of the polity, in general its fate, are seen as connected in a meaningful way with the member's own. One example of the 'mechanisms' through which our sense of membership is constructed and affirmed is through various narratives of identity. These narratives 'situate' us in relation to our polity, and include most obviously stories of our history – authentic and mythical – but can also take many other forms. They are instances of what, following Rogers Smith, can be called 'ethically constitutive stories'. This idea refers to

> [a] wide variety of accounts that present membership in a particular people as somehow intrinsic to who its members really are, because of traits that are imbued with ethical significance. Such stories proclaim that members' culture, religion, language, race, ethnicity, ancestry or history, or other such factors are constitutive of their very identities as persons, in ways that both affirm their worth and delineate their obligations. These stories are almost always intergenerational, implying that the ethically constituted identity espoused not only defines whom a person is, but who her ancestors have been and who her children can be (Smith, 2003, pp. 64–5).

As well as narrowly 'political', these stories can be cast in biological, religious, historical or cultural forms, but in so far as they relate to membership of a polity they help articulate, through defining and redefining, sustaining, modifying and transforming, a sense of political identity. This is typically what happens, for instance, to give some trite examples, when Americans call on the Founding Fathers of the Republic, the French appeal to the ideals of the Revolution or the British summon the Dunkirk spirit. They are stories that are often invoked most dramatically and explicitly when a polity is seen as confronting questions of great moment or in times of crisis, but they are also deployed more prosaically in

familiar and routine situations. Almost every day we reiterate, revise or create small narratives of decline, improvement or continuity in our country, stories of its achievements or failures, of how the actions of our government relate to our past or future, and so on. These nested narratives in which the story of our own life is embedded permit endless variations. There is, though, no guarantee that they will not sometimes be in tension with one another, or conflict with narratives that sustain other identities. Our political identity need not be simple and is always but one of many identities that we are likely to have, and it may well not be the most important to us.

Where we have a polity that manifests its generic value, and both objective and subjective aspects of political identity are in place, we have a situation in which all the conditions of political obligation are fully met. However, one question that may be asked about the two aspects of the associative argument is what happens when they come apart, especially if they radically diverge, as there is no strictly necessary connection between them. They can come apart broadly in two different ways. First, people may identify with an actual or potential polity that is distinct from that of which they are 'objectively' taken to be members. Where such an alternative identification is extensive, persistent and deep then secession or affiliation to another polity is likely to be a live issue. Political obligations for such people are problematic because there is real contestation over membership.[20] Note, however, that to renounce or deny political obligations to one polity in favour of another is not to deny any idea of political obligation, or to deny the validity of the associative account of it: indeed, it can be interpreted as supporting both. Secondly, it may be that people pretty much act in a conformist way, have no political allegiance elsewhere, but identify very weakly if at all with 'their' polity, perhaps having only the most narrowly of instrumental attitude towards it. Here the dangers are apathy, cynicism and political alienation. No doubt a polity can survive a measure of these dysfunctional attitudes, at least under relatively favourable circumstances. However, if extensive, persistent and deep-rooted, the bonds of a polity will in time be corroded; and, ultimately, even its ability to secure the generic good of a polity will be undermined.

In explaining what it is to be a member of a polity, without reference to the specificities of particular polities, it is possible only to pick out very general features of the relationship. As political obligations express one's membership of a particular polity, much will depend upon the characteristics of the polity through which that relationship is defined and sustained; and it is because the substantive traditions, institutions and values of any particular polity shape the precise content of political obligations that relatively little in detail can be said about them at this level of generality. However, because polities do, as we saw earlier, have a certain kind of generic value, at least where they have value at all, in terms of providing some measure of order and security, our political obligations can be expected to focus particularly on the conditions of this good and the specific forms – beliefs, practices and institutions – through which it is realised.

Because they are fundamental to any polity, the defence of the realm, law and the authority of properly constituted governmental bodies are bound to figure prominently in articulating the content of political obligations. Moreover, the nature of the generic good of a polity also explains the specifically coercive aspect inherent in political authority. For coercive authority is fundamental to a polity's realising its generic good, as the experience of both chronically weak and brutally tyrannical polities, in their different ways, demonstrate. In this respect, the traditional formulation of the problem of political obligation as being concerned with obedience to law or government is not altogether mistaken, although it is misleading and too limited. It is misleading because acknowledging political authority is not as such a matter of obeying the law, even if that is how it will typically manifest itself in practice. Political authority is a normative, not a purely behavioural concept.[21] Moreover, an exclusive focus on obedience to the law will often be too narrow to capture all that is at stake in complex discourses of political obligation.[22]

Let me try to clarify a little what is at stake in what I have been arguing by returning to the anarchist, who for the purposes of this argument is construed, in a rough and ready way, as someone who rejects the whole idea of being under any political obligations, at least unless one has made a genuinely voluntary choice so to commit oneself.[23] In terms of the argument here, the political anarchist is very likely to deny the claim that the polity has value, will not identify with it and will reject the ascribed status of member. There is an honourable tradition of political thinking, probably at its apogee in the second half of the nineteenth century but continuing into the present, which rejects the state in particular as always illegitimate. Correspondingly, political anarchists reject the thought that people could have obligations to it, although it can be convincingly argued that they have great difficulty in envisaging a plausible conception of society in which political authority in some shape or form, and therefore something suspiciously like political obligations, do not reappear (Horton, 1992, ch. 5). If my earlier arguments are sound then this will be no surprise. There is reason, too, to think that political anarchists will have to give up a lot else as well. So much of life in even moderately complex societies is inextricably bound up with there being a state that we should have to change fundamentally the way in which we live; which is of course a conclusion that many anarchists have been only too willing to embrace. It is not merely coincidental that classical anarchism often took the form of a reaction against the conditions of modernity, and that it characteristically (although not always) went along with a more small-scale, localised and rural vision of social life. In so far, however, as political anarchists struggle to live their lives in a way that manifests this rejection of the state, there can be integrity to their rejection of political obligation, even if that struggle is sometimes mired in confusion, and others believe such a rejection to be fundamentally misguided.

The position of the philosophical anarchist in a modern state, however, is rather different; or at least so I want to suggest. There is, I believe, an inherent tension

in the position. On the one hand, the philosophical anarchist seems happy to accept the benefits that membership of a particular state confers; and because he does not claim to want to abolish the state, unlike the political anarchist, or even to overthrow the political system, he is excused from engaging in the onerous and discomforting business that actively opposing it, and trying to live a different kind of life, entails. But, he does want to deny any corresponding *general* political obligations, owed by virtue of membership of the polity (or of course on any other basis), although he may often support particular laws for independent moral reasons or on prudential grounds. The viability of such a position, however, is, I suggest, dependent upon most people not adopting it. Both of and not of the polity, the philosophical anarchist can certainly *say* that he denies that any of us have any general political obligations, but is it a principled position that can be coherently lived? Could we plausibly envisage a viable polity comprised entirely of philosophical anarchists? If not, then the philosophical anarchist is caught in a performative, if not a logical, contradiction. Although ostensibly denying that (almost) anyone has any political obligations, the possibility of a viable polity capable of delivering its generic good seems to be dependent on most people not being philosophical anarchists. If this is so, then in this respect the philosophical anarchist's denial of political obligation has lost contact with the role that it plays in our lives, and in so far as the philosophical anarchist has lost contact with the unacknowledged role that it plays in making his *own* life possible, philosophical anarchism seems to manifest a kind of bad faith.

These last remarks are sketchy in the extreme. However, I air them in a brief and underdeveloped way here because they reveal, more vividly than may be apparent from the earlier discussion, why it is, in my view, that political obligation still *matters*. There is something artificial, even perhaps self-indulgent, in the denial that almost anyone has any political obligations. It is a symptom of a way of thinking that is deeply corrosive of our sense of the indispensability and worth of non-voluntary collective entities, and also of our ability and will to sustain them. For good historical, moral and political reasons, we have rightly learned to be suspicious of sanctifying the state; but that does not mean, at least under any conditions approximating to those in which we currently live, that we can do without it.

Whatever the merits or otherwise of these highly speculative closing remarks, my prime purpose has been to show that there can be a theoretically sound and morally unobjectionable conception of associative political obligations. That is, the fundamental claim that I have sought to advance is that there is a robust and cogent understanding of associative political obligations that provides a plausible explanation of how it is intelligible, reasonable and morally defensible for people to think that they have such obligations. The principal arguments for these conclusions have been that political obligations are a concomitant of membership of a particular polity; a polity being a form of association that has as its generic

value the good of order and security. Membership of a polity can be, and usually is, a status that one assumes without any voluntary decision to join, and which is internalised through various forms of identification. The precise content of political obligations will vary according to the character of any particular polity but, because of the nature of the generic good of a polity, political authority backed by the possibility of coercion will inevitably be at its heart. All of these arguments stand in need of refinement and further elaboration, but, at the very least, I hope to have shown that there is still some philosophical life left in the idea of associative political obligations.

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Notes

Earlier versions of this article, some significantly different from the present text, were presented at the Universities of Stirling, Sheffield, Essex, Newcastle, Keele and Pennsylvania. I am much indebted to the participants on these occasions, who pointed out numerous errors and weaknesses, many of which I fear I have not been able to respond to at all adequately. I am especially grateful for written comments or extended discussions to Andrea Baumeister, Thom Brooks, Margaret Canovan, Margaret Gilbert, Nancy Hirschmann, Peter Jones, Duncan Kelly, Ellen Kennedy, Andrew Mason, Glen Newey, Anne Norton, Jonathan Seglow, Rogers Smith, Hidemi Suganami, Albert Weale and two anonymous referees for this Journal.

1 Important criticisms of the idea of associative political obligations are to be found in Green (1988), Simmons (2001), Wellman (1997; 2001), Dagger (2000), Jeske (2001) and Higgins (2004).

2 See Horton (2006, p. 428).

3 In my desire to reject certain kinds of explanation, and my commitment to relying on a largely phenomenological approach to political obligation, I seriously underestimated the need for a positive account in *Political Obligation* (Horton, 1992). As George Klosko comments, 'saying that no explanation is necessary does not constitute an explanation. We still need an account of why the fact that an individual has certain feelings in regard to a particular community in itself entails particular moral requirements in regard to it' (Klosko, 2005, pp. 114–5).

4 This may be so for a variety of more or less complex reasons, including for instance that a polity cannot provide what I later identify as its generic goods – order and security – or because people's claims to membership may be denied by the polity itself.

5 It should be evident from these characterisations that the term 'obligation' is not being used in the narrow or technical sense in which philosophers sometimes distinguish 'obligations' from 'duties'. We could equally use the term 'associative duties', and indeed some philosophers, such as Samuel Scheffler, do (Scheffler, 2001). We could also, as Simmons often does, refer to political obligation as expressing a 'moral bond' between members of a polity.

6 It has been suggested that it would be better to abandon the term 'obligation' altogether in this context. This may be good advice, but I continue to use it because the term does properly situate my concerns within the traditional problematic of political obligation.

7 It should be noted that Gilbert's formulation in terms of dropping 'the presumption that the bonds in question are moral bonds' does not actually *preclude* them being so, but the thrust of her argument appears to caution against so construing them. See also Gilbert (2006, pp. 275–88).

8 'Political obligation' is a term of art without any currency in non-philosophical discourse. It seems that T. H. Green was responsible for introducing the expression into political thought, as recently as the late nineteenth century. In my own use of the term, it is not much more than a handy label for a cluster of ethical relationships and concerns that exist (or so I claim) independently of the label itself.

9 It is because these are already 'moralised' facts that those concerned with the sanctity of the fact/value distinction need not be unduly alarmed. I disagree, therefore, with Philip Soper on this point (Soper, 2002, pp. 173–4). On 'thick' ethical concepts, see Williams (1985, pp. 140–5).

10 Ideally, these rather bare remarks should be supplemented by an account of what might be called an 'ontology' of collective entities. A more robust account of the reality of social groups than that which is normally endorsed by the individualism that underlies much of liberal thought could provide additional support for the idea of associative obligations.

11 For critiques of 'voluntarist' theories of political obligation see Horton (1992, ch. 2) and Simmons (1979, chs 3, 4).

12 It might be apposite to mention at this point that my concern is with the 'standard case', where membership of the polity into which one is born is 'assumed'. It is of course possible to cease to be a member of one polity by being accepted into another, to be expelled from a polity, to hold dual citizenship and so on. Any full account of political obligation would need to say more about these possibilities, but I do not see them as in any way undermining my argument.

13 Of course, almost all of those who reject the idea of associative obligations accept that there are obligations or duties owed to humanity (or other sentient beings) generally, and I do not mean to imply that those who reject associative obligations think that all of morality is to be justified through individual voluntary choices.

14 Clearly this is an issue that deserves more discussion than it receives here. The point that I would most want to stress in such a discussion is that the denial of the significance of non-voluntary collective entities in our lives ultimately rests on a strong individualist prejudice that certainly does not have to be embraced, and which may even be untenable.

15 I employ the comparison between a polity and a family principally to draw attention to two points: both are groups that at least some members do not voluntarily choose to join and both can have value. I am not supposing, implausibly, that the polity is a sort of family writ large. Although I also explicitly drew attention to some disanalogies between polities and families in my earlier work, arguably the comparison played too great a role there (Horton, 1992, pp. 145–51). For a distinct but cognate argument connecting political obligation to other associative obligations, see Utz (2004).

16 This is my response to critics like Leslie Green who claim that 'it is obvious that people differ in their needs, interests, desires and aspirations in ways which make it extremely unlikely that the same set of particular obligations will apply to each. And for that reason it is unlikely that they will have equal reason to bind themselves to obey the state' (Green, 1988, p. 233). And even someone as sympathetic to the idea of associative political obligations as Stephen Utz seems to share a similar view in asserting that 'A general project by all people in a large geographical area for which implicit standards of performance could realistically be posited is patently absurd' (Utz, 2004, p. 304). By contrast, I claim that order and security is a good that is shared by the members of a polity, and we have a pretty fair idea of when we lack it. In fairness, there is an important question that can legitimately be raised at this point that I do not explicitly address: this is whether the polity is uniquely best suited to provide what I call its 'generic good', or whether there is an equally viable, or even better, way in which the good of order and security can be maintained. Some critics, no doubt, will think that this question deserves rather more attention than I give it. It should also be remarked, perhaps, that the idea of 'order and security' would benefit from further discussion than is possible here.

17 Stephen Utz adopts a similar position to mine when he writes that: 'Bad or worthless projects do not require or justify their participants' acceptance of a presiding authority, even if a de facto authority for the projects is available. This is so by virtue of the badness or worthlessness of the projects' (Utz, 2004, p. 303). Although Utz writes of projects, the argument could equally be expressed in terms of membership of groups.

18 See for example MacIntyre (1981), Miller (1995), Scheffler (2001) and Taylor (1989).

19 In her generally fair and acute critique of my *Political Obligation*, Ruth Higgins describes a similar claim there as 'a bizarre behaviouristic twist' to my position (Higgins, 2004, p. 154). On the contrary, however, it seems to me no more than an anodyne commonplace that we judge how seriously people mean what they say, at least in part, by how they act.

20 That the account I offer does not always give a clear 'answer' to the question of whether or not people have political obligations is a strength and not a weakness. The world is a messy place, and my aim is to try to do justice to the complexity of political relations and the phenomenology of the conceptual structures in terms of which people can properly think about them. Moreover, that people will often identify with other groups, including some that we might label 'political', as well as their polity, and that this may give rise to conflicting obligations, is not an objection to the account of political obligation presented here, but a fact of life that simply needs to be acknowledged and incorporated within any adequate account.

21 For an interesting, and in many (although not all) respects congenial, discussion of the relationship between associative obligations and the authority of the law see Utz (2004). Some aspects of my understanding of political authority are discussed more fully in Horton (2005).

22 I have considerable sympathy, therefore, with Bhikhu Parekh when he argues that we need a broader understanding of political obligation than that on which the traditional conception of 'the problem of political obligation' has tended to focus (Parekh, 1993). However, in my view, he risks going too far in the opposite direction, perhaps underestimating the centrality to any polity of coercive authority.

23 For a useful analysis of different forms of anarchism see Miller (1984). For an extensive critique of philosophical anarchism see Gans (1992). For a vigorous defence of the integrity of the philosophical anarchist see Simmons (2001, pp. 102–21).

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