

Associative Political Obligations and the Distributive Objection

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I hope that it will not seem too self-indulgent if I begin by very briefly situating this paper in the context of my work in this area more generally (as, alternatively, it might be presumptuous to assume that you are all already familiar with it). Much of that work has been concerned to articulate an account of political obligation in terms of what have become known as ‘associative obligations’ or ‘associative duties’¹ (Horton, 1992, 2006, 2007(a) and 2007(b)), although I have to confess that I do not seem to have won many converts to this view². The context of much of that work has been, in particular, a critique of philosophical anarchism – a view that denies that most of us have any political obligations specifically to our polity – and especially of the arguments of A. John Simmons, probably the most philosophically sophisticated and tenacious defender of that position (Simmons, 1979 & 2001). Here, though, I want to set aside the debate with philosophical anarchism to consider another kind of criticism that has been levelled against the idea of associative duties generally, and of associative political obligations in particular: this is what has become known, following Samuel Scheffler, to whom I am greatly indebted in this paper, as ‘the distributive objection’ (Scheffler, 2001: Chs. 3-7 *passim*).

This conference provides a particularly appropriate occasion for such an engagement, concerned as it is with the twin themes of political obligation and global justice. For the principal proponents of the distributive objection to associative political obligations or duties tend to be theorists of global justice (e.g. Caney, 2005 & 2008; Pogge, 2002; Tan, 2004). Although, as I shall argue later, one can be genuinely

concerned about global suffering and poverty without necessarily rejecting the claim that there are also robust, independent associative obligations, it is generally true that the stronger the conception of global egalitarianism, the more any associative obligations, and especially associative political duties, are likely to be seen as at best secondary and derivative, if they are thought to have any validity at all. In what follows, therefore, I shall somewhat loosely characterise those who advance the distributive objection as global justice theorists, while referring to those who embrace a strong version of global egalitarianism, such as a global difference principle, as global egalitarians.

It is perhaps worth noting that although, in addition to their scepticism towards associative obligations, there are some commonalities of approach between the kind of philosophical anarchism embraced by Simmons and proponents of the distributive objection, such as a conception of morality dominated by universal abstract principles, they are generally lines of criticism that are not easily combinable (Scheffler, 2001: Ch. 4; Seglow, 2009). For, whereas philosophical anarchists are firmly inclined towards a form of voluntarism about any moral duties that are not based on negative rights to non-interference, defenders of the distributive objection typically endorse a strong theory of positive rights. Thus, for example, for Simmons background morality is conceived largely in terms of a natural right to liberty and negative duties that renders problematic any positive rights that are not grounded in a promise or some other form of voluntary agreement. By contrast, global justice theorists are usually committed to some more or less demanding positive rights and the corresponding duties that are seen flow from that commitment, while defenders of a strong form of substantive egalitarianism are necessarily committed to such morally

demanding positive duties. So, although philosophical anarchists and global justice theorists are both inclined to reject the claim that there are any robust, independent associative political duties, and perhaps any associative duties all, they do so for quite different reasons that tend to pull in opposite directions.

The structure of the paper is fairly straightforward. In the first section, I begin by saying a little about associative duties in general and associative political duties in particular. (You may already have noticed that I switch rather randomly between duties and obligations, and I should make it clear from the start that nothing in my argument hinges on any supposed distinction between obligations and duties.) In doing so, I cannot set out a detailed account either of associative duties in general, or of associative political obligations in particular, and so far as possible I shall mostly be agnostic between differing theoretical explanations of them³. The purpose is only to fix in broad terms the *kind* of view that I want to defend and against which the distributive objection is levelled. In the second section, I then set out the distributive objection. Again, I shall mostly be concerned with generic features of this objection, although I distinguish between stronger and weaker versions of it. In the process I shall also say a little more about its connection to theories of global distributive justice. In the third part I argue that the antagonism between defenders of a moderate, but still robust, conception of associative political duties and at least the proponents of weaker forms of the distributive objection can be mitigated in various ways. The point here is not to deny that there is often a persistent tension between them, but to suggest how they can to some degree be accommodated within a view that is willing to accept the legitimacy of both. In the fourth part I make a few remarks in defence of associative political duties against more radical forms of the distributive objection as

advanced by egalitarian theorists of global justice, although I am aware that I do little more than scratch the surface.

To anticipate and clarify the basic direction of the argument, the view that I wish to articulate and defend is not one in which the global poor have no legitimate moral claims against the wealthy, or, even, one in which those claims *always* have a lower priority than our associative duties. But the position that I am particularly concerned to resist in this paper is the obverse of this. So, I want to insist on the independent claims that our associative duties have on us, and, even when they are admitted, to deny that they must necessarily be seen as subservient to what are taken to be principles of global distributive justice. We have two independent sources of moral claims on us, with no set of priority rules that explain how one set of claims must always take precedence over the other. Both matter; and neither one can be silenced or consigned to permanent inferiority by the other. Of course, in context we frequently have good reasons for leaning towards one rather than the other, but these are matters of practical judgement, and often there is room for rationally irreconcilable differences about they are to be balanced or weighed against each other.

I

The principal source of the general idea of associative duties is eloquently expressed by Samuel Scheffler when he writes:

[O]rdinary moral opinion...continues to see associative duties as central components of moral experience. In so doing, it recognises some claims upon us whose source lies neither in our own choices nor in the needs of others, but rather in the complex and constantly evolving constellation of social and

historical relations into which we enter the moment we are born. For we are, after all, born to parents we did not choose at a time we did not choose; and we land in some region we did not choose of a social world we did not choose. And, from the moment of our birth and sometimes sooner, claims are made on us and for us and to us.... And if, in due course, we inject our own wills into this mix – straining against some ties and enhancing others, sometimes severing old bonds and acquiring new ones – the verdict of common moral opinion seems to be that we can never wipe the slate entirely clean. Our specific historical and social identities, as they develop and evolve over time, continue to call forth claims with which we must reckon, claims that cannot without distortion be construed as contractual in character, and which are not reduced to silence by general considerations of need (Scheffler, 2001: 64).

This is a picture that I assume we can all recognise whatever our attitude is to it. There are, though, a number of points here that are, perhaps, worth spelling out just a little more, although as remarked earlier I cannot be expected to do so in any detail here.

Fundamentally, the idea of associative obligations is derived from a feature of ordinary moral thought that, as Scheffler surely correctly remarks, is very widespread, whether or not it is equally widely endorsed by philosophers. This is that there is a dimension of our moral life that is neither to be understood as based on universal moral principles, such as equality or human rights, nor as resulting from voluntary transactions or commitments, such as promises or oaths of allegiance. Instead, they derive from patterns of relationships with some limited group of people. What is distinctive about associative duties when viewed as an independent source of moral

claims on us (and entitlements) is that they derive from an appreciation of our social embeddedness within different forms of relationship; what Scheffler refers to above as ‘our specific historical and social identities’. These relationships are either entirely unchosen, such as those with parents and, for most of us, with fellow citizens, or are in some significant part not entirely explicable in terms of any choice that may have been involved in the process of acquiring them, such as relations with colleagues and even friends, and that are also not fully explicable in terms of universal moral principles, such as meeting human needs or maximising utility⁴. These relationships are often of great importance to us, some being among the most valuable features of our lives, and are typically thought to make moral demands on us. Moreover, we commonly think that it is often enough to cite these relationships as justifications of our actions; and they play a particularly important role in justifying partiality in our behaviour, explaining why we favour those people who stand in a special relationship to us. For instance, they justify (or are commonly thought to) why I helped this man, who is my father, rather than some other man who may have needed or benefitted from (and even in some sense, perhaps, deserved) my help more: we would think it distinctly odd if, on being told that this man is my father, we were then asked why we thought that was a good reason for ever treating him more favourably. And even if the relationship with my father breaks down such I come to hold that I owe him nothing by virtue of his being my father, this is something that typically needs to be explained, in a way that my not helping just anyone who could similarly benefit from it does not.

It is thought by some, however, that the claim that there are associative *political* duties is especially problematic and less firmly grounded in common moral thought. Yet, although our relationship with compatriots is different in some significant

respects from that with our immediate family, most obviously in the absence of the face-to-face character of the latter, it still seems evident that the idea that we have duties to other members of our polity that we do not owe to others is widespread and powerful. Most clearly this seems to be involved in the duty that people in some circumstances believe themselves to be under to risk their lives to defend their country. It can also be convincingly argued that such a sense of commonality and the duties associated with it play an important role in underpinning institutions like the welfare state (Miller, 1995). The quality of our communal political life matters to us in a variety of ways and for a number of reasons. In any case, the view that citizens have special obligations to the polity of which they are members – what in the literature has become known, following Simmons, as ‘the particularity condition’ (Simmons, 1979) – is agreed to be widespread even by those, like Simmons, who think that it is misplaced.

There is perhaps one final clarificatory point that needs to be made. This concerns the relationship between the rather broad account of associative duties that I am countenancing and the more restricted conception of traditional theories of political obligation, where it is typically understood narrowly as no more than the obligation to obey the law. While I certainly agree about the fundamental importance of the law and coercive institutions in mediating the relationship of citizens, I also think that an excessive concern with ‘obedience’ and an exclusive focus on the law can be misleading (Parekh, 1993). So, on my account, while the traditional concerns of the problem of political obligation continue to figure prominently, as I think they must, they are to be interpreted as part of wider conception of the associative duties that we have as members of our polity. Inevitably, there are quite a few aspects of this brief

account that would need further discussion and refinement in any fuller treatment of associative duties in general and of associative political duties in particular, but I hope that what I have said is just about adequate for the purpose at hand.

II

What, then, is the so-called distributive objection and how is it relevant to associative duties? Again, Scheffler explains very well how this objection bears on associative duties, and especially on associative political duties (i.e. duties to compatriots), when he writes:

The distributive objection challenges the idea that members of affluent societies have special responsibilities to their associates that they do not have to other people. The objection need not deny that there are important differences of character and motivation between those who take such responsibilities seriously and those who act out of crudely self-interested motives. Nevertheless, it insists that special responsibilities serve to validate a natural tendency to partiality or favouritism within groups, and the effect of this form of validation is to confer unfair advantages on the members of wealthy groups while placing other people at an unfair disadvantage (Scheffler, 2001: 85)

At its simplest, the distributive objection holds that associative duties are a mask for unfairness and inappropriate favouritism or partiality, whether or not they are maintained in good faith or as simply a transparent excuse for selfishness.

This complaint if developed specifically with respect to associative political duties in fairly affluent countries is that, if given independent weight, such duties detract from

our universal duties to bring about a just distribution of resources across all human beings. For, if we have a countervailing duty, say, to relieve relative poverty in our own country, this will likely mean that there will be less resources, and perhaps significantly less resources, to redistribute to those in other countries where people are considerably worse off than even the relatively poor in our own. This is unfair because the fact that someone is a member of one society rather than another is irrelevant to their basic human needs, and in itself makes them no more deserving of or entitled to a higher level of resources, welfare or whatever is taken to be the currency of distributive justice (although for the sake of simplicity I shall henceforth only refer to resources).

Thus, while some theories of global justice are open to a wider range of reasons for justifying cross-national inequalities than are others, most tend to be sceptical of the relevance of belonging to a particular polity *per se*, and some global egalitarians in particular are fiercely hostile to it. As we shall see later, these global egalitarians simply reject the significance of political membership to distributive questions entirely, often seeking to ridicule the claim that they could be. However, even those who are not strongly attached to any particular theory of global distributive justice are still likely to feel that the distributive objection has *some* force, and indeed it is certainly not my intention to deny that there is something seriously morally unsatisfactory about a world in which in the richest countries a vast amount of resources are simply wasted or utilised for utterly trivial purposes, while millions of people suffer from gross malnutrition, easily curable diseases and so on. It is not difficult to agree with Thomas Nagel when he writes that: ‘The collective pursuit of prosperity and justice for themselves by the citizens of a nation remains under a

shadow while it goes on in a world like ours, where a minority of nations are islands of relative decency in a sea of tyranny and crushing poverty' (Nagel: 1991: 179). However, and this leads into my next section, accepting this claim need not be incompatible with also accepting the force of associative political duties.

III

I now, therefore, move on to consider whether there is a necessary antagonism between defenders of associative political obligations and proponents of weaker forms of the distributive objection, such that embracing one requires the rejection of the other. In suggesting that there need not be, I am not denying that there are still likely to be some tensions and conflicts between what global justice is thought to require, even on these more modest accounts, and what associative duties may mandate or permit. But I do not subscribe to the view that there is something amiss if there are sometimes conflicts between the various moral considerations that have purchase on us, and even if there are no clear priority rules for always prioritising between them. However, that is not to say that it is not better if we can alleviate the most severe conflicts where this is possible without distorting or undermining the legitimacy of these sometimes rival claims. Nor is it to deny that in many cases where there is a conflict, the balance of reasons may clearly point towards to one set of concerns having priority over the other. Moral conflicts are not always difficult to resolve.

A first, simple point to be made here is that distributive concerns do not exhaust the content of associative political duties. That citizens have a particular duty, say, to participate in the political affairs of their own country need not conflict in any way with principles of global justice. Only if one takes the latter to require a world state

(or to be so demanding that there would be no time left for political involvement in one's own country) would one be even remotely inclined to think that there must be a conflict here. In fact, it is quite hard to imagine a world in which one would have no political duties to one's political community, whatever form that political community might take, although it is fair to say that these might be thought explicable in terms other than those of associative duties. But, my point here is only the fairly modest one that there no *need* for theorists of global justice to deny that there are *any* associative political duties; and as I go on to explain there may even be good reason for them to acknowledge a significant if secondary role for such duties.

This is because, even with respect to distributive concerns, it is possible to advance the claim that associative political duties can act so as to support global justice. For, as Richard Vernon has persuasively argued in an as yet unpublished book, *Cosmopolitan Regard*, given the world as it is and is likely to be for the foreseeable future, the only political agencies that can really effectively bring about global justice are states or multi-national institutions whose effectiveness is entirely dependent upon their backing by states. If this is the case, it can plausibly be argued that it is vitally important that citizens recognise associative duties to their own political community in order that they support their state's role in promoting global justice. In the absence of an effective international taxation agency, for example, the redistribution of funds needed to bring about global justice are only likely to be realisable through state governments, and realistically this requires, for instance, that citizens accept the legitimacy of their taxation by their government. However, whether or not one is entirely convinced by Vernon's argument, and I have only really presented the conclusions rather than the argument, my initial contention that in some areas there

need be no conflict between many associative political duties and the requirements of global justice remains untouched.

A second point concerns the nature or content of many associative duties. So far, I have accepted Scheffler's understanding that these are indeed duties in the sense of strict moral requirements; and of course they often are (Seglow, 2009). However, many of what might be called associative *duties* are rather more like permissions than strict moral duties (although it would be a mistake, in my view, to think of them as, therefore, merely supererogatory). For instance, in our ordinary understanding of them, in many circumstances they allow us to favour our own family, friends or compatriots but do not in any strong sense require us to do so; or, they are highly indeterminate and open-ended about how far we are *required* to favour those people with whom we are in associative relationships. What I mean by this is, for example, that even keenest defenders of associative duties might not want to say that someone who weighs their duties to the world's destitute much higher relative to her own family than is the norm necessarily acts wrongly. Of course, there is for most of us something wrong with a Mrs Jellyby, whom Dickens memorably portrays in *Bleak House* as being so concerned with poor children in Africa that she comprehensively neglects her own. However, a parent who takes the view that it is inappropriate to lavish vast material resources on her child, in the form for instance of expensive toys or designer clothing, which most moderately wealthy parents tend to devote to their children, surely does nothing wrong; and nor does a parent who does not want to stack up an inheritance for their child but prefers to give the money to agencies concerned with reducing poverty in poor countries: money is a poor measure of parental love and concern. Indeed, it is just as consistent for the defender of associative duties to admire such behaviour as it

is for the enthusiast of global justice. And, equally, even the theorist of global justice is likely to think that it is permissible for a parent to devote more attention to her child than to other children (although they may wish to give an alternative justification for it than one in terms of associative duties). So, again, while the theorist of global justice and the defender of associative duties may well disagree about the point up to which favouring one's own children is permissible, they need not do so, and even when they do disagree it is pertinent that in doing so neither is necessarily committed to rejecting the legitimacy of the other's concerns.

It might, though, be conceded that this is true of familial duties but be denied in relation to associative political duties. And it does appear to be the case that some political duties, and particularly those encompassed within the rather narrow traditional conception of political obligation as being about obedience to the law, cannot be understood as permissions. Some political duties, therefore, are quite strict and specific in what they require of us (Klosko, 1998). However, two points are relevant here. First, political obligation in the traditional sense does not obviously conflict with the idea of global distributive justice. The claim that we are all under a general obligation to obey the laws of our state does not of itself appear to have any specific implications for global justice. And, as alluded to earlier, if a state were actually pursuing policies that promoted global justice then such political obligations could also work in favour of global justice. Secondly, not all political duties are as determinate or strict as this: there are many 'optional' ways in which we can discharge our responsibilities as members of our polity. This takes us back to our earlier point about many associative duties, including some associative political duties, being more open-ended and/or less strict.

A third, related point, but distinct from the second, concerns the limits of associative duties. Even the most determined advocate of associative duties will want to insist on their inherent limits, and even if there is no precise criterion or agreement about exactly where these limits lie, some things are clearly unacceptable. No defender of associative duties would claim that they make it permissible for, let alone require, people to do absolutely anything to promote the interests of their family, friends or fellow citizens. That would be absurd. Nor are we just talking about prohibitions on murder and such like. In a political context, for example, public officials (at least in societies where there is no legitimate nepotistic political culture) are not entitled to favour their own relatives in awarding government contracts or in making other official decisions. Associative duties have an independent source, but they do not exist entirely apart from the rest of morality. Rather they inhabit our moral life in the context of other relevant considerations, which often shape and discipline them; although, to repeat the point, this does not mean that associative duties are either entirely explicable in terms of these other moral considerations, or are necessarily *always* subservient to them. Sometimes it is associative duties that shape other parts of morality.

Finally, it is worth noting that there are other arguments as to why rich countries should do much more to assist poorer ones, which if accepted should have considerable moral leverage. Here, I shall mention only two; both familiar enough in the literature (e.g. Pogge, 2002). The first is an historical argument that stresses the benefits that rich countries have often reaped through a history of colonialism and exploitation. This argument draws attention to the role of rich states in the causal

explanation of why some states are rich and others poor. While this is neither likely to be the only explanation, nor to be uncontroversial, if such an argument is accepted it provides a strong reason in terms of reparation for past wrongs for rich states to do more. And a similar argument can be built around the claim that the current system of world trade is fundamentally unfair, only here we are not talking about compensation for wrongs that we have done in the past, or not only those, but righting wrongs that we continue to do. Again this claim is far from uncontroversial, but the point is that there are arguments that would push in the same direction as the distributive objection, but that do not fundamentally challenge the idea that we also have associative political duties. Indeed, interestingly, both these arguments might be thought to be best expressed in terms of associative political duties in that the wrongs that need correcting are in both cases perpetrated by or through states; so, the argument might continue, we all have a duty, specifically as members of the agency responsible for or the beneficiary of the wrongs, to commit to whatever remedial action is appropriate.

Taken together, these considerations, and they are certainly not exhaustive, all support the view that it is possible to combine fairly robust views about associative duties with a concern for global poverty and deprivation. It is possible to be genuinely committed to both without necessarily rejecting one or the other. This is not to claim that all the tensions between them can be eliminated – and this is where I disagree with some global justice theorists, like K.-C. Tan (Tan, 2004), who have sought to allow associative political duties, but only at the price of their always being subsidiary to the principles of global distributive justice – but then difficult moral choices are

something with which we should be familiar and that have to be negotiated practically as best we can.

IV

In the final substantive part of the paper I want briefly to address the challenge of the distributive objection in its more virulent form, and in particular as advanced by those I have termed ‘global egalitarians’, although some of them at least might prefer the term cosmopolitans⁵. One argument on which I specifically want to focus, and that is much favoured by some global egalitarians, is the claim that distributive distinctions based on membership of a political community must be morally arbitrary. Thus Charles Jones says of what he calls ‘compatriot favouritism’ that it is ‘clearly lacking any general, defensible rationale’ (Jones, 1999: 134). And Simon Caney⁶, on whom I shall focus my comments, provides a belligerent, recent example of the dismissive approach when he writes that:

the thesis that the borders of some, or all, principles of distributive justice are defined by the borders of the state needs to show why state membership is morally relevant.... For it is hard to see how state membership could have the type of normative significance ascribed to it...Which state someone belongs to, is in very many cases a matter of luck. It is a matter of fortune whether one is born into Berkshire or Bihar and it seems highly perverse to argue that such facts should affect what people are entitled to. Why, one might ask, should being born into one state have such a tremendous impact on people’s prospects in life’ (Caney, 1998: 505)?

Well, perversely or not – although I am somewhat consoled by the fact that if it is perverse, it is a perversity probably shared with the majority of the human race – let me try to respond to what is clearly intended as a rhetorical question. In doing so, I want to make three points.

First, virtually everything about us is arbitrary in the sense deployed by Caney. When I was born; which parents I was born of; whether I was born healthy, intelligent, charming, or none of these; that I was born at all; and so on, are all arbitrary in the sense that they are contingent facts about me that could have been otherwise⁷. They are also arbitrary in the sense that I cannot be said to deserve any good or ill fortune that I may have had specifically with respect to these; and this is an important point in that the temptation to argue that we do somehow deserve our good fortune is one that ought to be firmly resisted⁸. However, even once that temptation is resisted, and even if, as here, we are dealing with what has become known as ‘brute luck’, nothing in particular necessarily follows. Some people are lucky or fortunate and others unlucky or unfortunate: that’s just a fact. And this leads on to my second point

This is that it is far from obvious, even allowing that these differences are arbitrary, that it is somehow our duty to try to reconstruct the world so as to eliminate all their adverse consequences. Global egalitarianism is not just the position that falls out from acknowledging the contingency of many features of our circumstances that affect our life chances. Nor, it should be added, does it simply fall out from some uncontroversial principle of moral equality. Again, it is clearly impossible here to examine in any detail various arguments for global egalitarianism, which are many and varied, but one point that can legitimately be made is that global egalitarianism

does indeed stand in need of the support of such arguments. Moreover, any justification if it has any implications for the real world will have to pay attention not only to the realms of ideal theory, but to what are the likely consequences are of trying to implement such an ideal in a situation where the vast majority of the people who would need to be supportive if it is to be effective simply do not subscribe to such a view or anything like it. And, surely, political philosophy should have something to say about political agency in such a context. But I shall have a little more to say in this vein later.

Thirdly, states are, or at least can be, political communities. A polity is not *just* an arbitrary set of geographical borders, although of course the geographical borders of states often are arbitrary. There is a common life in the sense that members share a common set of institutions and laws, a form of government and often to some degree a broader culture and history, to which they attach value and which play an important role in structuring their lives. The polity, when it is functioning effectively, is a source of stability and security, and also for many of its citizens a rich source of identity. Moreover, it is not just a matter of sharing the benefits of membership, but also the burdens, which in extreme circumstances can include the expectation of a willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice. These features are what distinguish members of a particular polity from those who are not. The precise content of what it means to be a member of a political community will naturally vary to some degree according to the nature of the particular polity. It, therefore, seems to me to be one of the sillier forms of reductivism or trivialisation to pretend that political communities are no more than an arbitrary arrangement of borders.

There is also at the heart of my disagreement with theorists like Caney a difference about what political philosophy should be about. Thus Caney says that what he calls ‘the statist scope thesis’:

takes it as given that there should be a system of states. It then argues that there are distributive principles that apply solely to those included within the state. This line of reasoning is troubling in a number of respects. First, before we accept this kind of argument we need an argument as to why there should be states in the first place...Since such momentous normative implications (are said to) follow from statehood it is incumbent on the proponents of the *Statist Scope Thesis* to provide a defence of the state’ (Caney, 2008: 5006).

But, why, it may be asked in return, is it necessary to *justify* the state in the first place? That is what we have; and even though a world of states has not been in existence forever, and may well at some point be replaced by something else at some point in the future, it is far from obvious that the state is not a sufficiently well-entrenched part of the current political landscape for its existence to be taken as given. Secondly, if the existence state needs to be justified, why pick only on the state? Why not seek the justification of anything and everything. Can we choose to imagine whatever world we like? Indeed, if one wants to go along this route, why should there be people? What’s the *argument*? Thirdly, does this, though, mean that we are succumbing to an inherent conservatism (Caney, 2008: 507)? I do not think that it does. We have to make some assumptions about the political world for political philosophy to get off the ground at all. It is also a *sine qua non* of politics, if not political philosophy, that we have to at least start from where we are. And if our interest is in changing the world, as global egalitarians claim they want to, then is it not utopian in the worst sense simply to think that something like the state can be

theorised out of existence, without a proper consideration of how this is to be accomplished or the likely consequences in reality of attempting it? Moreover, even if I am wrong about this, and the charge of conservatism is thought to stick, why is that necessarily an *objection*; any more, say, than it would be to assert that global egalitarianism is inherently radical? Finally, and at this point I find it hard to restrain my aspiration, there *are* plenty of arguments in favour of the state as a form of political organisation. I gestured earlier to such an argument in terms of the value that a state may have for its members, but similar and other arguments have been developed in far greater detail. Such arguments may or may not be thought persuasive, but it is just disingenuous to pretend that none have ever been seriously advanced.

V

In this paper I have sought to evaluate in general terms the distributive objection to associative political obligations. In part that evaluation has taken the form of a rejection of the claim that being seriously concerned with global suffering and deprivation is incompatible with a commitment to a robust conception of associative political obligations. This does not mean that there are no hard judgements that need to be made in weighing these demands on us. But it also seems clear to me that if one accepts that there are any positive duties of global justice, to alleviate severe suffering for example, then the demands of associative obligations are not sufficient to justify the pathetic level of resources that rich countries currently devote to reducing poverty and illness in much poorer countries. This is not to say that there is a precise metric that can be brought into play to assess exactly how much is enough, but no one who thinks that there is a duty to address such suffering could possibly honestly believe

that more should not be done in this regard. For doing so need have no significant impact on our associative political duties; or, it might be added, on any of our other associative duties. But, note that I have expressed this in the conditional form. For I have not sought to defend the claim that we do have global duties of this sort: that is another argument. However, for those who think that there are no positive duties at all to alleviate global suffering and deprivation, the distributive objection will have no force and the discussion undertaken here is largely, if not entirely, otiose.

The other part of my response, specifically to those whom I have labelled global egalitarians, has been more robust. And here it is not possible entirely to bracket the merits of the claims of global equality. However, I have still largely sought to avoid criticising the idea of global egalitarianism *per se*. Again, to consider the merits of global egalitarianism as a moral demand would require another paper, or more likely a book. Instead, what I have attempted is to say a little by way of vindicating the claims of associative political duties against their dismissal by global egalitarians. If that defence is at all effective and one wants to continue to be a global egalitarian then one is likely to experience a deep and fundamental tension between acknowledging our associative duties and the demands of global equality. I have no suggestions about how to deal with the conflict that arises from this tension: it may simply be that this is one of those conflicts that have to be lived with, and that we negotiate in practice as best we can. What I do want to insist on, though, is that for those of us for whom associative political duties are a meaningful and important part of our lives, which I venture to suggest is most of us, they are not so overwhelmed by the juggernaut of global justice that we have to deny them a significant place in the moral geography of our world.

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¹ Ronald Dworkin appears to have been responsible for coining the term 'associative obligations'. He defines them as 'special responsibilities social practice attaches to membership in some biological or social group, like the responsibilities of families or friends or neighbours' (Dworkin, 1986: 195-6).

² Extensive and thoughtful critiques of my views can be found in Simmons, 2001: Ch. 7; Higgins, 2004: 142-155; Mokrosinska, 2007: Ch. 4; and Vernon, 2007.

³ Margaret Gilbert offers a particularly elaborate and sophisticated explanation in terms of her account of 'joint commitments' (Gilbert, 2006). See also: Hardimon, 1994; Jeske, 1996; Mason, 1997; and Honohan, 2001.

⁴ This is not to deny that some philosophers have sought to explain many associative duties in voluntarist terms or as derivative from universal principles, but it is (stipulatively) a defining feature of the conception of associative duties that are of concern here that they cannot be entirely explained in either of these ways.

⁵ I mostly avoid the term 'cosmopolitan' in the context of the distributive objection, as it seems to me to carry a good deal of extra baggage with it.

⁶ In fairness to Caney, he makes a large number of points very briefly, and I here only consider a couple of them.

⁷ I simply leave aside whatever complex questions that this way of expressing matters raises about personal identity.

⁸ It seems to me that any attempt to justify existing distributions in terms of some notion of desert is not only doomed to fail, but plays into the hands of global egalitarians. For the underlying assumption of such claims seems to be that if distributions are not justified by desert then they must be unjustified in the sense of illegitimate. That is an assumption I would want to resist.