

Associative Responsibilities, Or Reconceptualizing Political Obligation

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I defend the claim that individuals are not necessarily mistaken to believe themselves bound, in some way, to particular political societies. First, I concede to philosophical anarchism, and I accept that states are without legitimacy rights, and that citizens are without political obligations. Rather than admit that citizens are not bound to states, though, this concession actually clears away some of the conceptual debris, and, thus, it enables us to focus more clearly on other ways in which individuals can be bound to particular political societies. Next, I argue that, if we take seriously the right of self-government, it is not unreasonable to believe individuals have a responsibility to belong to associations which help foster and develop their capacities to exercise this right. Assuming that political societies are among such associations, we can then think of this responsibility as one of the moral requirements capable of grounding the duties of citizenship. Finally, I consider how this responsibility measures up against several possible objections, and I argue that it not only provides grounds for believing individuals are bound to particular political societies, but that it also leaves room other moral principles, as well as the political realities these other moral principles tend to ignore.

Associative Responsibilities, Or Reconceptualizing Political Obligation

On November 4th, 2008, President-Elect Barack Obama addressed an estimated one hundred thousand supporters, who had gathered to hear him speak at a rally in Grant Park, Chicago, Illinois.¹ Throughout his victory speech, Obama spoke, again and again, of “change,” a word that had become one of the leitmotifs of his presidential campaign.² “It’s been a long time coming,” Obama said, “but tonight, because of what we did on this day, in this election, at this defining moment, change has come to America ... That’s the true genius of America, that America can change. Our union can be perfected. And what we’ve already achieved gives us hope for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.” Amidst these expressions of hope and change, though, Obama was careful to caution his supporters: “This victory alone is not the change we seek; it is only the chance for us to make that change ... And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were. It can’t happen without you, without a new spirit of service, a new spirit of sacrifice. So let us summon a new spirit of patriotism, of responsibility where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves, but each other ... Let us remember that ... [i]n this country, we rise or fall as one nation; as one people.”³

For some, this “new spirit” might indeed come as a welcome change from “the way things were”. For others, though, this talk of “patriotism” and a “responsibility” to “our union” as “one nation” and “one people” may sound like little more than an old idea dressed up in rhetoric and sophistry. What gives Obama *the right* to implement policies that would require Americans to participate in “service” to their country?⁴ And why would Americans have *an obligation* to make such a “sacrifice” for their country? A. John Simmons, for

¹ http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/O/OBAMA_RALLY_CHICAGO (8 Nov 2008)

² <http://www.barackobama.com/index.php> (08 Nov 2008)

³ <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/president/speeches/obama-victory-speech.html#> (8 Nov 2008)

⁴ <http://www.barackobama.com/issues/service/> (08 Nov 2008)

example, concludes his *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, by claiming that “citizens generally have no special political bonds which require that they obey and support the governments of their countries of residence. Most citizens have neither political *obligations* nor ‘particularized’ political *duties*, and they will continue to be free of such bonds barring changes in political structures and conventions ... Insofar as we believe ourselves to be tied in some special way to our country of residence, most of us are mistaken ... If [this position] runs counter to normal feelings about the citizen-state relationship, I think there are better explanations for this fact than the falsity of my conclusion [concerning political obligation]. For what belief can better serve the interests of one’s political leaders than the belief that all are specially bound to support their government and obey the law?”⁵

In this paper, contra Simmons, I defend the claim that individuals are not necessarily mistaken to believe themselves bound, in some way, to particular political societies. First, I concede to philosophical anarchism, and I accept that states are without legitimacy rights, and that citizens are without political obligations. Rather than admit that citizens are not bound to states, though, this concession actually clears away some of the conceptual debris, and, thus, it enables us to focus more clearly on other ways in which individuals can be bound to particular political societies. Next, I argue that, if we take seriously the right of self-government, it is not unreasonable to believe individuals have a responsibility to belong to associations which help foster and develop their capacities to exercise this right. Assuming that political societies are among such associations, we can then think of this responsibility as one of the moral requirements capable of grounding the duties of citizenship. Finally, I consider how this responsibility measures up against several possible objections, and I argue that it not only provides grounds for believing individuals are bound to particular political societies, but that it also leaves room other moral principles, as well as the political realities these other moral principles tend to ignore.

EXPLAINING PHILOSOPHICAL ANARCHISM

Although philosophical anarchism has been the target of recent criticism,⁶ the present discussion relies upon the terminology developed and deployed by Simmons to defend his

⁵ A. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 192-195, original emphasis.

⁶ Cf., William A. Edmundson, *Three Anarchical Fallacies: An Essay on Political Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Chaim Gans, *Philosophical Anarchism and Political Disobedience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and John Horton, *Political Obligation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1992), chap. 5.

own position.⁷ It is fitting to defer to Simmons's terminology, not only because he is a self-described anarchist, but also because he is a prolific critic: for nearly thirty years, his anarchism has posed a constant challenge to contemporary theories which have attempted to defend justified political obligation.

According to Simmons, anarchists are united in the central claim that "all existing states are illegitimate."⁸ Legitimacy, here defined, is "the complex moral right [the state] possesses to be the exclusive imposer of binding duties on its subjects, to have its subjects comply with these duties, and to use coercion to enforce the duties,"⁹ and "consists in a certain, normally limited kind of authority or right to make binding law and state policy."¹⁰ The logical correlate of this legitimacy right, political obligation, is "the (defeasible) individual obligation to comply with the lawfully imposed duties that flow from [the state],"¹¹ and includes "the obligation of citizens to obey the law and to in other ways support the state."¹² Political legitimacy and obligation arise from citizens entering into a moral relationship with the state, for example, the former consenting to the authority of the latter. Simmons contrasts this notion of legitimacy with other familiar notions, such as institutional stability and conformity to the rule of law, arguing that these notions and others like them are better understood as grounds for justification and not legitimacy. Whereas stability and lawfulness are qualities that may speak to the state's goodness or desirability, they say nothing about the relationship which gives the state authority over its citizenry.¹³

The most basic division between anarchist theories, then, is between those that judge the state's legitimacy on *a priori* grounds and those that judge it on *a posteriori* grounds. *A priori* anarchism holds that the state is necessarily illegitimate due to an essential flaw, fundamental to its character or conduct. If the anarchist is committed to voluntarism, he may argue that the state is, by definition, brutally coercive; if he is committed to egalitarianism, that it is unnecessarily hierarchical; or if he is committed to communitarianism, that it is hostile to the existence of authentic, meaningful communities; etc. Accordingly, there never

⁷ A. John Simmons, "Philosophical Anarchism," in *Justification and Legitimacy: Essays on Rights and Obligations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 102-121, and *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, chap. 8.

⁸ Simmons, "Philosophical Anarchism," 103.

⁹ A. John Simmons, "Justification and Legitimacy," in *Justification and Legitimacy: Essays on Rights and Obligations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 130.

¹⁰ Simmons, "Philosophical Anarchism," 106.

¹¹ Simmons, "Justification and Legitimacy," 155.

¹² Simmons, "Philosophical Anarchism," 106.

¹³ Simmons, "Justification and Legitimacy," 130-135.

could be a legitimate state. *A posteriori* anarchism, on the other hand, holds that the state's legitimacy is contingent upon its actual, manifest character or conduct. An anarchist holding such a view might argue that, in theory, the state could be a legitimate institution, but that no existing state has ever approximated the theoretical requirements. Such an anarchist may appeal to the same principles which *a priori* anarchists appeal to, e.g., voluntarism, egalitarianism, communitarianism, etc., or he may simply find *a priori* anarchist accounts of the state's illegitimacy unconvincing.¹⁴

In addition to the divide between *a priori* and *a posteriori* anarchism, Simmons makes a further division between weak and strong anarchist theories. Both weak and strong anarchism hold that, because all existing states are illegitimate, and, thus, all citizens without political obligations, individuals have a right to disregard the laws and policies of the state. However, strong anarchism also holds that the illegitimacy of the state entails a duty to oppose the state's laws, its policies, and, where possible, its existence. The weak anarchist, then, claims that the state is just a "powerful bully" whom we are free to ignore, whereas the strong anarchist claims that we ought to oppose the very existence of all such bullies.¹⁵

Regardless of the anarchist's position, whether *a priori* or *a posteriori*, weak or strong, the aforementioned right and duty are not the only reasons for action, nor are they necessarily final or absolute. Anarchists accept, if not insist, that individuals can and do have further obligations and duties, as well as other moral and prudential reasons for acting; moreover, any and all such reasons can be taken on a balance-of-reasons approach, as opposed to being treated as final or absolute. If the anarchist follows the latter approach, and treats his right to disregard or duty to oppose as an absolute reason for acting, he will feel perfectly justified in disregarding the law or opposing the state, without further consideration or justification. If he follows the former approach, however, he will feel compelled to weigh all of the appropriate reasons for acting against one another, before committing himself to action.¹⁶

According to Simmons, the most defensible anarchist position, the position that is "not just distinctive and initially plausible, but also correct," is an *a posteriori*, weak anarchism that accepts the balance-of-reasons approach.¹⁷ Thus, what is distinctive about the philosophical anarchist is that he denies that the state's illegitimacy entails a strong, absolute duty of opposition. Despite its illegitimacy, there may be moral reasons for not opposing the

¹⁴ Simmons, "Philosophical Anarchism," 104-106.

¹⁵ Ibid, 107.

¹⁶ Ibid, 107-108.

¹⁷ Ibid, 110.

state, for instance, if it is just or nearly just, or if its laws prohibit wrongful acts. All things considered, then, the anarchist cannot plausibly argue that he always ought to oppose such states. Similarly, it would be wrongheaded for the anarchist to argue that the state's illegitimacy is reason enough to oppose it: illegitimacy simply entails the lack of authority to make binding law and state policy. Although the anarchist could argue that he has a duty to oppose the state, this duty would have to be grounded in something more than the state's illegitimacy, for example, it being thoroughly unjust. And, finally, the anarchist must allow for at least the possibility of legitimacy, otherwise he risks arriving at potentially odd and embarrassing conclusions. For example, the *a priori* anarchist, who appeals to voluntarist principles, but is forced to reject even an ideal state that is founded in a genuinely consensual social contract.¹⁸

ACCEPTING PHILOSOPHICAL ANARCHISM

Accepting the claim that states are without legitimacy rights, and that citizens are without political obligations, may seem fatal to defending the belief that individuals are bound to particular political societies. However, by clarifying the scope of this claim, we can see just how far Simmons's anarchism really goes towards proving that citizens are not bound to states, and we can determine just how useful Simmons's notions of political legitimacy and obligation really are for understanding the relationship between individuals and particular political societies.

Although Simmons argues that states are without legitimacy rights, and that citizens are without political obligations, it would not be inaccurate to describe him as a consent theorist. To borrow a phrase from his *On the Edge of Anarchy*, we could call him a Lockean anarchist.¹⁹ Like Locke, and consent theorists more generally, Simmons accepts that the principles of consent and fidelity are the clearest grounds for political legitimacy and obligation.²⁰ But unlike Locke, and most other consent theorists, Simmons acknowledges the obvious problem with these principles, namely, that consent and fidelity cannot explain how citizens are bound to existing states, because few individuals have ever consented to the authority of the state.²¹

¹⁸ Ibid, 108-112. Cf., Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

¹⁹ A. John Simmons, *On the Edge of Anarchy: Locke, Consent, and the Limits of Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 248-269.

²⁰ Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, 190.

²¹ Ibid, 57-100.

The principles of consent and fidelity nonetheless retain an explanatory role, even though they are deprived of their justificatory force. Simmons explains, “At least since Locke’s impassioned defense of the natural freedom of men born into nonnatural states, the doctrine of personal consent has dominated both ordinary and philosophical thinking on the subject of our political bonds.”²² This doctrine of personal consent holds that individuals cannot acquire obligations to support and comply with the governments of particular political societies unless they have knowingly, intentionally, and voluntarily granted the state a right to create binding laws and policies. The assumption supporting this claim is twofold, and it concerns the aforementioned natural freedom of individuals, and the nonnatural states into which they are born.²³

First, it is assumed that individuals, *qua* rational persons, are capable of possessing the full complement of rights and duties that are prescribed by natural law, which is in some sense objective and discoverable through the exercise of reason. Of particular importance, individuals possess a right of self-government, which entails the freedom to act as one chooses, without undue interference, so long as one does not violate the bounds of natural law. Barring such violations, this right can only be restricted by a deliberate and voluntary act, such as consent, which generates both an obligation to perform some other act, as well as a correlative right to the performance of this other act. Second, it is assumed, quite simply, that political societies are artificial and coercive arrangements, which lack the rights, and presumably the duties, that are prescribed by natural law. Only individuals are capable of possessing these rights, and only they are capable of empowering political societies by surrendering a portion of these rights, thus generating a new right to create and enforce laws and policies, as well as a correlative obligation to comply with the enforcement of these laws and policies. This assumption dovetails with the first to support the doctrine of personal consent: if the natural state is one of freedom, circumscribed only by the bounds of natural law, and political society is a nonnatural state, which limits this freedom through coercive government, then political obligations cannot be natural and can only be justified by willingly acceptance. Such willing acceptance not only lends moral content to our political relationships, it also ensures that our personal interests are being served and that we are safeguarded from injury by the state. Individuals, then, have an obligation to support and comply with the governments of their particular political societies, if, and only if, they have

²² Ibid, 57.

²³ Ibid, 75-77.

knowingly, intentionally, and voluntarily consented to the authority of the state. Since they have not, states are without legitimacy rights, and citizens are without political obligations²⁴

In response, we can make two points, which should help clarify the scope of this claim. First, Simmons's notion of the political relationship only explains why political societies do not have a *voluntarily* generated, moral *right* to create and enforce laws and policies, and why individuals do not have a *voluntarily* generated, moral *obligation* to support and comply with the creation and enforcement of such laws and policies. Beyond this, it explains very little, at least in regard to the relationship between individuals and particular political societies. Second, Simmons's notion of the political relationship is neither necessary nor sufficient to explain why political societies may be *justified* in creating and enforcing laws and policies, or why individuals may have reasons beyond political legitimacy and obligation to support and comply with the creation and enforcement of such laws and policies. Simmons's anarchism commits him to the belief that other moral and prudential considerations can both justify the creation and enforcement of laws and policies, as well as provide reasons to support and comply with the creation and enforcement of such laws and policies. What is more, and, perhaps, more telling, even if political societies possessed legitimacy rights, and individuals possessed political obligations, these other moral and prudential considerations could restrict, and, at the very least, would conflict with, the exercise of legitimacy rights, and the fulfilment of political obligations. In short, talking about political legitimacy and obligation is only one, very limited way of explaining the relationship between individuals and particular political societies. It is not the only way, and, given the realities of political life, it may not be the most useful way either.

EXPLORING ASSOCIATIVE RESPONSIBILITIES

Simmons's emphasis upon voluntarism and the right of self-government, in regard to the relationship between individuals and particular political societies, reflects an exceptionally narrow view of moral and political life, a view that can be characterized by what Charles Taylor calls "the primacy of rights." According to Taylor, "Theories which assert the primacy of rights ... accept a principle ascribing rights to men as binding unconditionally, binding, that is, on men as such. But they do not accept as similarly unconditional a principle of belonging or obligation. Rather our obligation to belong to or sustain a society, or to obey

²⁴ Ibid, 61-70.

its authorities, is seen as derivative, as laid on us conditionally, through our consent, or through its being to our advantage.”²⁵

Taylor argues that such a view of moral and political life is woefully incomplete. Ascribing natural rights depends upon affirming the worth of certain capacities, which are necessary for the exercise of these rights, and, without which, the ascription of these rights would not make sense. To ascribe the right of self-government, on Taylor’s account, is to affirm that we are morally required not to interfere with the actions of individuals, because they have developed certain threshold capacities for rationality, which entail an ability to govern themselves, within the bounds of natural law, according to some chosen conception of the good life.²⁶ Taylor adds, though, if ascribing natural rights depends upon affirming the worth of certain capacities, then it is not unreasonable to believe that this affirmation could have other consequences, such as affirming a moral requirement to foster and develop these capacities in others and ourselves. What is more, any proof that these capacities are only fostered and developed within certain kinds of associations, for example, political societies, would provide reasons to believe that individuals have a responsibility to belong to these kinds of associations, to particular political societies. For Taylor, such a responsibility would be just as important as our natural rights, and it would not make sense to ascribe natural rights without ascribing such a responsibility, or claiming that such a responsibility derived its moral importance from surrendering a portion of our natural rights to particular political societies.²⁷

Although such a responsibility would not ground legitimacy rights, or political obligations, it is conceivable that it could ground certain “positional duties,” specifically, what Simmons refers to as the “duties of citizenship.” Simmons defines positional duties as “tasks or performances which are intimately connected with some particular office, station, or role which an individual can fill ... An individual comes to have a positional duty only by filling the position to which it is tied, and thereby coming to have certain performances expected or required of him within the scheme in question.”²⁸ “The existence of a positional duty,” according to Simmons, “is a morally neutral fact. If a positional duty is binding on us,

²⁵ Charles Taylor, “Atomism,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 188.

²⁶ Cf., A. John Simmons, *The Lockean Theory of Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 79-87.

²⁷ Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 190-200.

²⁸ Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, 12-13.

it is because there are grounds for a moral requirement to perform the positional duty which are independent of the position and the scheme which defines it”²⁹

We can think of the duties of citizenship, then, as the requirements that individuals are expected to recognize, as citizens, for example, to support and comply with the creation and enforcement of laws and policies, to be good citizens, etc. Assuming that political societies are among the kinds of associations which help foster and develop the capacities to exercise the right of self-government, we can think of associative responsibilities as one of the moral requirements capable of grounding these duties. What is more, we can say that, the greater the role particular political societies play in fostering and developing the capacities to exercise the right of self-government, then the greater the justification for certain institutions within these particular political societies, and the greater the responsibility for citizens to belong to these particular political societies. Thus, even if states are without legitimacy rights, and citizens are without political obligations, states can be uniquely justified in creating and enforcing laws and policies within particular political societies, and citizens can have moral reasons to support and comply with the creation and enforcement of such laws and policies within these particular political societies.

DEFENDING ASSOCIATIVE RESPONSIBILITIES

So far, I have offered a very rough sketch of one way in which individuals may be bound to particular political societies. It is far from complete, but it should be enough to consider several possible objections against this sort of account. By answering these objections, we can add some depth to this account of associative responsibilities, as well as make good on the claim that individuals are not necessarily mistaken to believe themselves bound, in some way, to particular political societies.

The main problem with associative accounts, according to Simmons, is that “claims about our moral duties or obligations made by Associative theories are (and need to be) either too strong to be plausible or too similar to the claims made by Transactional or Natural Duty theories to be interestingly distinguishable from them. Thus, Associative theories are hung on the horns of a dilemma. They must either make claims that are counterintuitive and indefensible, or (once their claims are rendered plausible) they must collapse into some kind of non-Associative theory.”³⁰

²⁹ Ibid, 21.

³⁰ A. John Simmons, “The Duty to Obey and Our Natural Moral Duties,” in *Is There a Duty to Obey the Law?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 111.

Given this claim, one objection against this account of associative responsibilities could be that these responsibilities are actually better described as some sort of natural duty. This objection might run as follows: if we accept that individuals have a moral requirement to foster and develop the capacities necessary to exercise the right of self-government, that these capacities are only fostered and developed within certain kinds of associations, and that political societies are among such associations (which, granted, is a lot to accept, without any kind of argument or justification, at this stage), why should we then accept that such a requirement is a responsibility *to belong* to these kinds of associations, *to particular political societies*? Why not just say, for example, that individuals have a natural duty to support any and all associations which help foster and develop the capacities necessary to exercise the right of self-government, at least when such support can be offered without too much cost or inconvenience? To put it more pointedly, does such a responsibility really satisfy, what Simmons calls, “the particularity requirement”?³¹ Or, in trying to satisfy this requirement, have we not committed a mistake similar to the mistake John Rawls committed when he tacked the “application clause” onto his natural duty of justice?³²

There are at least two reasons for believing that such a responsibility would not be better described as a natural duty. First, when we substitute notions of duty and supporting, for notions of responsibility and belonging, we lose the normative dimensions that this account was meant to capture. This requirement is not just a moral requirement to foster and develop the necessary capacities; it is also a moral requirement to foster and develop the necessary capacities in others *and ourselves*. Similarly, and, perhaps, more importantly, this requirement does not just assume that the necessary capacities are only fostered and developed within certain kinds of associations; it also assumes that *our* capacities, which are necessary for *us* to govern *ourselves*, have been and continue to be fostered and developed within *our* particular associations, *our* particular political societies. Second, when we substitute notions of duty and supporting, for notions of responsibility and belonging, we lose the descriptive dimensions that this account was meant to capture. Associations, specifically associations like political societies, do not often distribute benefits to individuals they do not count among their members, nor do they often expect individuals they do not count among their members to offer any kind of substantial support. However, association, especially associations like political societies, often distribute benefits amongst their members, benefits

³¹ Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, 30-35.

³² *Ibid.*, 147-156.

which are vital for fostering and developing the capacities necessary to exercise the right of self-government, benefits like recognition, education, and safety and security.³³ What is more, such associations often expect their members to recognize both formal and informal requirements, requirements like following certain rules, offering some sort of substantial support, being good members – in other words, acting like members, *belonging*. Thus, when we substitute notions of duty and supporting, for notions of responsibility and belonging, we lose the essentially associative dimensions that this account was meant to capture.

This response, though, now makes this account of associative responsibilities look less like some sort of natural duty, and more like some sort of transactional account. According to Simmons, if this observation is correct, then, like nonvoluntarist contract theories, this account of associative responsibilities is bound to fail.³⁴ This objection might run as follows: Insofar as associative responsibilities depend upon moral requirements arising from benefits provided by political societies, they plainly rely upon some sort of principle of reciprocation, like fairness or gratitude. And insofar as associative responsibilities appeal to requirements arising from expectations, they either rely upon some sort of consequentialist principle, like utility or necessity, or are simply non-explanatory, since expectations alone do not impose moral requirements, unless they are justified or reasonable.

This objection, in regard to associative responsibilities, could be dismissed rather quickly. Although associative responsibilities depend, to a certain degree, upon benefits provided by political societies, the moral requirement to belong to particular political societies neither arises from these benefits, nor relies upon any kind of principle of reciprocation. Rather, these benefits play a justificatory role, that is, the greater the role particular political societies play in distributing these benefits, then the greater the justification for certain institutions within these particular political societies, and the greater the responsibility for citizens to belong to these particular political societies. Principles of fairness and gratitude, as well as other moral and prudential considerations, may affect these justifications, but they do not ground our associative responsibilities. Similarly, although associative responsibilities depend, to a certain degree, upon expectations of others, the moral requirement to belong to particular political societies neither arises from these expectations, nor relies upon any kind of consequentialist principle. Rather, these expectations play an explanatory role, that is, they partially define the formal and informal requirements of citizenship, for example, which laws

³³ Cf., Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defence of Pluralism and Equality* (Oxford: Martin Robertson & Company Ltd., 1983), 64-83, 197-226, 249-280.

³⁴ Simmons, "The Duty to Obey and Our Natural Moral Duties," 113.

are *our* laws, what sort of support *we* should offer, how *we* can be good citizens of *our* particular political societies, etc. Principles of utility and necessity, as well as other moral and prudential considerations, may affect these explanations, but they do not ground our associative responsibilities. Thus, although this account of associative responsibilities may look like some sort of transactional account, it clearly is not.

The emphasis upon “*our* particular political societies,” throughout the last two responses, illustrates an important aspect of this account of “our associative responsibilities.” Much of this account hangs on the claim that political societies help foster and develop certain capacities, but I have said very little about how political societies actually foster and develop these capacities, aside from claiming that political societies distribute certain benefits amongst their members, and that these benefits are somehow vital for fostering and developing the capacities necessary to exercise the right of self-government.

On the one hand, using the language of distribution naturally leads to talking about concrete and tangible goods. Without some level of material welfare and physical security, for example, it is hard to imagine how individuals could develop the capacities necessary to govern themselves. On the other hand, political societies also distribute goods which are neither concrete nor tangible. So in addition to interests in material welfare and physical security, individuals have interests in, what we might call, psychological welfare and ontological security. Meeting the latter, the needs of the human condition, is just as important as meeting the former, the needs of human nature. And, more often than not, meeting the former considerably predetermines how we can justifiably meet the latter.

One way political societies meet the needs of the human condition, then, is by telling stories, what Rogers M. Smith calls “stories of peoplehood.” According to Smith, political societies tell “economic stories,” which show “that it is in the interests, usually the economic interests, of particular groups of leaders and their constituents to advance each constituent’s economic well-being.”³⁵ Political societies also tell “stories of political power,” which promise that the leaders and members of particular peoples “will exercise their powers through institutions and policies that give significant power to each member, often via some system of alleged virtual or actual representation.”³⁶ And, finally, political societies tell “ethically constitutive stories,” which “present membership in a particular people as somehow intrinsic to who its members really are, because of traits that are imbued with ethical

³⁵ Rogers M. Smith, *Stories of Political Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 60.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 62.

significance. Such stories proclaim that members' culture, religion, language, race, ethnicity, ancestry, 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 constitutive identity espoused not only defines who a person is, but who her ancestors have been and who her children can be."³⁷ These stories tell individuals that they share significant similarities, which they have not strictly chosen, and which they cannot simply choose to give up or trade away. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, these stories present membership within particular political societies, and the similarities that individuals share with one another, as members, as something inherently valuable.³⁸ Thus, insofar as individuals see themselves as taking part in these stories, insofar as individuals identify themselves as being members of these political societies, whether for economic, political, ethical, or other reasons, these stories will partially constitute what it means for them to be members of "our particular political societies."

Given these claims, one could ask why identification as members of particular political societies, or identification with being members of particular political societies, has any moral relevance. Membership within political societies entails all sorts of social practices, some of them morally justified, some of them morally unjustified, and some of them morally irrelevant. Simmons argues, "Absent any compelling argument for general political obligations (of the sort to which traditional theorists aspire), and absent any compelling argument for the independent binding power of local rules requiring obedience and support (of the sort to which proponents of the normative independence thesis aspire), it seems plausible to dismiss as a kind of false consciousness our feelings of obligations toward our countries of birth or residence. Of course we identify ourselves with 'our' countries, 'our' governments, and 'our' fellow citizens ... But none of this identification (along with its accompanying feelings of obligation) – none of these ways of speaking or acting – seems, considered by itself, in any way inconsistent with denying that we are morally bound by political obligations to our countries of residence."³⁹

This objection, in regard to associative responsibilities, would be, at the very least, misguided, if not incorrect. As John Horton has argued, "Obviously, the *possibility* of something like false consciousness cannot be ruled out *a priori*, but ... [t]he general fact of

³⁷ Ibid, 64-65.

³⁸ Ibid, 64-66.

³⁹ A. John Simmons, "Associative Political Obligations," in *Justification and Legitimacy: Essays on Rights and Obligations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 83.

socialisation has no implications for the validity of the beliefs into which we are socialised. We can, moreover, reverse the logic of Simmons' position. Unless there is some powerful reason to reject such beliefs, especially if they are widespread across a diverse range of people, within and between cultures, then it does not seem unreasonable to operate at least on a presumption of their validity.”⁴⁰ We could say, then, although associative responsibilities depend, to a certain degree, upon identification, the moral requirement to belong to particular political societies arises from neither identification as members of particular political societies, nor identification with being members of particular political societies. Rather, like expectations, identification plays an explanatory role, that is, it partially defines why individuals are identified as members of particular political societies, for example, because of their birth, their continued residence, etc. And, like benefits, identification plays a justificatory role, that is, the more individuals identify with being members of particular political societies, then the more justification there is for certain institutions within these particular political societies, and the more responsibility there is for citizens to belong to these particular political societies. Other moral and prudential considerations may affect these explanations and justifications, but it would be much too hasty to leap from the claim that these explanations and justifications are products of convention, to the conclusion that these explanations and justifications are morally irrelevant.

RECONCEPTUALIZING POLITICAL OBLIGATION, OR AVOIDING THE PROBLEM OF POLITICAL OBLIGATION?

Before concluding, we should consider one more objection, which may seem to render this account of associative responsibilities completely inconsequential. This objection might run as follows: although this account may provide support for the claim that individuals are not necessarily mistaken to believe themselves bound, in some way, to particular political societies, it says nothing interesting about the problem of political obligation. By conceding to philosophical anarchism, and accepting that states are without legitimacy rights, and that citizens are without political obligations, I ensured that the battle was over before it began.

Although such an objection might have some merit, we could say at least two things in response. First, insofar as this account of associative responsibilities shows that individuals are not necessarily mistaken to believe themselves bound to particular political societies, I have accomplished what I set out to do. Second, whether or not this account of associative

⁴⁰ John Horton, “In Defence of Associative Political Obligations: Part One,” *Political Studies*, 54 (3), 434.

responsibilities says anything interesting about the problem of political obligation depends upon how we pose the problem. If the problem is posed in terms of proving that naturally free and equal individuals have an obligation to obey the law, or government, or the state, then I am not sure if anything interesting can be said. However, if the problem is posed in terms of understanding why individuals might have some sort of bond to particular political societies, a bond which might require them to obey the law, but which might also require them to disobey the law, then I think I have said something interesting. Of course, nothing in this account of associative responsibilities says, definitively, one way or other, whether such a bond would require obedience or disobedience. But whether or not such a bond would require obedience or disobedience is not something that such a theoretical account can determine in abstraction.

Finally, to return to the introduction of this paper, what would give President-Elect Barack Obama *the right* to implement policies that would require Americans to participate in “service” to their country, and why would Americans have *an obligation* to make such a “sacrifice” for their country? According to this account of associative responsibilities, if by right we mean legitimacy right, and by obligation we mean political obligation, then Obama would not have such a right, and Americans would not have such an obligation. But that does not mean that Obama could not be justified in implementing such a policy, nor does it mean that Americans could not have a responsibility to make such a sacrifice.