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Issues Surrounding Attempts to Ground Political Obligation in Gratitude

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ABSTRACT

In the following paper I examine a theory of political obligation which seeks to ground a citizen's duty to comply with their government in debts of gratitude. After presenting a historical account of the mechanisms of this theory, I turn to its modern reception by examining works by John Simmonds, A.D.M. Walker and George Klosko. Both Simmonds and Klosko are skeptical that gratitude is an appropriate principle to ground political obligations; It seems to them that debts of gratitude aren't strong enough or necessarily appropriate for this task. In order to resist the critiques of Simmonds and Klosko, Walker seeks to adapt the theory for modern audiences. The majority of this paper will examine the dialectic between Simmonds, Klosko and Walker. After the basic dialectic has been put forth, I will conclude that although theories which rely on debts of gratitude offer a convenient and romantic way to view a citizen's political obligations to their government, these theories ultimately prove unsuccessful, as they misunderstand what gratitude fundamentally is.

KEYWORDS

Political Obligation, Gratitude, Fairness, Reciprocation, Good Will

One significant question within Political and Legal Philosophy deals with whether citizens have an obligation to comply with their government. In more contemporary philosophical thought there is a good deal of skepticism towards whether these political obligations actually exist. Any theory that does argue for them has the difficult task of grounding this obligation in some existing conception. One theory that attempts to do so grounds political obligations in debts of gratitude. Although the view may seem initially plausible, upon further scrutiny of its concrete formulations, it cannot adequately ground obligations citizens might have to their government.

Within the following essay I will seek to convey the central tenants of the Argument from Gratitude and interpret it in its most favorable light. Once the central view is laid out, I will ultimately claim that the debts of gratitude generated under the theory are not sufficient to ground political obligations.

In order to do so, within the first section I will offer a cursory glance at the historical interpretation of the Argument from Gratitude. In the second section I will rehearse two pressing critiques that John Simmonds brings forth in response to this historic view. In the third section I will introduce a more plausible view of the Argument from Gratitude as presented by A.D.M. Walker and attempt to respond to the critiques put forth by Simmonds. Within the fourth section I will offer critiques against Walker's revised theory of gratitude as presented by George Klosko. In the subsequent section I will then provide Walker's responses to these critiques. Finally, I will weigh into the debate and argue that Walker's revised theory of gratitude, while more plausible than others, still doesn't sufficiently ground political obligation. I argue that this is due both to the lack of independence within the theory and because of its reliance on an implausible interpretation of what gratitude is.

SECTION I: THE ORIGINAL ARGUMENT FROM GRATITUDE

The initial attempt to ground Political Obligation in debts of Gratitude comes from Plato's *Crito* in which he argues that the citizen-government relationship is akin to the child-parent relationship and as such, the citizen has an obligation to obey the laws of the government (Tredennik 1954, 92).

The underlying thought is often referred to as the principle of reciprocity. Simmonds characterizes the thought thusly:

The receipt of a benefit puts one under an obligation to requite one's benefactor, to confer on him a benefit in return for the benefit one has received from him. (Simmonds 1979, 143)

Essentially, if an entity, in this case the state, confers upon a recipient, in this case a citizen, a benefit, that citizen ought to offer an equal benefit back to the state.

From this principle of reciprocation, Plato then argues towards the existence of political obligations. Walker runs the full argument as follows:

1. The Person who receives benefits from X has an obligation to requite or make a suitable return to X. (This is the principle of reciprocation)
2. Every citizen has received benefits from the state.
3. Every citizen has an obligation to make a suitable return to the state.
4. Compliance with the law is a suitable return.
5. Every citizen has an obligation to comply with the laws of his state.

As will be explored within the following section, this initial attempt at putting forth a theory of political obligations grounded in gratitude is deeply flawed for a number of reasons. It should still be noted however, that this view is attractive insofar that it offers a generally communal and friendly picture of the relationship citizens hold with their government.

SECTION II: SIMMONDS CRITIQUE OF THE ORIGINAL ARGUMENT FROM GRATITUDE

With the original argument from gratitude now laid, within this section we will explore Simmonds critiques of it. For the purposes of this essay, the focus will be placed initially on Simmonds argument against the first two premises, and subsequently on Simmonds argument against the move from the fourth to the fifth premise.

Simmonds first contests the first principle, questioning whether the mere receipt of a benefit from a benefactor is sufficient to oblige the beneficiary to reciprocate. Simmonds essentially argues that "the person who receives benefits from another does not always have an obligation to requite his benefactor, but

only in certain circumstances" (Walker 1988, 194). Simmonds isolates the following five principles that he thinks need to be present for a beneficiary to be under a debt of gratitude to their benefactor:

1. The Benefactor "must have made some special effort or sacrifice, or incurred some loss, in providing the benefit in question" (Simmonds 1979, 170).
2. In conferring the benefits to the beneficiary, the benefactor must have acted intentionally, voluntarily and without disqualifying motives, like acting out of self-interest (Simmonds 1979, 171-172).
3. The benefit can't be forced upon the beneficiary (Simmonds 1979, 175).
4. The beneficiary must want the benefit which is granted (Simmonds 1979, 177).
5. The beneficiary must not want the benefit not to be provided by the benefactor (Simmonds 1979, 178).

Simmonds think that while a government may fulfill the latter three principles, it will be unable to act under the prior two. In arguing this, Simmonds contends that a state doesn't make any special effort or sacrifice to offer benefits to its citizens, nor is it the right kind of entity, being an institution, to have motives that can properly be said to be intentional, voluntary and genuinely altruistic.

With this revision of the principle of reciprocity, the second principle in the initial argument is under threat. If the state is incapable of providing benefits in the ways necessary, then it can't be said that every citizen has received a benefit from the state.

The second main critique Simmonds offers deals with the move from principle 4 to principle 5. Simmonds argues that even if a debt of gratitude was owed by the citizens to the state, it needs to be shown that compliance with the law is in fact a suitable return. Simmonds is basically wondering why one should pay their debt of gratitude through compliance with the law instead of through some other means (Walker 1988, 194).

Simmonds then argues, that even if compliance with the law is shown to be a suitable return for the benefits conferred on the beneficiaries, it needs to be shown to be the "uniquely suitable" return (Walker 1988, 195). Otherwise, it doesn't follow that every citizen is obliged to comply with the law, as there may be other equally adequate ways of fulfilling a debt of gratitude to the government.

With Simmonds two critiques of the initial formulation of the Argument from Gratitude now put forward, within the next section we will analyze Walker's response.

SECTION III: WALKERS RESPONSE AND REVISED ARGUMENT FROM GRATITUDE

In defending the Argument from Gratitude, Walker seeks to distance himself from the historic view put forth previously and instead adapts the theory based off his understanding of what gratitude is.

For Walker, Gratitude should be understood as "a set of attitudes...towards the benefit and towards the benefactor...[showing] proper [appreciation of] the benefit and [having] goodwill and respect for [the] benefactor" (Walker 1988, 200). Walker admits that the notions of appreciation, goodwill and respect he relies on are nebulous. He next draws from this understanding of Gratitude, two obligations that follow: 1) To demonstrate to the benefactor that you have the correct attitudes towards them and 2) to not act contrary with the possession of these attitudes (Walker 1988, 200).

While this first obligation is largely symbolic, the second is to be concretely manifested when the benefactor is in need. This second obligation, unlike the first, is a continued requirement that can't definitively be met (Walker 1988, 200).

Walker offers an alternative way to distinguish between these two obligations; The first is an obligation to show that the beneficiary has goodwill towards the benefactor whereas the second obligation is an ongoing set of actions stemming from the actual goodwill the beneficiary holds towards the benefactor (Walker 1988, 200).

It is important to note that a political obligation is primarily an obligation to act in a certain way rather than to act in a certain way while also under a certain attitude or doing it for a certain proper reason.

From his characterization of Gratitude and goodwill, Walker next examines four candidate requirements stemming from goodwill that could potentially serve to ground political obligations. This list of obligations isn't meant to be exhaustive, but rather is simply a list of promising candidates. Walker argues goodwill requires the beneficiary to:

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- A. Help the benefactors when he is need or distress and one can do so at no great cost to oneself.
- B. To comply with his reasonable requests.
- C. To avoid harming him or acting contrary to his interests.
- D. To respect his rights. (Walker 1988, 202)

In order to select which of these principles ought to be used to ground political obligation, Walker argues that it must be both relevant and independent.

In order for a principle to be relevant in the right way it needs to “bear on the issue of a citizen’s compliance with the law” (Walker 1988, 202). In other words, political obligation must be able to be seen as a version of compliance with the principle.

In order for a principle to be independent it must not hinge upon another explanation which already supposes a political obligation (Walker 1988, 202). Essentially, if the Argument from Gratitude is to work, the principle chosen must do the explanatory work and not rely on a pre-existing foundation for political obligation. If it does so, then whatever principle it is relying upon is the grounding principle of Political Obligation rather than gratitude.

Walker argues that the first two principles, A and B, are not able to ground political obligations because they are not relevant. This is to say that Walker doesn’t view a Political Obligation as akin to helping a benefactor in need or complying with a reasonable request.

Walker rejects the final principle, D, as it runs afoul of the independence principle. Principle D in invoking a respect for the benefactor’s rights presupposes that the benefactor has rights to be respected. If this is the case, then some other explanation is necessary to provide the foundation on which the state can claim to have rights.

Walker takes principle C, the obligation to not harm or act contrary to the states interest, as the principle that grounds political obligation. The principle is relevant insofar that it is, generally speaking, within the interest of the state for its citizens to abide by the laws. Walker does argue that in some cases it may not be in the interest of the state for its citizens to abide by the law, thus opening an interesting space for civil disobedience, but these cases should be rare and are not the focus of the current task at hand.

Walker takes principle C to be independent as it doesn’t rely upon another theory to explain the source of political obligation. Rather, political obligations are

grounded in our obligation not to harm our benefactor, which is grounded in our debt of gratitude.

Walker's revised form of the Argument from Gratitude should be taken as follows (Walker 1988, 205):

1. The person who benefits from X has an obligation of gratitude not to act contrary to X's interests.
2. Every citizen has received benefits from the state.
3. Every citizen has an obligation of gratitude not to act in ways
4. Noncompliance with the law is contrary to the state's interests.
5. Every citizen has an obligation of gratitude to comply with the law.

With Walker's alterations to the theory finally laid out, we can now turn to examine whether the theory is suited to answer the objections previously raised by Simmonds.

As fore-mentioned, Simmonds initial critique of the Argument from Gratitude questions whether debts of gratitude are formed from the government's conferral of benefits to its citizenry. Simmonds argued that while the latter three conditions for the formulation of a debt of gratitude may be fulfilled, the government is incapable of fulfilling the first two, and thus no debt is created.

Central to this critique is the issue of whether or not one can be said to feel gratitude towards an institution or only towards individuals that make up an institution. While Simmonds is sympathetic to the latter view, Walker argues that one can coherently feel grateful towards an institution.

The common objection to Walker's view is that when an individual claims to be grateful to an institution, in reality they are actually grateful to specific individuals who make up that institution. Walker dismisses this point as an objection however, noting the following two points (Walker 1988, 198):

1. Even if gratefulness to an institution is derivative for gratefulness for the people who make up the institution, it is still coherent to say that one is grateful to the institution.
2. In the case of the government, one could generate a political obligation out of gratefulness to a collective of all citizens. This doesn't interfere with the Argument from Gratitude.

By arguing the above two principles, Walker can dodge this initial objection. The second component of this critique of the principle of reciprocation as applied to

the government is whether or not it can act with the correct intention or motive. As an institution after all, it isn't a thinking being but rather a collective.

Walker accepts this critique but argues that the institution have a sufficient analogue in their stated purpose or function (Walker 1988, 199). While a government may not be said to act out of a motive to ensure the safety of its citizenry for instance, it can be said that the institutions purpose is to protect its citizenry. Walker views this as a sufficient answer to Simmonds critique.

Walker offers another defense of his initial two principles arguing that even if Institutions don't act purely out of the safety of its citizenry (or any other benefit that is conferred) a partial or mixed purpose or function is sufficient to ground a debt of gratitude (Walker 1988, 208). Though the government operates out of duty, so long as part of its function is also an intentional and deliberate effort to benefit its citizenry, that is sufficient. Walker supposes that if one was swimming and began to drown, and a lifeguard expended a minimum effort to retrieve you from the pool, though the lifeguard acted out of duty and sacrificed practically nothing to save you, a debt of gratitude can still be generated (Walker 1988, 208). Walker finds this situation analogous to the one citizens find themselves in relation with the government.

Simmonds second objection deals with whether compliance with the government's laws is the uniquely suitable return for the generate debt of gratitude.

Walker argues that insofar that a debt of gratitude to the government is a sign of goodwill directed towards the government, then not complying with laws is against the government's interested and thus not done in goodwill. One would be failing to act with goodwill and thus have violated their debt of gratitude.

Walker clarifies that it isn't necessary to actively harbor bad will when not complying with the law, but rather that an attitude of non-goodwill is sufficient to damage the interests of the government (Walker 1988, 206). While citizens may have other obligations per their debt of gratitude, compliance with the law will be included in any minimal account.

Finally, Walker anticipates two objections: one dealing with whether non-compliance with laws damages the government's interests; and the other dealing with whether the state truly confers benefits on the citizenry.

The motivation underlying the first objection is roughly that individual defiance of laws doesn't damage the government in a noticeable way. Walker

mounts Parfit's theory in response, arguing that while small acts of defiance by individuals may not harm the government's interest, collective defiance would and thus each individual act should be treated with this in consideration (Walker 1988, 207).

The second objection is grounded in the idea that citizens are in a commercial relationship with the state, and since they pay taxes, the state can't be said to be conferring benefits in a way which generates debts of gratitude.

In response, Walker argues that gratitude may have a place in commercial relationships, that the citizen-government relationship is not a commercial one and that we owe debts of gratitude to other citizens and not necessarily the state. The government in this model is a redistributive agency that provides service individuals could not such as international security. From this set of arguments, Walker argues taxes don't nullify the debts of gratitude that are generated (Walker 1988, 209).

Within this section I laid out Walker's Argument from Gratitude and responded to the critiques mounted by Simmonds. Within the next section I will present Klosko's critiques of this revised theory.

SECTION IV: KLOSKO'S CRITIQUES OF WALKER'S REVISED THEORY

Klosko has two significant arguments against Walker's theory: 1) Walker's use of Parfit's theory inadequately answers the question of whether noncompliance is against the interests of the government and 2) That debts of gratitude formed without Simmonds five conditions present are too weak to ground political obligations.

Klosko regards the first critique as relatively insignificant though I will offer it additional attention in a subsequent section. Walker had previously argued that while an individual not complying with the law may not relevantly damage the interests of the government, one must consider the collective effect that would be had if a multiplicity of people didn't comply with the law. This rehearsal of Parfit's argument is reminiscent to Kant's formula of universalization.

In order to argue against this, Klosko supposes a situation in which only one person doesn't comply with the law by not paying their taxes. Since we cannot evaluate her actions collectively, as she is the only non-compliant, Klosko argues

that Walker must take her not to be obligated to pay (Klosko 1979, 354). This seems intuitively incorrect though, it seems the individual has still done something wrong in not paying her taxes. Klosko gestures towards fairness as a better explanation for this intuition then promptly drops the critique (Klosko 1979, 354).

Klosko attends closely to the subsequent objection. Klosko reasons that a political obligation “can be overridden by conflicting moral or religious beliefs, [but] in most cases...should be presumed to hold” (Klosko 1979, 354). Essentially, if Political Obligations exist they are forceful and give strong reasons to pursue certain political actions.

Klosko’s concern is that Walker’s model of debts of gratitude is too weak to support such Political Obligations. Under Walker’s model, these obligations “would be overridden frequently, not just in unusual circumstances” (Klosko 1979, 355). This critique is nested within Walker’s theory as can be seen by his example of the council member with a benefactor and an unrelated duty. Walker argued that while “[the council member] may feel an obligation not to vote for a proposal which would significantly damage [the] benefactor’s interests...this obligation will almost always be outweighed by [the council member’s] duty...to some wider good” (Klosko 1979, 355).

Klosko takes this as evidence of the general weakness of debts of gratitude. Such debts are thus not sufficient to ground political obligation. Though Klosko cedes, unlike Simmonds, that debts of gratitude can be formed without the complete fulfillment of all five of Simmonds principles, he ultimately argues the principles are necessary to create debts of gratitude strong enough to ground Political Obligation (Klosko 1979, 356).

In order to dispel this critique, Walker will need to be able to show that there exists a debt of gratitude that can be formed between a citizen and the government strong enough to ground Political Obligation. In the next section we will turn to see how successful Walker is in this response.

SECTION V: WALKERS REBUTTAL OF KLOSKO’S CRITIQUES

Walker, likely for the sake of brevity doesn’t address Klosko’s initial concern.

As for the second concern, in order to dispel it, Walker needs to show the existence of at least one obligation of gratitude that won’t be typically overridden by other considerations and thus can ground Political Obligation.

Instead of providing a concrete example however, Walker merely gestures towards what Hume and Kant have to say on the importance of debts of gratitude. Walker notes that Kant “named ingratitude along with envy and malice as one of the three sins” and that Hume thought that “of all crimes...the most horrid and unnatural is ingratitude” (Walker 1989, 363). While a call to authority of these two renowned philosopher rhetorically inclines one to believe gratitude is important in some sense, it does little in the way of actual convincing one of that.

To be charitable, Walker may not have engaged deeper with the objection due to the space constraints placed upon his arguments, yet the response he offers is simply unsatisfactory.

SECTION VI: REMAINING ISSUES WITH THE ARGUMENT FROM GRATITUDE

Having now considered Walkers response to Simmonds as well as the ensuing debate by Klosko, it seems prudent to weigh in and establish that Walker fails to adapt the Argument from Gratitude sufficiently in order to ground Political Obligations.

Aside from Walker’s failure to produce a counterexample of a generally strong gratitude-based obligation, he also relies too heavily on Parfit’s arguments. Take the case where only one individual doesn’t comply with the government and the government’s interests aren’t damaged. It still seems that individual is doing something wrong and is obliged to reconcile their action. Walker can only account for this through its collective cost, and yet separate from the universalization of this action, the individualized instance seems wrong.

Put another way, there is a fairness concern over whether the individual in question is justified in not complying with the law. Since concerns of fairness better explain the individuals obligation instead of gratitude, it seems this might be a more productive line to follow.

Separate from this, Walker’s theory reads a lot of content into the conception of gratitude. On a more classic Strawsonian picture, gratitude is an attitude individuals adopt in response to the good will that others show them. This good will is expressed by exceeding the expectations and demands put on the person. The individual who feels gratitude isn’t necessarily indebted to the person who benefitted them nor are they obligated to reciprocate. If this actual expectation

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was a condition upon the benefit that was conferred, the individual wouldn't feel gratitude, instead this would just be another instance of a contractual exchange of benefits. The attitude of gratitude arises when there isn't an expectation for an individual to do something, and they still do it. Separate from this one can determine whether the action is praiseworthy or whether gratitude should be expressed but this is a different question.

Although the Argument from Gratitude doesn't work, at least in its presented formulation, its friendly perspective on the relationship between the citizen and their government remains an attractive idea.

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