



Political Obligation and Gratitude

George Klosko

Philosophy and Public Affairs, Volume 18, Issue 4 (Autumn, 1989), 352-358.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

Philosophy and Public Affairs is published by Princeton University Press. Please contact the publisher for further permissions regarding the use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/pup.html>.

Philosophy and Public Affairs
©1989 Princeton University Press

JSTOR and the JSTOR logo are trademarks of JSTOR, and are Registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. For more information on JSTOR contact jstor-info@umich.edu.

©2001 JSTOR

GEORGE KLOSKO

Political Obligation and Gratitude

A.D.M. Walker has recently revived the currently unfashionable view that political obligations can be explained as obligations of gratitude, stemming from benefits the individual receives from the state.¹ Believing that past arguments from gratitude have been hampered by imperfect understanding of that complex concept, Walker carefully sorts out important features of gratitude and so attempts to present a more convincing case. Though much in Walker's account of the nature of gratitude is illuminating, I believe that his attempt to sketch out a workable theory of political obligation is less successful. Walker's argument from gratitude does not address and appears to be unable to meet an important criterion that theories of political obligation should satisfy, that political obligations be sufficiently strong to require compliance with the onerous burdens of citizenship.

According to Walker, the recipient of a benefit should respond with a complex set of attitudes, which includes appreciation of the benefit received and goodwill towards and respect for the benefactor (p. 200). His main point is that these attitudes place certain constraints upon the recipient's conduct. The recipient must perform expressive actions in order to make clear to his benefactor that he is grateful. There are also substantive constraints: the recipient must not act in ways incompatible with possession of the requisite attitudes. Walker holds that while the requirement for declarative actions can be discharged by a single appro-

1. A.D.M. Walker, "Political Obligation and the Argument from Gratitude," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 17, no. 3 (Summer 1988): 191-211. Otherwise unidentified page references are to this article.

ropriate expression of thanks, the substantive requirement “cannot be met once and for all” (p. 200).

Walker bases political obligations upon the substantive requirement. Because of his goodwill, the recipient of a benefit must “avoid harming [his benefactor] or acting contrary to his interests” (p. 202). Because citizens receive significant benefits from the state, their goodwill requires that they obey the law: “In general, noncompliance with the law damages the interests of the state. It is manifestly in the state’s interests that its citizens should be law-abiding; indeed without a fair measure of compliance with the law no state could function or survive” (p. 204).

This is only a sketch of Walker’s argument, but it should suffice for our purposes. There are problems with Walker’s position, both specific and general. In the course of attempting to defend his position against possible objections, Walker raises one problem which he does not appear to defuse. There is an obvious objection to the view that citizens should obey the law because disobedience would harm the state’s interests (pp. 206–7). Greene’s failure to pay her taxes is likely to have only imperceptible effects. The United States government has an annual budget in excess of a trillion dollars; her few thousand dollars will not be missed. To this line of argument Walker responds by appealing to the principle, recently advanced by Derek Parfit, that the moral significance of an action should not be determined by its effects alone, in isolation from the effects of similar actions (pp. 206–7).² Thus Greene should bear some portion of the blame for the activities of all those who do not pay their taxes, the collective effects of whose noncompliance are not imperceptible.³

This defense is not successful. It roots Greene’s obligation to pay her taxes solely in the consequences of collective nonpayment.⁴ But if we assume that she is the only nonpayer and her action has no detectable

2. Walker cites D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), esp. pp. 75–82.

3. Walker does not make clear here whether Greene should be blamed for (a) not paying taxes, (b) not obeying the law, or (c) both. If Walker intends (b) (as it appears from p. 207), then a single act of disobedience to any law should incur a portion of the blame warranted by all violations of law in the community. This position strikes me as untenable. If Greene breaks the speed limit on an interstate highway by one mile per hour, does she incur a portion of the total blame due to society’s murderers, gangsters, robbers, and rapists? As discussed below, Walker’s account requires a more detailed explanation of exactly what burdens obligations of gratitude require citizens to bear.

4. I assume that we should confine attention here to tax laws (see the preceding note). My criticism could be restated if we substituted all laws.

effects, the implication is that she does not have an obligation to pay. This conclusion clashes with our clear intuition that the burdens of citizenship should fall on all alike. Walker takes pains to distinguish obligations of gratitude from obligations of fairness (p. 201).⁵ But in this case the differences fall out in favor of the latter. According to a principle of fairness, Greene should be criticized for not paying her taxes even if she is the only citizen not to do so. Why should she receive the benefits that the taxes of her fellows purchase while enjoying the advantages of non-payment, if there is no morally relevant difference between her and them?⁶

A more important objection centers upon the question of exactly what Walker's argument establishes. Even if we concede the main points in Walker's analysis of gratitude—that it entails a set of attitudes, that one of these is goodwill towards the benefactor, and that goodwill constrains the actions of the recipient—the strength of this constraint has not been demonstrated. It is apparent that political obligations must be of significant strength. The most obvious political obligation, the obligation to obey the law, requires a pattern of conduct impinging on many areas of citizens' lives, while compliance with certain laws, such as those requiring payment of taxes or military service, can be onerous indeed. Now, it is generally recognized that political obligations do not bind absolutely; they are *prima facie* obligations, which hold in most but not all cases. But ordinarily, the fact that a given law seriously inconveniences those asked to comply would not excuse citizens from compliance unless the inconveniences were extreme or unusual. Similarly, though *prima facie* political obligations can be overridden by conflicting moral or religious beliefs, in most cases the obligations should be presumed to hold. A citizen's moral beliefs should override laws only in unusual cases. What is more, in the vast majority of cases, the state does not *request* compliance; it demands that citizens obey and (assuming that citizens do indeed have the requisite obligations) justly punishes them for not obeying.

The problem with Walker's argument is that, though obligations of

5. Cf. A. J. Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 172–75.

6. On the principle of fairness, see *ibid.*, chap. 5, and G. Klosko, "Presumptive Benefit, Fairness, and Political Obligation," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 16, no. 3 (Summer 1987): 241–59, where further references may be found.

gratitude undoubtedly exist, they are generally weak and diffuse, too weak to function as *prima facie* political obligations in the usual sense. Such obligations would be overridden frequently, not just in unusual circumstances. They would not appear generally to require compliance with onerous or burdensome laws.

In previous treatments of obligations of gratitude, gratitude has generally been taken to give rise to a rather vague obligation. This is described by A. John Simmons as “a very general sort of indebtedness,” a diffuse moral requirement “to consider the interests” of the benefactor in the future.⁷ Walker’s statements of the content of obligations of gratitude are similarly vague. The goodwill possessed by the recipient of a benefit implies that he should “avoid harming [the benefactor] or acting contrary to his interests” (p. 202). The obligation is “not to act in ways that betray lack of goodwill for a benefactor” (p. 202), “to be mindful of our benefactors’ interests, to take care not to damage them, and to give them a special weight in our deliberations” (p. 203). But if this is what obligations of gratitude to the state require, then it seems that they will be met if citizens *give careful consideration* to what the law demands, even if they decide not to obey it.

An indication of how weak obligations of gratitude are appears in one of Walker’s examples, which concerns himself and a benefactor: “As a member of a committee, I may feel an obligation not to vote for a proposal which would significantly damage my benefactor’s interests.” But Walker notes the weakness of this obligation: “Doubtless this obligation will almost always be outweighed by my duty, as a member of the committee, to some wider good” (p. 204). He notes that he would have to apologize to his benefactor for going against his interests, thereby acknowledging the existence of *an* obligation. But the point remains that the obligation in question would “almost always” be overridden by other legitimate concerns.

Walker notes (p. 209) that his argument omits discussion of the stringency of obligations of gratitude. This omission obviously stems from his main concern, which is to show that widespread political obligations rooted in gratitude exist. This has been denied by previous theorists, most notably Simmons.⁸ Simmons argues that even if the conferral of benefits by the state generates an obligation for the recipient to make

7. Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, pp. 185, 168.

8. *Ibid.*, chap. 5.

some suitable return, it cannot require obedience to the law as *the uniquely suitable return*.⁹ But as we have seen, Walker is able to demonstrate that there is a connection between the state's conferral of benefits and obedience to the law, which stems from the recipient's goodwill towards and consequent desire not to harm the benefactor or his interests.

But though Walker is able to show that obligations of gratitude occur more widely than Simmons allows, it is not clear that these obligations are sufficiently strong. According to Simmons, not every conferral of benefit will generate an obligation of gratitude. For an obligation to arise, certain conditions must be met, the most important of which are (a) the benefactor "must have made some special effort or sacrifice, or incurred some loss, in providing the benefit in question," and (b) he must have provided the benefit for appropriate reasons—that is, the benefit must have been provided intentionally, voluntarily, and for reasons other than self-interest.¹⁰ Simmons argues that the benefits conferred by states generally do not meet these conditions, and so that the argument from gratitude does not establish widespread political obligations.¹¹

Now, Walker believes that failure to satisfy (a) and (b) does not rule out the creation of obligations of gratitude "Is [Simmons] not simply mistaken to hold that benefits call for gratitude only if they involve special effort or sacrifice on the part of a benefactor? If I am about to drown when a strong swimmer already in the water notices my plight, swims over, and rescues me, without any special effort or sacrifice on his part, do I owe him no gratitude? Would gratitude in these circumstances be inappropriate?" (p. 208). In the circumstances Walker sketches, gratitude would clearly be in order. But questions of stringency arise. The recipient owes the swimmer a debt of gratitude, but it is apparent that the debt is not overly strong. It seems that such a debt could be discharged with a strong expression of thanks and would not require much in the way of subsequent substantive performances on the recipient's part. The debt is far less than it would have been had the rescue required real sacrifice or effort, that is, had it satisfied Simmons's conditions.

Comparison with another case might be instructive. A few years ago Joe Delaney, a professional football player, jumped into a dangerous lake

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 185–87; Walker, pp. 194–95.

10. Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, pp. 170–72.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 187–90.

in order to save two children. Although he was not a strong swimmer, Delaney is said to have believed that someone had to attempt the rescue, and he drowned in the attempt. If Grey were rescued under circumstances such as these, he would owe the rescuer (assuming that both survived) a far greater debt than that owed to Walker's swimmer. Thus though Walker's example shows that Simmons's conditions need not be satisfied before a debt of gratitude can be generated, much of Simmons's contention continues to hold. Conditions (a) and (b) (and the others he lists) must be satisfied before a *strong* debt of gratitude can be established, certainly one strong enough to require obedience to the law.

The weakness of obligations of gratitude tells strongly against the argument from gratitude as a basis for political obligations. In this respect the case is similar to Rawls's argument from the natural duty to support just institutions, in *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls's account of the precise nature of this natural duty is rather brief and unclear,¹² but it seems unlikely that such a duty could be plausibly described and also be strong enough to ground onerous political obligations. It is notable that the parallel natural duty Rawls presents, the duty to help another who is in need or jeopardy, holds only as long as "one can do so without excessive risk or loss to oneself."¹³ But as we have seen, obedience to certain laws, such as those concerning payment of taxes or military service, can entail the assumption of heavy burdens.¹⁴

In closing, I will follow up on one of Walker's additional points. He notes that one advantage of the argument from gratitude is that it calls attention to aspects of the citizen's relationship to the state other than the obligation to obey the law. Questions of gratitude call attention to the

12. J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 114–17, 333–42. For more detailed discussion of the natural duties of justice and political obligation, see Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, chap. 6.

13. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 114; see Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, pp. 154, 193.

14. In this regard traditional arguments for political obligation based upon consent and utilitarianism—despite their flaws—are preferable to arguments from gratitude or natural duties, as the traditional arguments are able to establish strong obligations. Walker takes pains to distinguish the argument from gratitude from the argument from fairness. The former, unlike the latter, is not rooted in a principle of reciprocity, requiring proportionate repayment for benefits received (pp. 201, 195; cf. p. 209). In severing the link between the weight of benefits received and the content of services owed, however, Walker renders the argument from gratitude unable to generate strong obligations. In this respect too the argument from fairness, which contains a reciprocity proviso, provides a more suitable grounding for political obligations.

spirit in which the state provides benefits and in which its officials act (p. 210). To the extent that traditional theories of obligation have neglected such concerns they are deficient. But it would be wrong to require that a single principle of political obligation address all issues. In all likelihood a range of moral principles will have to be introduced to account for all aspects of the citizen's relationship to the state. Traditional theories of obligation have focused on the obligation to obey the law because of the central role obedience plays in the continued existence of the state and its members. But even if the argument from gratitude cannot satisfactorily ground this obligation, it appears to nicely supplement it. Feelings of gratitude could well inspire citizens to participate in public activities, to volunteer for civic organizations, and to go beyond the call of duty in various other ways as well. To the extent that the argument from gratitude helps to round out the portrait of the citizen's relationship to the state it makes a significant contribution, despite its inability to fill in the center of the picture.