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Political Obligation

John Horton

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For Christopher

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Preface and Acknowledgements

The aim of this book is to introduce a range of philosophical questions and arguments concerning political obligation. It does not aspire to be a comprehensive treatment of its subject, nor does it offer a precisely articulated and fully developed argument of its own. My principal focus is on the various attempts by political philosophers to provide a justification of political obligation, and in consequence other issues have been more or less neglected. However, while not the only interesting aspect of political obligation, the question of justification has been fundamental within most philosophical discussions of the topic and lies at the heart of any systematic treatment of it. Most of the book is taken up with the attempt to sketch the more prominent arguments about the justification of political obligation; to explore some of their assumptions and implications; and to suggest what seem to me to be their most significant weaknesses and limitations. The approach adopted is analytical rather than historical, and my concern to address arguments of particular relevance in the modern world is reflected to some extent both in the choice of, and in the relative space devoted to, the positions discussed.

Much of the book, therefore, is concerned with the critical exposition of the ideas of others, and in undertaking this task I have sought to achieve a reasonable balance between exposition and criticism, and between fidelity and accessibility. It is inevitable that some parts of the book are more difficult than others; but I am especially conscious, in consequence of my desire to avoid excessive exposition of canonical texts in political philosophy and to relate them to a contemporary perspective, that the richness and complexity of many of these accounts of political obligation receive less than justice. Such failings are relatively easily remedied by reading the originals, and by reference to some of the many secondary commentaries which are now available on all the principal figures in the history of Western political philosophy. However, while much of the book takes the form of a critical survey,

it would be misleading to imply that it is not informed by an authorial point of view.

This point of view encompasses both a conception of political philosophy and a specific approach to the problem of political obligation. So far as political philosophy is concerned, I am deeply sceptical of the more ambitious claims which have been made on its behalf by some of its practitioners: I favour a view of political philosophy which sees it as seeking to help us understand ourselves and our place in the world rather than aiming, for example, to provide rational 'proofs' of particular political commitments. Such an approach certainly need not be uncritical, but in my view most of the interesting arguments in political philosophy are better or worse, more or less plausible, and only rarely true or false. With respect to political obligation I have tried to offer an interpretation which avoids at least some of the unsatisfactory features of other accounts, in particular those that I call voluntarist theories, yet does not succumb to the scepticism about political obligation which has become increasingly prevalent in the philosophical literature. I hope, therefore, that these features may give the book a somewhat wider interest than simply the student audience to whom it is primarily addressed. In particular, I hope it may encourage others to explore these ideas further.

For a work of fairly modest aspirations this book has been an unreasonably long time in both gestation and writing, and in the process I have acquired a great many debts of gratitude. Inevitably a book of this sort draws extensively on the work of previous writers: I have done my best to acknowledge such debts in the references, but I should apologise for those which I have inadvertently overlooked. My interest in the problem of political obligation goes back nearly twenty years to when I was a student, and it is a loss to the reader, in addition to being a source of personal regret, that this book was unable to benefit from the astute and wise criticism of the late John Rees, one of my earliest and most inspiring teachers. However, I have been very fortunate to have had the help and support of so many other people. The University of York has provided a mostly congenial environment for my work, despite the best efforts of the British government during the last decade to sabotage the effective functioning of the university system. It has been particularly fruitful to have been part of the Morrell Studies in Toleration in the Department of Politics, which through the generous support of the

C. & J. B. Morrell Trust has sponsored a stimulating programme of research in political philosophy. This support has also helped to attract many outstanding graduate students, whom it has been a pleasure to teach and from whom I have learnt a good deal. I should like to thank the Trustees for their continued support, and in particular Nicholas Morrell, Edward Goodman and Geoffrey Heselton.

The book had its origins principally in work now contained in Chapter 6, which in earlier forms was presented at Durham, Swansea and New College, Oxford, and I am grateful for the useful discussion it received on each occasion. Both that chapter and drafts of Chapters 2 and 5 were presented at Political Theory Workshops at the University of York, and subsequently appeared as *Morrell Discussion Papers*. These meetings, and I refer not only to those when my own work was the subject of attention, have been an invaluable source of intellectual stimulation, in which constructively critical discussion has been sustained in a serious yet relaxed and sympathetic context. I am grateful to all the participants over the years. Among the many people with whom I have discussed political obligation, or who have commented on parts of the book, I should like to thank especially Alex Callinicos, David Edwards, Margaret Gilbert, Terry Hopton, Preston King, John Liddington, Barbara McGuinness, David Morland and Rian Voet. No author could have had a more cheerfully long-suffering publisher than Steven Kennedy; Keith Povey has been a constructive copy-editor; and the two academic editors of the series in which this volume appears have been models of tactful support: Albert Weale was especially encouraging in the early stages, and Peter Jones read a complete draft of the text, making numerous characteristically acute and perceptive suggestions. I have also benefited enormously from the very helpful comments of Paul Kelly, Chris Megone, Glen Newey and Igor Primoratz, all of whom read the complete manuscript in draft and saved me from many confusions and errors. So too did Peter Nicholson and Susan Mendus, but my intellectual and personal debts to them go very much deeper. Peter Nicholson, initially my teacher and now a colleague and friend, has encouraged me and commented on my work all my academic life, a labour on his part for which I am sincerely grateful. Susan Mendus and I have collaborated on several projects during the last decade, and her tireless encouragement, sympathy and support – friendship in the

fullest sense – in addition to her perceptive criticism, has been indispensable to me. Of course none of these people is to blame for the use to which I have put their help, and all deserved better.

Much of this book was written during what were difficult times for me personally. In addition to Chris Megone, Peter Nicholson and Susan Mendus I should also like to thank in this context: John Crump, Pamela Dowswell, Adrian Leftwich, Jackie Morgan, Dorothy Nott and particularly Keith Alderman. Alison, Anna, Karen, Mike, Nick, Tina, Steve Reilly and especially Claire Roberts also helped, as too did Lynne and Christopher. However, above all my personal thanks are owed to Jenny Bradford. I am also grateful to her for typing some of the manuscript in its early stages; and to Jackie Morgan who undertook the bulk of this work, and whose patience with my incessant revisions was infinite.

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John Horton