

Ryan Gabriel Windeknecht  
Research Institute for Law, Politics and Justice  
Keele University  
January 2010

## **Political Obligation: A Critical Introduction**

**Dudley Knowles; Routledge Contemporary Political Philosophy; Abingdon and New York; Routledge; 2010; xii + 220 pages; £18.99; ISBN: 978-0-415-41601-6**

In this book, Dudley Knowles develops a novel approach to the problem of political obligation and, according to this approach, critically evaluates several leading theories. Whereas Knowles's earlier work focused on grounding political obligation in feelings of gratitude, this book takes a broader view, arguing that a plurality of principles, when properly qualified, offer a solution to the apparent conflict between the individual's right of self-government and the state's right to govern.

In Part One, Knowles develops his approach to the problem of political obligation. According to Knowles, political obligation is a cluster of institutional duties that individuals possess, *qua* citizens. These duties are moral in force, and are oriented towards the state, as well as one's fellow citizens. Against conventional understandings, Knowles argues that these duties are not solely, or even centrally, concerned with obeying the law. Rather, they may include duties to serve in the military, vote, and oppose unjust laws and policies. Although these duties are moral in force, they are not absolute and, thus, fulfilling one's political obligation may not always be the right thing to do.

The correlate of the individual's political obligation is the state's legitimate authority. Like the duties that make up political obligation, the rights that make up legitimate authority are moral in force, but are not absolute. That is, the state cannot require the individual to commit acts which are, for example, immoral, or trivial or absurd.

With these concepts in mind, Knowles formulates a distinctively liberal dialectic: 'the state proposes; the citizen disposes' (p.53). In other words, the state puts forward good reasons for individuals to accept its authority, and individuals review these good reasons to decide whether or not they should accept the authority of the state. Knowles calls this 'the good reasons thesis' (p.53). These reasons can range from the ambitious, that 'All citizens of all states should accept all the duties prescribed to them' (p.66), to the more modest, that 'Some citizens (of some state) should accept some of the duties of citizenship' (p.68). Adding to this liberalism, two constraints are introduced. The first is the justice constraint, which requires the state to be just to claim authority. The second is the publicity constraint, which requires the good reasons to be truthful, as well as comprehensible to the individuals to whom they are addressed.

This dialectic functions at two different levels, and corresponds to Knowles distinction between the philosophical and political problems. At one level, the dialectic concerns the grounds of the citizen's duties, that is, whether or not the good reasons put forward by the state are philosophically sound. At another level, the dialectic concerns the generation of the citizen's duties, that is, whether or not the good reasons put forward by the state are politically applicable. For example, consent theory is often acknowledged as well-grounded. However, it is also thought to be critically flawed, and, thus, untenable, because few if any individuals have ever consented to the authority of the state. According to Knowles's distinction, though, consent theory offers a clear solution to the philosophical problem, and whether or not it offers a solution to the political problem is matter of practical, not theoretical, investigation.

In Part Two, Knowles critically evaluates several theories of political obligation: anarchism, consent and contract, fairness and gratitude, utilitarianism, natural duties of justice and care for others, and communitarianism. Knowles's treatment of these theories is comprehensive and fair-minded – and, according to the conventional copout, far too detailed to adequately cover in this review. Suffice it to say, both the anarchist and communitarian challenges lose out. Against anarchism, it is argued that wholesale scepticism is unjustified, and that the state can have good reasons to claim authority over the individual. Against communitarianism, it is argued that political membership is an insufficient ground for obligation, and that the individual can always demand such good reasons from the state. These theories aside, the remaining are accepted conditionally. Hypothetical contract and utilitarianism are conditioned on the defence of their underlying philosophical principles. More

traditional forms of consent and contract, as well as fairness and gratitude, are philosophically sound and, therefore, conditioned on their practical application, that is, whether or not individuals have consented or contracted, or accepted or received the benefits of living under the governance of the state. Likewise, natural duties of justice and care for others are conditioned on whether or not the state is a just institution, or an appropriate institution for facilitating the provision of care and preventing a potential slide into the proverbial state of nature. In the end, the conditional acceptance of these theories as good reasons for ascribing political obligations to individuals and legitimate authority to states hinges strongly upon the distinction between the philosophical and political problems. Or, as Knowles writes in the conclusion to Chapter Eleven:

I have stated the philosophical credentials of a number of different arguments which I believe may demonstrate that the state is well-founded and that citizens should recognize their proper duties. Whether these reasons apply in the particular circumstances of the anxious or curious questioner who confronts his state with the ineliminable demand that it establish its legitimacy is an empirical issue, towards the settling of which philosophers have nothing further to contribute (p.189).

Before concluding, it would be remiss not to acknowledge Knowles's writing style. This review has tried, however (un)successfully, to highlight Knowles's contribution to the literature concerning the problem of political obligation. In addition to the content, though, the writing itself is accessible and, at times, entertaining. For example, in the introduction to Chapter Six, Knowles writes, 'We need to examine the major anarchist doctrines in turn, but we shall have to do so briskly – so the anarchist may justly complain' (p.83). Admittedly, not quite John Cleese, but subtle quips like this are scattered throughout the text, making for an enjoyable read.

Ultimately, Knowles offers a well-written, critical introduction to the problem of political obligation, suitable for readers unfamiliar with the topic, and yet relevant for those with more familiarity. Although his approach may not satisfy those who have more traditional ideas about what a theory should provide, it will nonetheless challenge them to reconsider the concepts according to which the problem is conventionally understood. If nothing else, Knowles's distinction between the philosophical and political problems, perhaps his most unique contribution to the literature, should give pause to anyone attempting to argue for or against any particular theory of political obligation.