

FAMILIES, NATIONS AND STRANGERS

by

SAMUEL SCHEFFLER



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The E. H. Lindley Memorial Lectureship Fund was established in 1941 in memory of Ernest H. Lindley, Chancellor of the University of Kansas from 1920 to 1939. In February 1941 Mr. Roy Roberts, the chairman of the committee in charge, suggested in the *Graduate Magazine* that

the Chancellor should invite to the University for a lecture or a series of lectures, some outstanding national or world figure to speak on "Values of Living"—just as the late Chancellor proposed to do in his courses "The Human Situation" and "Plan for Living."

In the following June Mr. Roberts circulated a letter on behalf of the Committee, proposing in somewhat broader terms that

The income from this fund should be spent in a quest of social betterment by bringing to the University each year outstanding world leaders for a lecture or series of lectures, yet with a design so broad in its outline that in the years to come, if it is deemed wise, this living memorial could take some more desirable form.

The fund was allowed to accumulate until 1954, when Professor Richard McKeon lectured on "Human Rights and International Relations." The next lecture was given in 1959 by Professor Everett C. Hughes, and has been published by the University of Kansas School of Law as part of his book *Students' Culture and Perspectives: Lectures on Medical and General Education*. The selection of lecturers for the Lindley series has since been delegated to the Department of Philosophy.

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Samuel Scheffler

Anyone surveying the political life of this planet in the late twentieth century is bound to be struck by the prominence of two powerful but conflicting tendencies. The first of these is the tendency toward greater economic, technological, and political integration, a tendency that has been fueled in a variety of ways by the extraordinary progress of modern science in this century. The second is the tendency toward greater communal identification and differentiation, a tendency that is evident in the recent resurgence of nationalism as a political force, in the rise of the idea of multiculturalism, and in the seemingly endless series of ethnic and communal conflicts to which recent years have been witness.

Among the many issues raised by these conflicting global and particularist tendencies are a variety of questions about responsibility. Most obviously, perhaps, there is the question of how we are to understand our own responsibilities to diverse categories of people: to our families and friends, to the people in our neighborhoods and communities, to the members of other groups with which we are affiliated, and, of course, to those vast numbers of people who are strangers to us, and with whom our only significant social bond, if it can be called that, is that we are all members of the human race. This question is hardly a new one, and various cultures have at various times had reasonably settled ways of answering it. However, our own thinking about questions of responsibility seems to me to be in a very unstable condition, and the conflicting tendencies toward integration and differentiation that I have mentioned may be seen both as symptomatic of this condition and as serving to exacerbate it.

The commonsense morality of our culture holds that each of us has certain responsibilities toward other people simply as such — to avoid various forms of mistreatment, for example, and also to provide limited forms of assistance in certain contexts. At the same time, commonsense morality holds that there are additional and often much greater responsibilities that the members of significant social groups and the participants in close personal relationships have to each other.¹ It is these additional responsibilities, which may be called “associative duties,” that I wish to discuss in this lecture.² Some philosophers have expressed scepticism about whether associative duties

constitute genuine duties at all, except perhaps insofar as they can be assimilated to duties of other kinds. Other philosophers have seen associative duties as absolutely central to moral life, and have seen scepticism about them as the outgrowth of an excessive, theory-driven universalism. My aim in this lecture is neither to dispute nor to defend the claim that associative duties constitute genuine duties. Instead, I wish to explore the nature of these duties as they are ordinarily understood, to emphasize their importance within commonsense moral thought, to consider some possible explanations of their basis or rationale, and to indicate why, despite their centrality, they seem in some ways puzzling or problematic from a standpoint internal to our commonsense moral outlook itself. If I am right, then the conflicting tendencies on the political level toward integration and differentiation are mirrored within our moral thought by conflicting views about the boundaries of our responsibilities.

I.

According to a familiar distinction, *general duties* are duties that we have to people as such, whereas *special duties* are duties that we have only to those particular people with whom we have had certain significant sorts of interactions or to whom we stand in certain significant sorts of relations.³ Given this distinction, associative duties are of course a class of special duties. Other widely recognized classes of duties that are special in this sense include *contractual duties*—by which I mean duties arising out of promises, contracts, and agreements, *reparative duties*—or duties to people one has wronged or harmed or mistreated,⁴ and *duties of gratitude*—or duties to one's benefactors.

There are many different kinds of groups and relationships participation in which has at least sometimes been seen as giving rise to associative duties.⁵ Obviously, individuals are usually thought to have such duties to the members of their immediate families. In addition, however, people have been said to have associative duties to their friends, neighbors, and more distant relatives; to members of the same community, nation, or clan; to colleagues, coworkers and fellow union members; to classmates, compatriots, and comrades; to members of the same religious or racial or ethnic group; and even to members of the same team, gang, or club.⁶

There is no obvious feature that all of the relationships just mentioned have in common. Some of those relationships are ordinarily entered into voluntarily, but others of them cannot be. Many of the

relationships on the list can be terminated voluntarily, but, again, others of them cannot be. In some cases, the people to whom one is said to have associative duties are people who have come to depend or rely on one in certain ways, but this is not so in all cases. Some of the relationships mentioned involve people who are engaged in some common cooperative enterprise, but others do not. And while some of the relationships can only arise among people who know each other well, in other cases the participants need never have met or had any sort of interaction. The apparent diversity of these relationships presents a *prima facie* difficulty for any view that proposes to assimilate associative duties to some putatively clearer or more fundamental category of duties: to contractual duties, for example, or to duties of gratitude. While any given proposal of this kind may have a measure of plausibility in some cases, it will be difficult for any such proposal to accommodate the full range of groups and relationships participation in which has been thought to give rise to associative duties.

Of course, although the vast majority of people believe themselves to have a variety of associative duties, many people are, at the same time, unsympathetic to some of the perfectly sincere claims of duty made by others. For example, some people who are in no doubt about their associative duties to their friends or to the members of their own families are nevertheless unreceptive or even hostile to the idea that members of the same national or ethnic or religious group have special, associative duties to each other. Thus, although many different kinds of groups and relationships have been seen as generating associative duties, there is only limited consensus about when such duties do in fact arise.

The best explanation of this diversity and disagreement is that virtually any kind of group or personal relationship that has significance for the people it unites may be seen by them as giving rise to associative duties. This would explain the otherwise heterogeneous assortment of groups and relationships that have been seen as generating such duties. It would also explain why many people who believe that they themselves have associative duties of various kinds are nevertheless resistant to some of the deeply-felt claims of duty made by others. For, if we disapprove of certain sorts of groups and relationships, or of the tendency to invest participation in those groups and relationships with significance, then we may be reluctant to regard such participation as generating associative duties. If we disapprove of gangs, or of unions, or of religion, then we may be unreceptive to the suggestion that members of the same gang or union or religious group have spe-

cial moral duties to each other. If, on the other hand, we attach great importance to our own membership in a group of a certain kind, then not only are we apt to see ourselves as having duties to the other members of the group, we may also be inclined to suppose that membership in a group of this kind always gives rise to such duties, and we may disapprove of group members who fail to acknowledge their duties as we see them.

II.

In addition to the diversity of associative duties and the limited consensus about when they arise, there is also considerable unclarity, within commonsense moral thought, about the content of such duties.⁷ One thing that *is* clear is that this may vary depending on the nature of the group or relationship that gives rise to the duty. An athlete may have associative duties both to her teammates and to her family, say, but nobody supposes that the content of these duties will be exactly the same in the two cases. Even with respect to a particular type of group or relationship, however, the precise content of the participants' duties is often difficult to specify. In general, philosophers who discuss associative duties tend to characterize them as duties to provide positive benefits for one's associates (as I shall refer to them), duties that go beyond whatever positive duties we may already have toward people in general. It is understood, in these discussions, that the content of the additional benefits to be provided may vary depending on the nature of the group or relationship in question. However, it seems generally to be assumed that associative duties do not involve any addition to or strengthening of our negative duties — our duties not to harm or mistreat people. This assumption is compatible, of course, with a recognition that the same relationships that give rise to associative duties can also create special opportunities for mistreatment, and can, indeed, make possible specially intimate forms of mistreatment. Thus, even if one does not regard such relationships as giving rise to additional negative duties, one may nevertheless see them as creating new opportunities for the violation of those negative duties that we already have.

This consideration notwithstanding, it oversimplifies matters to think of associative duties solely as positive duties that go beyond our positive duties to people in general. To see this, we may first observe that this characterization itself is normally taken to mean not only that one's positive duties to one's associates are more extensive than one's

positive duties to other people, but also that they are stronger. This “greater strength,” in turn, comprises more than one feature. First, it means that one’s positive duties to one’s associates are less easily nullified or overridden than one’s positive duties to others by considerations of cost to oneself. Thus, for example, although I may be expected to bear some costs in order to provide assistance to a stranger, I may be expected to bear greater costs in order to provide comparable assistance to my brother or my child. Second, it means that one’s positive duties to one’s associates often take precedence over one’s positive duties to others in cases where the two conflict. Thus, for example, if both my brother and a stranger need the same sort of assistance, but I can provide this assistance only to one of them, then I may be required to help my brother, even if I would have been required to help the stranger had he been the only person needing my assistance. Indeed, I may sometimes be required to help my brother even if his need is less urgent than the stranger’s. Third, the idea of greater strength may also mean, although this is more controversial, that the threshold at which a positive duty can override a negative duty is sometimes lower if the positive duty is to an associate than it would be if the positive duty were to a stranger. For example, it may be thought that circumstances can arise in which I would be required or at least permitted to harm some person, or to violate his property rights, in order to provide a badly needed benefit for my brother or my child, even though it would be wrong for me to do the same thing in order to provide a comparable benefit for a stranger.

Note, however, that those who make this last supposition may equally well suppose that the threshold at which a positive duty can override a negative duty is sometimes *higher* if the *negative* duty is, say, to a family member, than it would be if the negative duty were to a stranger. For example, it may be thought that circumstances can arise in which it would be permissible for me to inflict a lesser harm on one stranger in order to prevent a much greater harm to another stranger, even though it would be wrong for me to do the same thing if the person on whom I would have to inflict the lesser harm were my own brother or child. This example shows that, on some interpretations at least, it is a mistake to think of associative duties as exclusively positive in character. For the example illustrates one way in which our negative duties to our associates may be thought stronger than our negative duties to others. And, as in the case of positive duties, this greater strength may be thought to manifest itself in other ways as well. Thus, it may be thought that one’s negative duties to one’s associates

are less easily nullified or overridden than one's negative duties to others by considerations of cost to oneself. For example, although I may be expected to bear some costs in order to avoid harming a stranger, I may be expected to bear greater costs in order to avoid harming my brother or my child in the same way. Similarly, it may be thought that one's negative duties to one's associates take a certain precedence over one's negative duties to others in cases where the two conflict. So, for example, if one is driving a runaway trolley as it approaches a fork in the track, and one must either steer it onto the branch on which one's brother is trapped or onto the branch on which a stranger is trapped, then, on this view, one ought to do the latter.

In view of these reflections, what we can say is the following. Within commonsense moral thought, the precise content of associative duties is often unclear. It may vary depending on the nature of the relationship giving rise to the duty, and, even with respect to a single type of relationship, the duties of the participants are often difficult to delineate with precision. Speaking very generally, associative duties require one to give the interests of one's associates priority of various kinds over the interests of other people. First, one must provide positive benefits for one's associates which one need not provide for other people at all, and which one may not provide for others in preference to one's associates. Indeed, providing such benefits for one's associates takes priority over the provision to non-associates of any benefit that one lacks a duty to provide. In addition, however, when conflicts among one's positive and/or negative duties arise, duties owed to one's associates take precedence of various sorts over duties to other people, although some of these forms of precedence are more controversial than others. In general, for most types of relationships there is no detailed consensus either about the extent of the positive benefits one must provide or about the degree of precedence that associative duties take.

III.

Despite the absence of greater consensus either about the content of associative duties or about which kinds of groups and relationships give rise to them, the importance of such duties in commonsense moral thought seems undeniable. Indeed, associative duties supply much of the substance of morality as it is interpreted by most people. The willingness to make sacrifices for one's family, one's friends, and one's community is ordinarily viewed as one of the marks of a good or vir-

tuous person, and the demands of morality, as ordinarily understood, have less to do with the abstract formulations of philosophers than with the specific web of groups and relationships that serve to situate a person in social space.

Nevertheless, two influential objections have been raised against the idea of an associative duty as we have been understanding it. The first of these, which we may call *the voluntarist objection*, is, in effect, an objection on behalf of the individual who is supposed to be bound by such duties. The voluntarist objection asserts that mere membership in a group or participation in a relationship cannot by itself give rise to any duties at all. Although it is true that we sometimes have special responsibilities to our associates, we have such responsibilities, according to this objection, only insofar as we have voluntarily incurred them. In other words, mere participation in a relationship or membership in a group is not sufficient to generate any special responsibilities whatsoever. Instead, one's special responsibilities must always arise from some voluntary act on one's part: if not from one's explicit acceptance of those responsibilities, then perhaps from one's voluntary entry into the group or relationship in question — or if not from one's voluntary entry into the group or relationship in question, then perhaps from one's voluntary acceptance of the benefits of participation in that group or relationship.⁸ But, the voluntarist insists, one cannot simply *find oneself* with such responsibilities without having done anything at all to acquire them.

The voluntarist objection has been one major impetus for an *assimilationist* treatment of associative duties. The assimilationist, as I have already indicated in passing, regards associative duties as being genuine duties only insofar as they can be assimilated to other, putatively less problematic types of duties.⁹ The voluntarist version of this position treats associative duties as legitimate only insofar as they can be assimilated to contractual duties broadly understood. I have already expressed doubts about the possibility of what might be called *wholesale monistic assimilation*: that is, about the possibility of assimilating the full range of perceived associative duties to any other single type of duty. In view of the diversity of groups and relationships that have been seen as giving rise to such duties, any attempt at wholesale monistic assimilation is bound to seem procrustean. However, this does not mean that monistic assimilationism as a general strategy is mistaken, only that, in its more plausible deployments, it will not offer any wholesale endorsement of the full range of associative duties that have been recognized within commonsense moral thought, but will tend instead to

be revisionist in character. For it will validate only those supposed duties that it can plausibly assimilate, and this will inevitably mean rejecting certain others. Indeed, insofar as associative duties are seen within ordinary moral thought as constituting a fundamental class of duties in their own right, monistic assimilationism, in its more plausible deployments, will be doubly revisionist. For it will fail to recognize some putative duties as being duties at all, and it will reject the commonsense understanding of those duties that it does regard as genuine.

These points may be illustrated with reference to the voluntarist version of monistic assimilationism. It is clear, to begin with, that people are often seen as having associative duties by virtue of their participation in some group or relationship even though their entry into the group or relationship in question was not accompanied by any explicit acceptance of those duties as such. In addition, we have already observed that some of the relationships that are thought to generate associative duties cannot be entered into voluntarily, while others cannot be ended voluntarily. In fact, some of the paradigmatic duty-generating relationships can neither be entered into nor exited from voluntarily. The relations of children to their parents and siblings to each other are the most obvious examples. In other cases, groups that have been seen as generating associative duties can sometimes be joined voluntarily, but the more typical pattern is for members to be socialized into the group gradually in the course of their development, so that they come to see themselves as part of the group without any consciousness of ever having made a decision to join it, and without any sense that there was ever a time in their lives when they were not part of it. So it is, often, with membership in a community or in a national or religious group. Even when relationships are indeed entered into voluntarily, moreover, this general description may mask considerable diversity; thus, for example, entering into a friendship is a very different process from joining a club,¹⁰ and becoming a parent is very different from moving into a new neighborhood.

It is this complex and diverse set of facts that drives many versions of voluntaristic assimilationism to argue that a range of relationships that do not fit the voluntaristic model narrowly construed may nevertheless be represented as contractual in an extended sense, and hence as duty-generating, because they involve the voluntary acceptance of benefits. At the same time, however, any relationships that cannot be represented as contractual even in this extended sense must be regarded, according to these versions of assimilationism, as incapable of generating genuine duties at all. To the extent that this excludes

some commonly recognized duties, and to the extent that people do not ordinarily see their voluntary acceptance of benefits as the source of their associative duties, these versions of assimilationism are prepared to be revisionist. As I have suggested, this illustrates the revisionist tendency of monistic assimilationism more generally.¹¹

An alternative to monistic assimilationism is pluralistic assimilationism. Rather than asserting that associative duties are genuine duties only insofar as they can be assimilated to duties of some one other type, the pluralistic position seeks to assimilate different classes of associative duties to putatively less problematic duties of several different types. As compared with monistic assimilationism, the pluralistic position appears, in the abstract, to hold out the promise of reduced revisionism without increased procrusteanism. In order to make good on this promise, however, the pluralist must first identify several different types of duties, all of which are clearer and better grounded than the unassimilated associative duties themselves. For those with voluntarist leanings, in particular, this may be difficult to do, since the voluntarist's reason for objecting to associative duties would seem equally to be a reason for objecting to any special duties that cannot be construed on a broadly contractual model.

As I have said, the voluntarist objection to associative duties is, in effect, an objection on behalf of the individual who is supposed to be bound by such duties. Associative duties, if conceived of as ascribable to individuals in the absence of any relevant consensual act, would, according to the voluntarist, constitute an unreasonable constraint on the individuals in question. As I have also said, however, there is another influential objection to associative duties. This objection, which we may call *the distributive objection*, is, in effect, an objection on behalf of those individuals who are not participants in the groups and relationships that are thought to give rise to associative duties. The distributive objection sees such duties, not as imposing unreasonable burdens on the participants in special relationships, but rather as supplying them with benefits that may be unreasonable. This objection may be developed as follows.

Associative duties require individuals to give priority of various kinds to the interests of their associates. These requirements, however, work to the disadvantage of other people. Suppose, for example, that there are three individuals, A, B, and C, none of whom has any special tie or relationship to any of the others. Each has only general duties toward the others, which is to say that each's duties toward the others are distributed equally. Indeed, a perfectly egalitarian distribution of

duty obtains among the three individuals, since none of the three has any special claim on the services of any of the others. Now, however, suppose that A and B, acting independently of each other, become members of some group of a kind that is ordinarily thought to give rise to associative duties. And suppose that C is not a member of this group, which we may call *The In Group*. If, as a result of their membership in *The In Group*, A and B come to have associative duties to each other, then the egalitarian distribution of duty that previously prevailed no longer obtains. Instead, A and B are now required to give each other's interests priority over the interests of C in a wide range of contexts. Thus, each of them now has stronger claims on the other than C has on either of them. This means that, for each of them, C's interests have been demoted in relative importance. Indeed, C's claims on each of them are now weaker, not only than his claims on them were before, and not only than their claims on each other are now, but also than their claims on him are now. For, we may suppose, C has no associates to whose interests he is required to give priority over the interests of A and B. Thus, the claims on C of A and B are as strong now as they ever were. The developments that have given his interests reduced priority for each of them have not given their interests reduced priority for him; the reduction of priority is, in this way, asymmetrical. Clearly, then, the overall distribution of duty that now prevails is both inequalitarian and decidedly unfavorable to C.

But, the distributive objection asks, why should the fact that A and B have become members of *The In Group* have these effects? Why should their membership in *The Group* work to C's disadvantage in this way? We may suppose that both A and B attach considerable significance to their membership, that both experience their participation in *The In Group* as very rewarding, and, indeed, that each of them sees membership in the Group as an important aspect of his identity. None of these suppositions seems capable of explaining why their membership should, as a matter of morality, work to C's disadvantage in the way that it does if it generates associative duties. Indeed, the distributive objection continues, far from explaining this, these suppositions seem rather to make the need for such an explanation more acute. For if A and B derive great value from their membership in *The In Group*, then they already have an advantage that C lacks. The effect of associative duties is to build a second advantage on top of this first one. If, in other words, A and B have associative duties to each other, then, in addition to enjoying the rewards of Group membership, which C lacks, A and B also get the benefit of having stronger

claims on each other's services than C has. Why should this be? Why should the fact that A and B are in a position to enjoy the first sort of advantage give rise to a moral requirement that they should also get the second, and that C, who has already lost out with respect to the former, should now lose out with respect to the latter?

This way of formulating the distributive objection suggests that the objection can also be directed against the voluntarist who seeks to assimilate associative duties to contractual duties. For, even if associative duties are seen as arising from the voluntary acceptance by group members of the rewards of membership, the distributive objection will still challenge the idea that morality requires those who have secured such rewards to have their good fortune compounded through a favorable redistribution of duty, while those who never acquired the original rewards are further disfavored by that same redistribution.

More generally, to the extent that members of The In Group have significantly greater resources than nonmembers independently of any redistribution of duty, the objection to such a redistribution will only be intensified, whether or not the greater resources that Group members have are actually a consequence of their membership. Thus, for example, if A and B are much wealthier than C, either because this has always been so or because membership in The In Group has conferred wealth upon them, the idea that morality requires them also to receive the advantage of having increased claims to each other's services will, according to the distributive objection, be all the more clearly open to question. Moreover, if we continue to assume that the members of The In Group are wealthier than C is, then the distributive objection will persist even if C and other people of modest means join together to establish a duty-generating group of their own. For proponents of the objection will still charge that, by requiring those who are wealthier to give each other's interests priority over the interests of those who are poorer, associative duties unjustifiably reinforce the inequality in resources between the two groups.

In short, the distributive objection sees associative duties as providing additional advantages to people who have already benefited from participation in rewarding groups and relationships, and it views this as unjustifiable whenever the provision of these additional advantages works to the detriment of people who are needier, whether they are needier because they are not themselves participants in rewarding groups and relationships or because they have significantly fewer resources of other kinds.

Many people will feel that the distributive objection has its great-

est force when it is directed at those associative duties that are sometimes said to obtain at the political level, among members of the same community or society or nation.¹² At this level, the idea that associative duties provide a mandate for those who are already rich in resources to turn their attention inward, and largely to ignore suffering and deprivation in the rest of the world, is likely to have considerable resonance for many people. However, once associative duties are seen as problematic at the political level, it is unclear why they shouldn't also seem problematic at the level of smaller-scale personal relationships. For associative duties also provide a mandate for relatively affluent families, say, to turn *their* attention inward, and to lavish resources upon each other while largely ignoring the needs of the less fortunate. Indeed, by emphasizing the costs to others of those patterns of partiality to one's intimates that are ordinarily seen as defining the abstract structure of "personal life," the distributive objection represents one way of challenging the very distinction between the personal and the political.

IV.

The formulation of the distributive objection that we have been discussing describes associative duties as providing additional advantages for people who have already secured the advantage of participation in rewarding groups and relationships. One response to the objection might be to deny that the two types of advantage are separable in the way that this formulation suggests. It is a mistake, or so it may be said, to suppose that *first* a rewarding relationship is established between two people, or among the members of a group, and *then* a question arises about how, if at all, this relationship affects the duties of the participants. Instead, it may be argued, an implicit commitment by the participants to give priority to each other's interests in various contexts is a precondition for the existence of a rewarding relationship. And, the argument may continue, it is such commitments that give rise to associative duties. Thus, it may be said, people cannot derive rewards from their participation in special relationships without acquiring associative duties, and any advantages they may provide, in the process.

Proponents of the distributive objection may reply that if people have a strong interest in obtaining the rewards deriving from participation in special relationships, and if they cannot obtain those rewards without acquiring associative duties in the process, than all that fol-

lows is that people have a strong interest in acquiring such duties — a conclusion that does not rebut the distributive objection but rather concedes one of its main claims. However, defenders of associative duties may respond that people's interest in obtaining the rewards of special relationships is so strong that morality cannot possibly fail to accommodate it. Those rewards are among the greatest goods that human beings can enjoy, and morality must surely permit people to make the kinds of commitments on which the rewards depend. Accordingly, it may be said, associative duties should be seen as arising out of commitments that people permissibly make to each other.

This amounts to a two-stage defense of associative duties. The first stage appeals to people's strong interest in participating in rewarding social relationships to secure the permissibility of making the commitments on which such relationships are said to depend. The second stage identifies those commitments as the actual source of people's associative duties. Thus, according to this defense, one does not acquire associative duties simply by virtue of standing in a special relationship to some person or by virtue of belonging to some special group. Instead, one acquires such duties when one makes a commitment to one's associates, either explicitly or implicitly, that includes an undertaking to give priority to their interests in various contexts.

The first thing to notice about this defense is the extent of the concessions that it makes to the voluntarist objection in the course of trying to ward off the distributive objection. By denying that either the mere fact of group membership or the mere existence of a special relationship can give a person associative duties, and by insisting that one cannot acquire such duties without making some commitment oneself, this defense brings associative duties entirely under the control of the will. Indeed, its identification of commitment as the relevant duty-generating factor appears to relegate this defense to a form of voluntaristic assimilationism, and a highly revisionist one at that. For, to take an obvious example, we do not ordinarily suppose that parents have special duties to their children only if they have made a commitment to give priority to the children's interests.

At the same time, this defense of associative duties is unlikely to defuse the distributive objection. For that objection does not deny that people have a strong interest in participating in various groups and relationships, and hence in committing themselves to give priority to their associates. On the contrary, the distributive objection is quite sensitive to the way in which such commitments serve the interests of the participants in special relationships. However, it argues that the

participants are not the only people whose interests are affected when such commitments are made; those who are not participants also have interests at stake, and their interests are apt to be especially strong when they already have fewer resources than the participants do. Accordingly, the distributive objection insists that, at the very least, the permissibility of undertaking to give priority to the interests of one's associates must be seen as sharply constrained by consideration of the effects on others of one's doing so. The proposed defense of associative duties does not really engage with this position, and so seems incapable of undermining it.

In addition, those who are sympathetic to the distributive objection may point out that although this defense says that associative duties arise out of people's permissible commitments, it does not actually explain how this happens. It appeals to people's interest in participating in interpersonal relationships to explain the permissibility of the commitments, but it provides no explanation of why the commitments give rise to duties. Of course, if people's strong interest in participating in interpersonal relationships makes it permissible for them to undertake to give priority to their associates, then the same consideration may also make it permissible for them actually to give priority to their associates. However, the idea of associative duties is not that one is permitted but rather that one is required to give such priority, and it is this further idea that requires explanation. Moreover, those sympathetic to the distributive objection may say, no appeal to the interests of those who make the commitments is capable of providing such an explanation. For the fact that people have legitimate self-interested reasons for making and acting on certain commitments does not explain why they have a duty to honor those commitments even if doing so works to the significant disadvantage of third parties. After all, we do not in general think that, if one has a legitimate interest in acting in some way that does not benefit others, then one is morally required not to benefit them. Thus, proponents of the distributive objection may argue, some other strategy is needed for explaining why commitments give rise to duties, rather than mere permissions, to favor one's associates. One obvious strategy would appeal not to the interests of those who make the commitments but rather to the interests of those who receive them. However, proponents of the distributive objection will insist that, in assessing the normative implications of interpersonal commitments, both these sets of interests must be balanced against the interests of those who will lose out if the commitments are indeed honored.

Thus, to recapitulate, it may be argued that associative duties are generated by commitments which people must make to each other if they are to establish rewarding relationships, and which morality permits them to make for that reason. However, this "defense" of associative duties is tantamount to a form of voluntaristic assimilationism. At the same time, it is unlikely to satisfy proponents of the distributive objection, who may press two points in response. First, they may argue that the permissibility of committing oneself to give priority to one's associates is constrained by the effects of those commitments on other people. Second, they may insist that some additional explanation is required of how permissible commitments give rise to associative duties. No appeal to the interests of those who make the commitments can provide such an explanation, they may argue, and any appeal to the interests of those who receive the commitments must be balanced by a consideration of the interests of those who do not receive them.

The question of how permissible commitments give rise to duties has, of course, been extensively discussed in the special case of promising. Although even the most thoroughgoing voluntarist is unlikely to argue that all genuine associative duties arise from actual promises, certain features of the promising example may appear to be of more general relevance. The standard function of promises, it is often said, is to facilitate social cooperation by providing promisees with a special kind of assurance. Making a promise provides such assurance because, in promising, one communicates an intention to incur an obligation by that very act of communication. In other words, one expresses one's intention to *make it the case* by virtue of that very expression of intention that one has a special kind of reason for acting as one says one will act. Without assurances of this kind, it is asserted, cooperative undertakings would often be difficult or even impossible to establish and sustain. Now it might be argued, by partial analogy to this case, that the commitments that give rise to associative duties make rewarding relationships possible precisely because they are seen by the participants in such relationships as generating special, duty-based reasons for giving priority to each other's interests. This perception, it might be argued, enables these commitments to provide a kind of assurance without which rewarding relationships would be difficult or impossible to establish and sustain. Accordingly, it might be suggested, the reason why these commitments give rise to associative duties is that the perception of them as giving rise to such duties is what enables them to make rewarding relationships possible.

Proponents of the distributive objection are likely to offer at least two replies to this argument. The first is that the participants in special relationships often have, and are seen as having, strong reasons apart from any perceived associative duties for giving priority to each other's interests. These reasons may derive, for example, from their love for each other, or from some shared identification or interest. Often it is reasons of this kind that motivate interpersonal commitments, and, it may be said, the recognition of such reasons is often sufficient to sustain rewarding relationships without any additional assurance provided by a shared perception of duty. The second reply is that even if a perception that interpersonal commitments give rise to duties is what enables such commitments to facilitate special relationships, this by itself does not show that these commitments really do give rise to duties. The promising case, it may be said, is similar, for the mere fact that one communicates an intention to incur an obligation does not itself explain how this brings it about that one actually does incur an obligation. Just what the explanation may be remains a matter of controversy, but many accounts appeal, in the end, either to the interests of promisors in being able to bind themselves, or to the interests of promisees in being able to rely on promises that are made to them, or to a general social interest in the existence of a stable practice of promising. And, proponents of the distributive objection may say, if any of these accounts is taken as the model for associative duties, then the case for such duties will once again rest, ultimately, on a kind of interest that needs to be balanced against the interests of those who are not participants in the putatively duty-generating groups and relationships.¹³

Thus it remains the case that the defense of associative duties that we have been discussing is apt to be challenged by proponents of the distributive objection despite the extensive concessions that it makes to the voluntarist objection. This confirms our earlier observation that the distributive objection may be directed against associative duties, not only when they are conceived of as constituting a fundamental category in their own right, but also when they are construed along voluntaristic lines. It is worth reflecting on why this is so. We have already observed that whereas the voluntarist objection to unassimilated associative duties is, in effect, an objection on behalf of those who are supposed to be bound by such duties, the distributive objection is, in effect, an objection on behalf of those to whom such duties are supposed *not* to be owed. This contrast may be further developed. The voluntarist objection is sensitive to the potentially burdensome char-

acter of social life, to the costs that must be incurred and the sacrifices that must be made in order for a human relationship to be sustained. The voluntarist, sensitive to these costs, argues that agents should not be required to bear them against their wills. Since this is precisely what unassimilated associative duties may require, such duties are themselves perceived as unreasonably burdensome, and are rejected accordingly. The distributive objection, however, is sensitive to the enormous rewards of social life, to the unparalleled capacity of interpersonal relations to enrich human existence. In consequence, it sees the opportunity to assist one's associates, and so to contribute to the flourishing of one's social relationships, as a great luxury. Accordingly, when it is suggested that one may be required to provide such assistance even if doing so works to the detriment of those who are already needier, the distributive objection perceives this as conferring a great benefit on oneself and one's associates: a benefit that is so great, in fact, as to amount to an unfair advantage. So far as this perception is concerned, moreover, it makes no difference whether such requirements are thought of as arising from some voluntary act on the part of the agent or not. Either way, they are seen as unfairly benefitting the agent and his or her associates. Since associative duties are requirements of precisely this kind, the distributive objection views them as problematic whether or not they are construed as susceptible to voluntaristic assimilation.

Clearly, both objections capture part of the truth about human relationships. For such relationships can of course be both burdensome and rewarding. They make great demands, but they are a source of incomparable satisfactions. They may call for great sacrifices, yet there are some sacrifices that it is a luxury to be able to make. And just as both objections capture part of the truth about human relationships, so too both capture part of the truth about associative duties. For, insofar as such duties would impose burdens upon us without our consent, they constitute genuine constraints. Yet, insofar as they would have us cultivate rewarding ties even when there are more urgent needs to be met, they also confer genuine advantages. Like our social lives themselves, the associative duties that are so often thought to accompany them may be demanding and enriching at once. The voluntarist objection focuses on the demands, and judges these to be unreasonable insofar as they are imposed without our agreement. The distributive objection focuses on the advantages, and judges these to be unreasonable insofar as they work to the detriment of those who are needier.

And, yet, there is a tenacious strand of ordinary moral opinion that dismisses both objections, and continues to see associative duties as central components of moral experience. In so doing, it recognizes some claims upon us whose source lies neither in our own choices nor in the needs of others, but rather in the complex and constantly evolving constellation of social and historical relations into which we enter the moment we are born. For we are, after all, born to parents we did not choose at a time we did not choose; and we land in some region we did not choose of a social world we did not choose. And, from the moment of our birth and sometimes sooner, claims are made on us and for us and to us. We are claimed by families and clans, by nations and states, by races and religions, by cultures and communities and classes — all clamoring to confer privileges and responsibilities upon us, and to initiate us into their histories and their traditions, their sorrows and their joys, their passions and their hatreds, their wisdom and their follies. And if, in due course, we inject our own wills into this mix — straining against some ties and embracing others, sometimes severing old bonds and sometimes acquiring new ones — the verdict of common moral opinion seems to be that we can never simply wipe the slate clean. Our specific historical and social identities, as they develop and evolve over time, continue to call forth claims with which we must reckon: claims that cannot without distortion be construed as contractual in character, and which are not reduced to silence by general considerations of need.

At the same time, the voluntarist and distributive objections are not themselves alien to ordinary moral opinion, for both of them are rooted in values that are also securely entrenched within modern moral thought. The voluntarist objection grows out of an ideal of freedom and autonomy which is one of the hallmarks of a liberal society and which has a central place in our evaluative outlook. The distributive objection is rooted in a principle of equality which is also a fundamental tenet of modern moral thought, and which asserts that all people, however varied their relations to us may happen to be, are nevertheless of equal value and importance. The problem, then, is not that these objections to associative duties are alien to us. On the contrary, the problem is that both associative duties and the values that generate objections to them exert genuine authority within our moral thought, so that what might otherwise be a mere clash of philosophical positions is instead a deep conflict within contemporary moral life.

V.

This brings us back to the point from which we began. As we seek to orient ourselves in relation to the conflicting tendencies toward global integration and communal differentiation that I mentioned at the outset of this lecture, no resource would be more helpful than a settled conception of our responsibilities toward others. Unfortunately, however, this is a resource we can suppose ourselves to possess only if we are prepared to repudiate some of the values we hold dearest. For, in the end, those values pull us in genuinely different directions on questions of responsibility. We prize our freedom to choose, and thus to control the extent of our duties to others. Yet we are committed to the equality of persons, and are sensitive to claims of need that do not themselves spring from choices we have made. Moreover, most of us recognize a region of moral space that is occupied by claims deriving neither from our own choices nor from the needs of others, but rather from our membership in particular groups and our participation in particular relationships. So it is little wonder, then, that we tend to flounder as we confront a world in which the boundaries of responsibility are increasingly contested. We are swayed by the sophisticated, cosmopolitan rhetoric of global integration, and we are genuinely moved by scenes of starvation and disease in faraway lands, but, at the same time, we resist those ideas of global justice that might broaden the scope of our own responsibility and threaten our standard of living. We recoil in horror from the bloody ethnic conflicts of which television has made us all spectators, but we celebrate diversity and difference and are suspicious of the idea of a common culture. We decry the fragmentation of our societies, but we seek above all else to protect and promote the interests of those who are dearest to us. We insist on our status as autonomous agents and on the centrality of our freedom to choose, but increasingly we see ourselves as victims and blame others for our misfortunes, as if to indicate how little we see our own choices as counting for in a world of complex interdependencies, massive institutional structures, and breathtaking new technologies. In all of these ways and more, we reveal that we have lost any sure sense of our responsibilities toward others and their responsibilities toward us. The idea of associative duties, important as it continues to be to us, can by itself provide no solution to this problem. Instead, the quest for a satisfactory conception of associative duties is but one part of a much larger task: the task of trying to identify a conception of responsibility we can live with in a world where the

distribution of responsibility has become one of the most divisive questions of all.¹⁴

NOTES

1. Recent discussions of these responsibilities include: Ronald Dworkin, *Law's Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 195-216; Alan Gewirth, "Ethical Universalism and Particularism," *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988), pp. 283-302; Robert Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Alasdair MacIntyre, "Is Patriotism a Virtue?" *The Lindley Lecture* (University of Kansas, 1984); Andrew Oldenquist, "Loyalties," *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982), pp. 173-93; Christina Hoff Sommers, "Filiat Morality," *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986), pp. 439-456.

2. The term 'associative duties' is adapted from Dworkin, who uses the term 'associative obligations' instead. Although philosophers often use the terms 'duty' and 'obligation', interchangeably, to refer to moral requirements of any kind, the term 'obligation' is also used, more narrowly, to refer to moral requirements deriving from promises or agreements, or from other voluntary acts. For reasons that will soon become clear, it seems to me important to avoid using terminology that might appear to imply that the responsibilities I am concerned with are best understood in voluntaristic terms. Hence my preference for the word 'duty' in this context.

3. See H.L.A. Hart, "Are There Any Natural Rights?" *Philosophical Review* 64 (1955), pp. 175-91; W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), p. 27.

4. For a recent discussion of such duties, see Shelly Kagan, "Causation and Responsibility," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1988), pp. 293-302.

5. The next several pages draw on, modify, and develop some brief remarks I made in Section II of "Individual Responsibility in a Global Age," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 12 (1995).

6. The special duties of doctors to their patients, lawyers to their clients, and teachers to their students are sometimes grouped together with those mentioned in the text, although it may seem misleading to think of such duties as arising from shared membership in a group or participation in a personal relationship. In a recent essay, Michael Hardimon distinguishes between associative duties and what he calls "role obligations," but he includes within the second of these categories many duties, such as the duties of family members to each other, that clearly do count as associative duties in my sense. See M. Hardimon, "Role Obligations," *Journal of Philosophy* 91 (1994), pp. 333-363.

7. These points are all emphasized by Sidgwick in *The Methods of Ethics* [seventh edition] (London: Macmillan and Company, 1907), Book III, Chapters IV and XI.

8. On the voluntary acceptance of benefits as a source of special responsibilities, see Hart, "Are There Any Natural Rights?"; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 111-14, 342-50, 376-7. For criticism, see Dworkin, *Law's Empire*, pp. 193-5; Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 90-95; A. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), Chapter V.

9. Utilitarian accounts of associative duties, while not most naturally described as assimilationist in quite this sense, share with assimilationist treatments the feature of not taking associative duties to constitute a fundamental moral category. For examples, see Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, Book IV (especially Chapter III, section 3); R.M. Hare, *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 135-40.

10. As Dworkin points out in *Law's Empire*, p. 197.

11. Robert Goodin's attempt, in *Protecting the Vulnerable*, to assimilate special duties as a whole to duties deriving from special need, seems to me similarly illustrative of this tendency.

12. The idea that there are associative duties at this level has a long history, and it is an explicit or implicit theme of contemporary "communitarian" writers. See, for example, Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 179. In recent years, some liberal theorists have also endorsed the idea. See, in addition to Dworkin's discussion in *Law's Empire*, Yael Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 99-102, 130-9. Also relevant is Neil MacCormick, "Nation and Nationalism," in his *Legal Right and Social Democracy: Essays in Legal and Social Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 247-264.

13. For an account of the duty to keep one's promises that emphasizes the interests of promisors, see Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 173-6. For accounts that emphasize the interests of promisees, see Neil MacCormick, "Voluntary Obligations and Normative Powers I," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Suppl. Vol. 46 (1972), pp. 59-78; Thomas Scanlon, "Promises and Practices," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 19 (1990), pp. 199-226. For criticism of MacCormick, see Joseph Raz, "Voluntary Obligations and Normative Powers II," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Suppl. Vol. 46 (1972), pp. 79-101. Other important contemporary discussions include Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 344-50; Raz, "Promises and Obligations," in *Law, Morality, and Society: Essays in Honour of H.L.A. Hart*, ed. P.M.S. Hacker and Joseph Raz (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); John Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), Chapters 3 and 8.

14. I am indebted to David Gill and Eric Rakowski for valuable comments on an earlier version of this lecture.

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