

*POLITICAL OBLIGATIONS*, by George Klosko. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 276 pp. \$74.00 (cloth).

During the preceding twenty years, George Klosko has devoted a significant amount of thought and effort to developing a “satisfactory” answer to the question of why citizens should believe themselves and others to be obliged to respect laws with which they disagree or otherwise perceive to be detrimental to their well-being. In *The Principle of Fairness and Political Obligation*, first published in 1992 (Rowman and Littlefield; new edition, 2004), Klosko presents a theory of political obligation premised upon the principle of fairness, understood to require “the just distribution of benefits and burdens” (2004, p. 34). Fulfilling such a condition entails reciprocity in the sense that “[i]ndividuals who benefit from the cooperative efforts of others have obligations to cooperate as well” (2004, p. 34). Klosko proclaimed such an approach to be superior to its principal competitors—namely, theories of obligation founded upon either utilitarianism or consent—though by no means problem-free. After further reflection, he concluded that a theory of political obligation based upon a single principle, whether it be fairness, consent, gratitude, utility, a natural duty of justice, or any other, “has important limitations” (p. 98) that prevent it from establishing obligations to support the “entire range” of public goods necessary for a “satisfactory” life, as such is typically understood by the citizens of contemporary Western liberal democracies.

In *Political Obligations*, Klosko develops a “multiple principle” (MP) theory of political obligation, which “extends” the argument he first developed in *The Principle of Fairness*. Though Klosko’s MP theory continues to rely significantly upon the principle of fairness to justify political obligations, it also employs the principles of natural duty and “common good” to assist in that endeavor. The former establishes a requirement for people to “help others who are in severe need or distress”—“a duty of mutual aid” (p. 105)—while the latter justifies obligations to support the state when it undertakes “reasonable measures to promote the common good” in ways not provided for via the principles of fairness and natural duty (p. 111).

Klosko’s argument in favor of an MP theory is a consequence of his belief that a “fully adequate” theory of political obligation must 1) possess an ability “to ground obligations of all or virtually all citizens ... and to support a full range of governmental functions” (p. 100); 2) accept that the obligations it promotes, though significant, “can be overridden by countervailing factors” (p. 11); and 3) recognize that most citizens have a “special relationship” with their government, a strong bond generated by, for example, their willingness to remain under its authority or receive benefits from it. To the extent that a theory exhibits such characteristics, it satisfies the demands of “generality,” “comprehensiveness,” “limited force,” and “particularity” (respectively), a condition necessary for realizing a “fully adequate” theory. Ideally, a theory of political obligation “should [also] explain why citizens of existing societies ... have moral requirements to obey the laws of their societies” (p. 13), though it need not do so in order to be successful.

Klosko demonstrates that, for various reasons, principles of obligation other than fairness “encounter difficulties in grounding obligation to core functions [of the state]” (p. 8). However, though the principle of fairness can establish obligations to support “indispensable” and related “discretionary” public goods—those that are critical to an “acceptable” life and can only be provided effectively by the state, such as national defense and law and order, and

those needed to support such activities, such as transportation and communication facilities—it is unable to do the same for the “entire range” of public goods required for a satisfactory life. Governments, Klosko observes, have traditionally been responsible for providing not only indispensable and related discretionary public goods, but also a variety of other goods, such as public parks, recreational facilities, libraries, and certain social welfare and educational programs, which, though not “indispensable,” significantly improve the quality of citizens’ lives. Klosko contends that a theory of political obligation must be able to establish obligations to all of the aforementioned goods if it is to provide the foundation for a “satisfactory” life; in turn, only an MP theory can effectively satisfy that criterion.

The need to provide for discretionary and (especially) other public goods that “make for more pleasant and productive societies” (p. 104) embodies Klosko’s belief that a satisfactory theory of political obligation must reflect the empirical realities of the society for which it is designed, a requirement that he suggests is too often—indeed, typically—overlooked. Thus, for example, the principles animating a theory of obligation must be compatible with citizens’ “other basic moral principles,” such as the need for democratic decision-making (p. 9). Klosko reviews judicial decisions in the US, Germany and Israel and examines the beliefs/attitudes of actual citizens in order to determine how both “the state itself” and ordinary citizens understand the idea of political obligations. He concludes that the understandings expressed by judiciaries and citizens correspond quite well with the premises that inform his proposed MP theory.

Klosko notes that his theory is intended as “a contribution to liberal political theory,” which means, among other things, that it assumes the primacy of the individual, the value of (negative) freedom, and the necessity of the state (p. 3). Those assumptions and various other aspects of Klosko’s argument can be expected to provoke a lively debate among those concerned with developing a “fully adequate” theory of political obligation. Among the claims likely to prove contentious is Klosko’s suggestion that the notion of “reciprocal obligations” based on the principle of fairness can legitimately be understood to require religious seminary (Yeshivot) students in Israel to submit to mandatory military service. And though he acknowledges the problem, the relative sparseness of the empirical evidence he employs to support his assertions concerning the compatibility between his proposed MP theory, judicial decisions and the beliefs/attitudes of actual citizens is also likely to generate criticism.

In *Political Obligations*, Klosko seeks to do what many have argued cannot be done: namely, develop a “satisfactory” liberal theory of political obligation. He offers a sophisticated yet extremely accessible and engaging analysis of the difficulties associated with that task and the requirements for its successful completion. Whether his argument is persuasive will undoubtedly be a matter of debate. Nevertheless, his study represents a valuable, original and eloquent contribution to the existing scholarship, one certain to attract widespread attention and stimulate new thinking about the character of political obligation in contemporary liberal democracies.

—Shaun P. Young  
York University