Republican Political Obligation and Political Community

Introduction
The debate around the context in which we can think of political communities in a changing world relates to current practice, as well as to unresolved theoretical ‘quarrels’. One of these theoretical ‘quarrels’ to which I think it relates in an important way is the debate around the notion of political obligation. This debate brings the discussion away from a mainly empirical and spatial sort of imagery, and ties it to more substantial, justificatory matters. Thus, in trying to answer foundational questions like ‘what is political community and how is it constituted’ or ‘can, or should the nation-state be the primary vehicle of political community’ I think that we need to look further, into the debate surrounding the thorny issue of political obligation.

Whether we think of trans-national groups or of intra-national groups (or, in other words, of the globalizing or localizing tendencies currently invoked) that both challenge the nation-state as the locus of political community, it becomes apparent upon reflection that the underlying concern is with the motivation and sense of political obligation that animates individuals who act collectively. I do not take the usual, restrictive approach to political obligation understood mainly as obedience to laws, but rather conceptualize it in a broader sense that can account for political action or political engagement. I will thus focus in this paper, on one theoretical strand of thought that supports this richer understanding of political obligation.

In this paper, I endeavour to find the best justification of political obligation that contemporary republicanism can afford and reflect on its implications for the way we envisage ‘political community’. I propose to reflect on the above foundational questions from the theoretical perspective of contemporary republicanism for two reasons. First, contemporary republican theories in their different specifications refer us to a political
community bounded by a nation-state, but also to cosmopolitan formats of political community. Thus, the most general question underlying this paper is whether a republican justification of political obligation would be able to accommodate a nation-state setting for political community, as well as cosmopolitan settings. At this stage, this is a highly speculative question, and though the paper is not meant to solve this question or address it directly, it is meant to shed some light on it. The second reason for choosing republicanism is that this theoretical standpoint aspires to give a normative explanation not only for the formal side of ‘political community’ (whether it is basically constrained within a nation-state format or is represented by a cosmopolitan vision of political community), but also for the ‘nature’ of political community (how it is seen to work and for what reasons).

Though historically republicanism has mostly stood for a statist, centralist notion of political community, contemporary theories of republicanism exhibit a diversity of views, from a transnational notion of republicanism through a national-identity based one, to a branch of republicanism with a focus on civil society. Among the varieties of contemporary republican arguments, one brings into discussion the idea of a republican European Union (see Richard Bellamy and Dario Castiglione). A second bases republican citizenship and the vision of political community on national identity (see David Miller) and the third works with a notion of political community of Toquevilleian inspiration, which though still within the boundaries of the state, presents a fragmented view of the nation-state and is represented by groups of individuals watching against wrongful, state actions. (see Philip Pettit and Maurizio Viroli).

Upon reflection, a notion of political obligation, though having received little attention from contemporary republican authors, appears to hold the key in the assessment of contemporary republicanism. It also underlies our notions of political community. This is not to say that we could not conceptualize political community in the absence of a notion of political obligation. It could be said that we can speak of a notion of political community without making recourse to any further justificatory element, by simply taking the empirical, political formats of our times as given. Also, the controversial nature of political obligation should be clearly recognized from the beginning, as some theorists argue that there is no such thing as political obligation incumbent on citizens of contemporary nation-states.

In my opinion though, any notion of political community, whether we think of a nation-state based political community or of more cosmopolitan visions of political community requires a
general theory of justification that is able to tell us what makes a political community hold. That can tell us, in other words what binds otherwise separate individuals into a political body that can claim their allegiance. And, as far as I can see, the most natural general theory of justification should be one of political obligation, as this provides a needed normative story of the relations between the members of a political community. In the absence of such a normative justification, I do not see how a notion of political community can claim legitimacy or can be sustainable. What is also entailed in the above claims is that my understanding of ‘political obligation’ focuses not on the usual rendering of an obligation to obey the laws of the polity, but on more inter-personal obligations. Of course an obligation to obey the law can be conceived as an obligation we owe to our compatriots, on the fair-play account for example, but the point rather is that, in my attempt to think of a notion of political community through the lens of political obligation from a republican perspective, I am trying to account for a much richer palette of obligations and a more substantive understanding of political community beyond mere formal structures or prudential arguments. I thus think that we need to reflect on the notion of political community from a normative point of view and that one such normative standpoint provided by contemporary republican theories could offer us some food for thought on the future of political community.

The value of ‘civic virtue’ that lies at the core of a republican theory, understood here as a shorthand for civic engagement on the part of citizens, and seen to take full expression in the related concepts of self-government, participation and deliberation ultimately needs a grounding other than supererogatory actions on the part of virtuous individuals. It ultimately needs an argument about the kind of political community we can normatively envisage and justify. The general dissatisfaction with contemporary republicanism refers not only to the many times sketchy character of its arguments, but connectedly and more substantively, to the apparent couching of these arguments in virtue ethics, rather than issues of justice, of rights and duties. It seems to me that the only way to dispel the most common suspicion that republican theories ultimately bring nothing more argumentatively palpable than the ideal of a polity based on the exhortation to virtue of character, is to try to provide a republican notion of political obligation. I will try to find out in this paper what such a republican notion of the most persuasive kind might look like and what its implications would be for the way we conceive of political community.
Unless republican authors only want to say that there are these nice values like civic engagement and deliberation that citizens should embrace because they bring positive effects to one’s life more generally, which seems fairly trivial and sounds like wishful-thinking, then they need to make some substantive arguments that incorporate and justify these values. The more ambitious claim, which we find in the work of instrumental republicans like Philip Pettit and in that of authors like Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt, (and which, in my opinion, is the driving force of a republican theory that attempts a serious contribution) is that such values can represent the key to the sustainability of democratic systems and freedom of individuals.

Unless there is concerted citizen interest and participation in public matters, the argument goes, democratic values and the security of individuals’ freedom are jeopardized in the long-run. In the absence of a strong civil society, cherished liberal values cannot be safeguarded as if by default. To this, it could be said that such a strategy takes us away from anything to do with political obligation insofar as it suggests that these values should be adopted instrumentally, for practical reasons, which might in turn be taken to imply that they are external to our normative understanding of morality. However, the differences between instrumental republicans and authors who are said to advocate a more substantive justification of republicanism are exaggerated, and pointing to the instrumental value of certain attributes or actions does not mean that these very same attributes or actions cannot be upheld for more substantive reasons. On the one hand, instrumental republicans seem to assume that such values are not only necessary from a prudential point of view, but that they are natural in some sense that needs further clarification. On the other hand, authors like Hannah Arendt, who is usually referred to as the proponent of a substantive, Aristotelian form of republicanism that takes political engagement to be the good life, also reflects, at the core of her argument, and in light of the experience of totalitarianism, on the importance of individuals’ membership in a well-defined and recognized political body. Citizenship, understood in the rich, republican way, is thus for Arendt, not only the best way of life, but also a necessary safeguard for individual security. And while, we may reasonably have doubts about the first tendency in Arendt’s argument, it seems uncontroversial that individuals fare better when members of a polity. This, in itself, does not leave the liberal grounds of political thought. The republican claim, however, is that it is not only the security of individuals in a physical sense that is improved by membership in a polity, but also a moral sense of security. And while this could be stretched as far as to refer to some form of flourishing along the lines
of a substantive notion of republicanism, I think that the basic claim is that by being members of a polity, individuals’ moral status is changed in such a way that they come to take responsibility not only for their own, personal lives, but also for the more general, social and political environment of the polity they belong to. In that sense, the active exercise of citizenship that republicans advocate is taken to be an expression of this altered moral status, which is indicative of the membership in a political community, but it is also taken to provide real, long-term protection for the individuals’ freedoms and the democratic values that the polities are expected to embody.

Republican arguments are most generally built around the idea of a thick understanding and practice of citizenship as a norm in political societies, and political obligation is taken to entail moral requirements on the behavior of ordinary individuals in relation to their membership in a political community. It has to be said though that this formulation and the related ‘particularity requirement’ articulated by Simmons (according to which a justification of political obligation should show why the obligations are owed to a particular set of people or institutions) would be denied by natural duty theorists who believe that political obligations are owed to people or institutions in general. We need to consider here whether the most compelling republican theory would stay faithful to the ‘particularity requirement’ or whether it can just as well refer to universal duties that obliterate the political dimension and take strength from the field of morality in general. Could there be such a generally moral duty to be a good citizen that would be comparable to the duty not to bodily harm others? Is being a good citizen part of an ordinary understanding of general morality? In general, if we look at the most relevant contemporary republican theories, we would not say that they support a general duty approach to a republican notion of political obligation. Philip Pettit looks to identification with groups of ascriptive belonging for platforms of individual political mobilization\(^1\), while David Miller adopts a more clearly particularistic strategy in arguing that national identity could represent the basis for a republican form of citizenship.\(^2\) Finally, Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt argue that reasoned communication is an important structure of reference for individuals and that it is best expressed in the deliberation among citizens, both formal and informal, which underlies the process of law-making. According to

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this last view, individuals qua citizens see themselves as the authors of the laws that govern their particular political community. Here again, there is a close connection to a particular legislative system authored by a particular set of people.

Usually, the moral behavior invoked in the understanding of political obligation has been summed up by the idea of an obligation of obedience to laws and there has been wide disagreement as to how one might proceed about justifying it. It needs to be clearly recognized that the task of justifying political obligation in the classical, limited sense of obedience to laws has proven a difficult one. With the more classical, liberal voluntarist justifications for political obligation having been exposed as ‘fictitious’, and a general difficulty in the liberal camp to square what could seem to be core liberal issues in tension (the liberal issue of the moral autonomy of the individual versus the liberal emphasis on the importance of a legitimate state) the debate scene was open to philosophical anarchist arguments. A simple argument of liberal intuition like that invoking the moral autonomy of the individual against political obligation brought further disarray to the discussion. Some, taking a more qualified, skeptical view, just pointed out that there may be good-enough reasons to obey the law like the need for coordination, even though there is no general obligation.

The three most distinctive theoretical efforts to come up with a justification, the associative obligations theory, the fair-play theory, and the natural duty theory have all found their critics and there does not seem to be any emerging consensus in the promise. From that point of view it may seem reckless to try to add one more attempt at justifying political obligations to what is an already multi-voiced debate. More importantly, a republican notion of political obligation would have to wrestle with not only obedience to laws but a much more extensive range of political obligations like political participation, political deliberation, and concern for co-citizens that could go as far as to require under certain conditions an obligation to uphold redistributive economic measures. On the other hand, such a notion could provide a justification of political community that does not simply acknowledge it as a prudential matter or as an empirical given without a story to be told.

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So, what are the prospects of a persuasive republican notion of political obligation and what are the specific grounds on which it can be justified, as well as the specific obligations it can entail? If one tries to place intuitively a republican notion of political obligation on the map of the ongoing debates, one could very well find herself at a loss. It is first of all important to settle on the preferred outline of a republican theory as this may take various shapes. A republican theory based on national identity conceived in a certain way will unavoidably elicit a substantially different justification for political obligation than a theory built around the importance of laws and a practice of civic authorship that informs those laws. It could be at first contended, however, that a republican notion of political obligation of whatever specification most likely belongs to a family of theories of associative obligations since it insists in whatever shape or form on the individual’s dependence on social contexts of belonging. In less ambiguous terms this can mean different things if looked at from the perspective of three republican theories. In the case of an instrumental republican theory as the one advocated by Philip Pettit, it refers to the idea that individual freedom of non-domination cannot be ensured unless the vulnerability group one is part of, is on the whole strengthened against domination. In the case of a republican theory of citizenship that relies on national identity, the claim is that individuals identify with a public, national culture, and that participation in the public debates that inform the public culture is an important part of who they are. Finally, in the case of a republican theory that emphasizes the importance of laws and the citizen debate, both formal and informal that underlies the laws in an ongoing process of collective, constitutional authorship or self-government (see Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas), the dependence usually referred to takes the form of collegiality in sustaining a strong sense of civil society. If a strong civil society is a necessary requirement for the legitimization of democratic systems, according to Habermas, and if democratic systems are taken to be valuable to individuals, then it turns out that individuals are dependent on the collaboration with co-citizens in the maintenance of civil society. At this point, it is not clear, though, whether such dependence as expressed in the instances of justification above is enough to give us an associative obligations account. It may be that the justification of republican political obligations is drawn from somewhere else than a straightforward, associative account.
The associative obligations account

Let us explore in the following the details and implications of political obligation from a republican perspective if viewed as a form of associative obligations. According to the associative obligations account, people incur obligations because they are part of groups defined by social practice within which they fulfill certain roles characterized by certain duties or, according to a more individualized account, because they fulfill institutional roles in their every-day lives, which are characterized by certain role specifications. To put it more simply, political obligation is taken to flow from mere membership in a political community. Unless, however, there are practices in place where obligations towards the other members of the group are manifested, no obligations can be said to exist. Thus, even for those theorists who do not acknowledge it quite as explicitly as others, mere membership is not enough to ground political obligation from an associative perspective. As Yael Tamir puts it, in the explicit version of this argument, “If someone acquires, by birth, citizenship in a state he despises, his formal membership cannot serve as grounds for generating obligations to that state.”

In less explicit terms, other proponents of an associative obligations account also add as necessary conditions on top of mere membership a more or less conscious identification with one’s polity and recognition of the obligations by individuals or the principle of reflective acceptability of role obligations. These authors, however, lay the emphasis on mere membership or occupancy of a role as the ground for political obligations.

Because the argument from associative obligations is thus constructed in two steps, by first saying that obligations flow from mere membership, and then adding that identification with the polity or recognition on the part of individuals of those obligations are necessary, further conditions, it is not as open to one particular criticism as it might first appear. The criticism is that people can simply misidentify or be wrong about their obligations, and thus the mere fact that they think they have certain political obligations does not really ground them normatively. Because some of the main supporters of the argument from associative

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5 See Ronald Dworkin, Law’s Empire, Fontana Press, 1986
8 see John Horton, Political Obligation, Humanities Press Intern., 1992, p.154
9 see Hardimon, op.cit.
10 for this criticism, see for example Richard Dagger, Membership, Fair Play, and Political Obligation, in Political Studies: 2000, vol 48, p.109
obligations also stipulate that obligations flow from membership as such, the above criticism does not apply with as much force as it would if the argument were to rest only on identification with one’s polity of belonging. The thing to note from the outset is that an associative obligations account seems to be most in line with our immediate intuitions or commonsense morality. Most of us identify with our families, friends and countrymen and act on that identification in some relevant way that is absent from our interactions with strangers, or citizens of other countries. Most of us thus think that we owe more to these categories of people to whom we are connected via some relevant relationship than to those to whom we are not connected at all. The stipulation of obligations is based on a preexisting practice of obligations. In other words, this notion of obligation rests by definition on contingent realities.

The second crucial observation regarding associative obligations as currently understood is that they are generally taken to be conditioned by background, moral principles like those of fairness and justice. Thus, associative obligations can be disregarded if they are shown to entail serious contradictions to external moral principles. This opens such theories to the charge that critics like John Simmons make that in effect, this means that associative obligations are thus rendered into lower order obligations that lack full normative force. We should not be, however, too quick in admitting Simmons right in his criticism. As John Horton contends, the fact that political obligations are not taken to exist in some kind of moral vacuum, does not by necessity mean that they lack normative force as long as political obligations are not justified in terms of those external moral principles. The charge more generally, however, is that associative obligations grounded on membership solely are blind to issues of justice, and when they do eventually invoke the justice of the association as a necessary condition of authorization, they unavoidably forsake their original and main justification. In order to assess this criticism, I think we should refer to the way theorists who support associative obligations usually proceed. They usually construct an analogical argument and try to explain political obligation on the analogy with more common obligations like those of family or friends. If we just think of family obligations or friends’ purported obligations, I think that one strategy in answering the above criticism is to point out that the roles of family members and friends are already imbued with a moral status. In other words, morality is the very texture of such roles. Apart from any mere, biological definition of parents or family members in general, parents are who they are because, as occupants of these

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11 see for example both Hardimon and Dworkin
12 see John Horton, Political Obligation, pp.156-7
roles, they have to fulfill certain moral requirements. Of course there can be and indeed are bad parents and bad sons and daughters out there, but the roles as such are defined by moral qualities, which one can manage or fail to fulfill. It is true, however, that in the case of the authors who mainly support associative obligations it is not clear if and how this carries through to political obligations, but I think the idea of republican citizenship (and its inherent obligations) as a valuable, morally worthy notion is part of a republican argument. In that sense, the criticism could be addressed by pointing to the in-built values of republican citizenship that would preclude unjust practices and guard against conventionalism.

The third feature of an associative obligations account reveals the theory’s main weakness. Though some of the accounts of associative political obligations do not work with the more communitarian view that individuals not only have to recognize or identify with the groups or communities of which they are part of, but also have to view that relationship as a constitutive and essential part of their identity, they all stipulate indeed that people in general recognize the existence of such associative relationships and consequent obligations. This readily triggers the empiricist criticism that such theories that rely on a uniform description of social realities cannot account for a diversity of individual attitudes and social environments. They fail, in other words, to explain what happens when individuals do not identify with their associational environments or social roles and thus, because of the way in which the argument is built to depend on that antecedent identification, do not incur political obligations. Making partial amendments to what purports to be a general justification of political obligation (which is, after all, what is at stake in this debate) as Yael Tamir does in her theory of associative obligations, when contending that those individuals who do not identify with the national group, and will thus not incur obligations, can instead be obligated by the principle of fair-play is bound to be unconvincing and undermine the generality claim of the theory in the first place.13

An interesting account of political obligation along associative lines and one which resonates with a republican view is that proposed by John Horton, who builds his argument around the analogy of obligations that family members have to one another with those that citizens might have to one another. This author claims, however, that what brings about obligations is not emotional bonds. His is a theory that in effect claims that most individuals are in fact bound

by political obligation even if they might explicitly refuse it, because of the unavoidability of political life and the feelings and attitudes associated with it, as for example feelings of guilt, shame, disapproval or pride at one’s government’s actions. As the argument goes, even when these feelings are absent, one cannot avoid being engulfed in a political practice of norms and rules pertaining to the political community in such a way that she is implicitly recognizing the political obligations associated with the political community. Horton starts from a view according to which political obligations are inherent in membership in a political community, and obligations define the status of members.

The attractiveness of Horton’s explanation of political obligation comes from his recognition that there need not be and indeed there usually is not an emotional, uncritical sort of identification with the polity one is member of, but there is a relevant, though diluted sense in which individuals identify with the political actions that represent the polity. This identification does not occur necessarily in a positive sense, but in a general sense of taking responsibility, of recognizing that those particular actions were performed in one’s name. It seems plausible, at least from a republican perspective, to say that political identification is actually all the more stringent when the individual is opposed to the actions of one’s government. Underlying such a seemingly paradoxical claim is the idea that individuals as citizens view themselves as the authors or rather the persons responsible for their government’s actions: “For there is an important, though limited, sense in which we understand ourselves as the author of such actions, even when we oppose them: they are the actions of our polity, the polity of which we are members.”

Thus, what justifies the analogy between a family and a polity in Horton’s view is not emotional bonding, but a technical similarity: the fact that we are born into a family just as we are usually born into a polity, and that as it happens, in both cases we incur obligations just because of this very fact of unavoidable membership.

But, is this an approach we could associate with a republican argument for political obligation? The view that individuals qua citizens conceive of themselves as authors of the polity’s laws and have a general sense of responsibility towards their government’s actions is very much in line with one strategy for republican virtue identified in the works of Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt. The argument that political obligation flows from mere

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15 *idem.*
membership in a political community appears to be, however, insufficient in grounding republican values like civic participation or commitment to deliberation. The fact that individuals are members of a political community does not explain why they should see themselves as the authors or those responsible for the polity’s laws and actions. This associative obligations account, though attractive insofar as it provides a politicized understanding of identification in line with republican arguments proves unsuccessful in bridging the conceptual gap and convincing us of the usefulness of the analogy between political obligations and familial obligations. It may be interesting to point out that familial obligations could be seen to be divided into basic obligations of care and provision and advanced obligations of moral provision (for example obligations of love and moral support). I argue that, if we conceptualize familial obligations in this two-tier structure it is hard to see how the latter kind of obligations can register as obligations in the absence of emotional bonds to motivate them. Similarly, we may be prompted to think that in order to justify political obligations of the more demanding, republican type we need something more than mere membership to work with.

In the case of political obligations what seems to count is the idea that individuals *qua* citizens are characterized by a sense of ‘authorship’ and responsibility for the political actions of their governments, and consequently feel obliged, as Horton economically puts it, to take account of “the interests and welfare of one’s polity”. Horton claims that mere membership can explain this attitude on which political obligation is based and that political obligation consequently stands in need of no further moral justification. This is highly implausible, and membership in a political community may be a *sine qua non*, but it cannot be a sufficient condition.

**The Republican Argument for Political Obligation**

Having in mind these general characteristics and problems facing an associative obligation strategy of justification, let us consider what a specifically republican argument would look like. Such arguments for a republican political obligation from an associative point of view are those offered by Iseult Honohan and Andrew Mason. Neither uses the analogy between obligations among citizens and family obligations. The first author proposes to explain political obligations on the analogy with obligations that colleagues have to each other and the

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16 Horton, op.cit., p.169
second uses the comparison with the obligations friends have to one another. Honohan suggests that interdependence and the intrinsic value of citizenship could ground political obligations, while Mason concentrates on constructing an argument for the intrinsic value of citizenship. In the following, I will investigate to what extent these arguments can be successful.

Honohan uses the analogy between citizens and colleagues and proceeds to argue that just as colleagues can be seen to be bound by certain obligations to each other because of the institutionalized practice of which they are all members, so citizens may be thought to be bound by political obligations pertaining to the politically organized world of which they are part of. She suggests that political obligation in a republican vein is grounded in interdependence, in the engagement of citizens in a polity, and generally in the valuable relationships among citizens. The immediate problem we are faced with, as already anticipated is to decide why people should find a republican notion of citizenship valuable and whether they actually do. Since, as it becomes apparent along this particular line of argument, only “those who recognize their interdependence can accept responsibilities to fellow citizens”\(^\text{17}\), it follows that it is of the utmost importance that the recognition of this grounding republican condition is clearly established.

So, is interdependence enough to ground republican political obligations? ‘Interdependence’ is a buzz word in contemporary republican theories, and one which is difficult to pin down. According to Honohan, “A republic is a political community of those who recognize their interdependence and subjection to a common fate and common concerns.”\(^\text{18}\) So, could we draw from this that a republic is a special kind of political community and not all political communities will even be expected to exhibit republican political obligations? While republicanism proposes an ideal normative vision of politics and society, it must claim to have some descriptive relevance. The question here is whether this descriptive relevance is taken to be partial, reserved to certain types of countries where certain criteria are met, or whether it can be taken to apply to all contemporary political communities. The first thing to emphasize, in my opinion, is that the republican argument should be taken to refer only to liberal democratic political systems. Political obligation theorists are many times equivocal when it comes to the applicability of their theories and seem to assume that their preferred theory of


\(^{18}\) Iseult Honohan, *Civic Republicanism*, p.285
justification could be applied to any political community. Republican authors, however, cannot afford such equivocation because their argument is inherently entangled with the democratic argument pertaining to liberal democratic systems. Thus, thinking back to Horton’s associativist argument for political obligation, we could say, even at a general level, that a republican argument would add to a view about obligations flowing from membership, a conception of politics that points not only to a procedural reading of democracy, but one that requires a substantive specification, according to which the legitimacy of democratic governments and political processes comes from civic authorization. According to this view, the bindingness of the fundamental law and of the legislative process based on it is dependent on a constant process of authorization by the people to which the fundamental law applies.19 Thus, the idea of self-government is at the core of this rich democratic republican vision of politics. This will inevitably have serious normative consequences for a republican conception of political obligation.

If interdependence is taken to ground political obligation under the republican view, we need to define what it might mean: “Interdependence grounds bonds and obligations between those who find themselves in a polity and are thereby vulnerable to common risks and have the potential opportunity to be mutually self-governing.”20 The first interpretation that comes to mind is that of interdependence in the assurance of public goods. Unless people cooperate, clean streets or clean air will not be readily available. Then, there is a more general sense of interdependence in which our lives, as members of a particular state are characterized by certain common features like visa restrictions, specific laws and regulations or economic policies that we are all governed by as members of a particular state. Also, as members of a specific community, we are interdependent insofar as we speak a common language, we share a ‘cultural vocabulary’, and our lives are characterized by common concerns. I think that the notion is most commonly understood by republican authors in a very general sense, to refer to the common world citizens of a specific state share by virtue of being part of a specific political entity that is characterized by specific laws and a specific political system. On the analogy between citizens and colleagues that Iseult Honohan proposes in justifying political obligation, just as colleagues are interdependent insofar as they share a specific practice and a specific work environment, so citizens are taken to be interdependent in sharing a certain

20 Iseult Honohan, Civic Republicanism, p.165
political and social life defined by specific institutions. Finally, the most abstract understanding of interdependence and the one which attempts to reach into the republican core is that of interdependence in the securing of political autonomy. According to this view, one owes participation to one’s fellow citizens because otherwise, one would endanger other’s chances to political autonomy. This other-regarding strategy of the political autonomy argument does not make much sense, however, unless it is actually backed up by a conception of the person that will obviously not be atomist, and that will have as integral part the idea that political autonomy is important to individuals.

The above attempts at specifying what is meant by interdependence and how it could be seen to ground political obligations under a republican heading still retain some opacity. Let us try to think of an example that might help us to imagine how interdependence actually works. Let us think of a small postgraduate college where students take an active role in organizing themselves into a community. They have volunteers who act as social secretary, as financial assistant or assistant in charge of the gym and all other services at the disposal of the group of students. They meet on a regular basis to discuss the academic as well as administrative issues concerning the life of the college and propose actions for its improvement. Minutes are taken at the meetings where new resolutions are proposed, and they also collect money at the end of each academic year for charity purposes. They can only hope to keep some services running if they act in this concerted way, if, in other words, enough student members of the college will feel it necessary to volunteer for posts and participate in the collectively organized activities. The most natural way to deal with free-riders will be a deontological one: they will be reminded about the intrinsic good of the community and be made to feel that they have failed in their role as college members by not taking active part in the activities of the college. It will be expected that student members will generally find it natural to take upon them the task of self-government and be ready to cooperate in order to bring about the good of a self-governing student body. This may have something to do with the idea that students, especially at a postgraduate level, will want to take these aspects of their life into their own hands, assert their will and organize college life according to their standards and wishes. It will be argued that active participation in the life of the college is part of what it means to be a member.

This example appears to encompass most of the characteristics that republican authors invoke in their arguments concerning political obligation. It entails self-government by the students,
it includes the interdependence of the members of the college in some general sense and it suggests there being a background story about the intrinsic worth of active membership in the college life. The differences between a small college of 100 postgraduate students and a state of 10 million people are of course, too obvious to state. Thinking of this example, however imperfect it may be, suggests though, that if we could conceive of a notion of republican political obligation, then this could not be simply grounded in some idea of interdependence. Some form of voluntarism or intentionality would need to enter the picture and the idea of the intrinsic worth of the practice itself would seem to be the most promising way to argue for political obligations conceived in a thick sense.

Thus, the problem with an argument that tries to ground special obligations in the interdependence of co-citizens is that any such explanation of interdependence is bound to register as too weak to ground something as substantive as an obligation to vote conscientiously, participate in public debates or take part in civic pressure groups. Honohan seems to allow, however, for two possible grounds for obligations. The first is a negative sort of construal of the theme of interdependence, and the second is the positive recognition of the value of republican citizenship: “Their commitment comes from their mutual vulnerability in the practice of self-government, and in its stronger forms from the value they attach to the relationship.”

Now, that I have raised doubts about the prospect that political interdependence per se could ground republican political obligations, let us consider an argument that I have hinted at throughout the analysis so far. This argument, as partially defended by Andrew Mason is that republican citizenship is valuable in itself, and that this could ground obligations in a similar way as it does among friends. The argument from friendship, as adapted by Mason from Raz to apply to political obligations, runs as follows: friendship is an intrinsically valuable relationship, which is in other words valued for its own sake; friends are defined by certain obligations; and these obligations are part of the good of friendship. Mason replicates this to say that citizenship is an intrinsically valuable relationship and that the obligations by which it is defined are therefore justified for the sake of the good of citizenship itself.

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21 Iseult Honohan, *Civic Republicanism*, p. 268
Friendship does impress on us as intrinsically valuable and one would usually think that there are obligations of care and concern towards a friend that define the role itself and that are justified by the moral worth of a relationship of friendship in general. It is much more difficult, however, to carry this thought through to the notion of citizenship. How can we conceive of citizenship as intrinsically valuable? Unlike friendship, citizenship is not interpersonal in a relevant, sustained way, it does not entail emotional closeness, it is nonvoluntarist and one cannot withdraw from its specific context as easily as one can step out of an unwanted friendship. We need, however to distinguish between citizenship understood as mere membership in a state and citizenship taken to mean a practice of civic involvement and deliberation. On the latter, republican vision of ideal citizenship, such a practice would gain more of an intentionalist and interpersonal content, but it would still be too impersonal, or removed from our immediate concerns to be intelligible on the comparison with friendship, in its purported quality of intrinsic value. So, what is it that makes it intrinsically valuable? According to Mason, because a person *qua* citizen enjoys equal status with the other members and is given recognition, the practice of citizenship is intrinsically valuable. Also, as part of a collective body which has considerable control over one’s conditions of life, under this notion of citizenship, an individual *qua* citizen is given the opportunity to participate in the formation of laws and policies that govern the polity. But how would that be different from a tennis club, where the members gain equal status and equal opportunity to make use of the services offered by the club and are given recognition by the other members and the management of the club in their special quality of members? First of all, membership in a tennis club is not taken to alter one’s moral status upon becoming a member, while this is taken to be the case when it comes to members of a polity. Then, the members of a tennis club do not really get to alter to rules of membership, but are unconditionally subject to them. In the case of membership in a state, the story is different insofar as, according to republican authors, citizens get the chance to participate in the making of the very rules they are governed by. I think, however, that the point at the back of our minds still remains that, in order for republican citizenship to be conceived as a good in itself, it has to register as a valuable thing in the eyes of people in general, and that somehow does not seem to pass a test of moral plausibility. It would not be dependent on empirical validation to the same extent as an associative obligations account would, because the intrinsic worth account could hold ground even in the absence of widespread recognition by the people, but it would certainly require

some empirical plausibility and the argument would in the end still rest on a psychological dimension.

If the idea of citizenship as intrinsically valuable on the analogy with friendship is difficult to grasp, let us consider another argument offered by Iseult Honohan that is built on the analogy with the obligations colleagues have to one another. This analogy is helpful insofar as it aids us in grasping better the relations between citizens from a republican perspective. Unlike the comparison with the relations among friends, in which case there was a disturbing dissonance between the emotional closeness of friends and the stranger-like nature of relations among citizens, this analogy conveys better the sense of interdependence between co-citizens. Citizens are said to be similar to colleagues because they share characteristics like ‘involuntary interdependence’, equality, difference, and relative distance. Also this analogy is quite compelling especially because it allows for the idea that co-citizens, like colleagues, can actually dislike each other, feel disinclined towards one another, or simply be indifferent. The analogy takes us back, however, to the associative obligations argument, insofar as it suggests that mere membership can ground obligations. Thus, there are some weaknesses in the argument that are worth reflecting on. As I will show, however, there seems to be a bias hidden in the argument for certain types of colleagues as basis for the analogy. This bias finally directs us towards the idea underlying most of this analysis, according to which a republican notion of political obligation is most likely constructed on the foundation of a specific argument for democratic legitimacy.

First, there seem to be two definitions of colleagues, with different emphases, at work in Honohan’s analysis. On the one hand there is the definition of colleagues from an empirical point of view in accordance with what people think a colleague is, and on the other, there is the definition of the theorist. The first states that “People readily identify as colleagues others with whom they readily interact on a more or less even footing within the framework of work places, companies, unions, and other institutions from string quartets to building sites.”23 On the same page, the author continues: “I will define colleagues as people involuntarily related through their work or projects, and interdependent roughly as equals in a practice or institution.”24

24 Idem.
On the analogy with colleagues, Honohan argues that citizens have obligations of communication, consideration, and trust to each other. They are said to incur them because they are members of an institutionalized practice. These obligations that citizens may be expected to exercise are as follows: to be informed about public things, ‘to participate in common affairs’, to listen to other points of view and present their own in a rational manner, ‘to be on the alert for injustice’ and ‘to support public life’. Also, to care about and be prepared to contribute to the welfare of one’s fellow citizens, and finally, “to express more trust in fellow citizens than in strangers, and to be more honest and trustworthy in return, though politics requires them to be more vigilant in their dealings than with family or friends.”

First, I should make the point that I do not see why one should show, as if out of principle, more trust to fellow citizens than to strangers. I think that trust is a performative concept, and that it requires at least some preliminary, communicative interaction before it can be set in motion. Thus, saying that people should show more trust to fellow citizens is like saying that they are, by virtue of being co-citizens, expected to be morally worthier. Assigning moral worth to individual character is not, in my view, the point of republican citizenship. What is rather at stake from the republican point of view is the value of the relations between citizens, based on the ‘common world’ they share, and which is particularly active when they participate in processes of civil society. Thus, this obligation of trust seems to represent a lapse in Honohan’s anti-nationalist treatment of political obligations, as if she adopts some kind of essentialist type of discourse, and creates an ‘outer enemy’ for identificatory purposes. The empirical reality that seems to underlie this assumption is rather that people usually get to exercise trust in relations of communication with co-citizens, but that has merely a contingent explanation, not a moral one. The fact that Honohan recognizes and welcomes the extensibility of political obligations, their intermeshing with other forms of obligations, which extend beyond borders, and the fact that they can be overridden by other moral considerations should make her recognize that trust is a function of interpersonal relations. Of course that a basic form of trust needs to be present in order for communication on public matters to be possible, but it in no way precludes giving one’s trust to foreigners that you come to interact

with, and it does not appear to be an equally convincing form of political obligation as those subsumed under the headlines of communication and consideration.

The next point to consider is whether this analogy is truly as general as Honohan may want it to be, despite her admittance that relationships and ensuing obligations between colleagues vary with different contexts of types of jobs. The fact that people may have obligations, on the model of colleagues, to other people whom they never met, is not something that Honohan does not recognize, but to the contrary. She actually hails the extensibility of colleague obligations to people with whom we do not immediately interact. She invokes the examples of academics, teachers, doctors, musicians, nurses, lawyers, and trade unionists, who all experience the relationship of colleagues in its potentiality to extend beyond the bounded realm of immediate colleagues.26 And one can induce from these examples that it may be these categories of colleagues that Honohan has in mind when developing the analogy between citizens and colleagues.

It is important to note that the categories of colleagues that Honohan invokes all seem to share intuitively something related to normative concerns or a higher calling as principle of collegiality. The example of professionals as colleagues is definitely distinct, say, from the example of administrative work colleagues, who do not necessarily share the same ‘higher’ interests, or calling as the types of colleagues Honohan invokes. Such relationships as the ones exemplified by academics or professionals in general may thus be more likely to be open to extensibility of obligations and thus be more appropriate for use as basis for the analogy. And they also may be more appropriate in grounding obligations to fellow citizens in general. Going back to my critical point about the two definitions of colleagues that Honohan invoked, it should not be inferred from my discussion, which started from that observation, that political obligations are persuasive only as derivative expressions of interaction. My aim was rather to point out that a notion of political obligations of communication and consideration (trust was found less persuasive and is here disregarded) cannot be justified on the analogy with colleagues’ obligations in both a republican and an instrumental liberal model, as Honohan suggests it can. It rather obtains only in the case of a republican understanding of citizenship that entails a more substantive form of interaction, first as the interaction between legal consociates, who share a common world in the form of a legal system, and second as the

participation of citizens in the deliberative process of civil society that underlies the political process of legislation and decision making. Without this more substantive understanding of interaction in place, obligations such as those subsumed under the categories of communication and consideration cannot be sustained. And while this does not require that there be a participatory form of politics in place, pertaining to the whole of the citizenry, it does imply that where there are no sustained practices of civil society in place and a normative understanding of the political process as collective self-determination, one cannot speak of obligations of citizens as colleagues.

If we think of the window of interpretation opened up by Honohan’s analogy between colleagues and citizens, which I have amended to read as an analogy between professionals as colleagues and citizens, most of the features proposed in the republican arguments investigated so far check out. We have an illustration of a relation which can be impersonal, or detached (not requiring emotional closeness) though it can also be tested in practice; which is extensible to people one has never met; conceiving of this extensibility is possible because professionals as colleagues are taken to share normative concerns; also, this relation exemplifies the interconnectedness coming from shared concerns and shared normative standards. When it comes to citizens, we can build on the insights that the analogy offers and point to the argument offered by Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas. Thus, following their line of theory, the normative concern that could explain political obligations is that of democratic legitimacy. According to the principle of popular sovereignty that Habermas adopts, authority is finally derived from the people. And while there is no direct or straightforward way in which this is accomplished, the engine at the heart of a constitutional democracy is that of an institutionalized practice of civic self-determination: “Read in discourse-theoretic terms, the principle of popular sovereignty states that all political power derives from the communicative power of citizens. The exercise of public authority is oriented and legitimated by the laws citizens give themselves in a discursively structured opinion-and will-formation.”

It is ultimately up to civil society to keep the flow of the political process in authoritative shape. Without a continuous process of “informal opinion-formation that prepares and influences political decision making,” the normative understanding of democracy that Habermas proposes could not be achieved. Thus, in the absence of discursive validation by citizens there is no political legitimacy to speak of.

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28 idem., p.171
The argument for a republican notion of political obligation could thus be constructed as follows. Democratic legitimacy requires the participation of citizens in a process of discursive authorization. Democratic legitimacy and the medium of republican citizenship by which it can be achieved are both intrinsic goods because they represent moral state of affairs we should aspire to, and instrumental goods because they secure other goods such as the sustainability of the democratic state and protection against domination for individuals. Individuals are conceived to want to have as much control over their lives as possible, in all of the relevant aspects. Thus, it is expected that individuals will want to influence the social and political aspects of their lives as much as possible. For that, they will need to get involved in the public-political process. Two arguments converge here: the first says that constitutional, democratic legitimacy requires a republican notion of political obligation and the second refers to a certain conception of the person according to which individuals place a high premium on moral agency and will consequently want to be as much as possible part of the overall picture of society against which their personal life stories are consummated. Individuals as citizens are also expected to recognize democratic legitimacy as a crucial concern. This entails an enlightened interest in the political environment one is part of. This approach to political obligation has its problems. First of all, it is based on a notion of democratic legitimacy that needs further justification. Then, it entails a very demanding conception of the person. Habermas’ cognitivist approach to legitimacy entails for example the idea that individuals come together in deliberation and decide on the right answers, on rational grounds. The unregulated forum of informal, public debates does not sound, however, like a good place to expect rational, consensual results. One may think that the people who phone in to BBC radio to express their opinions on political matters are quite reasonable and to the point, but that is not usually a general expectation. Then, political debates do not exactly invite natural science precision. All of these considerations will need to be addressed in a more elaborate discussion.

The specific political obligations we could think of, along with Iseult Honohan and Andrew Mason, are the following. First, we are obligated to participate in public life because republican citizenship is valuable to us and its practice, based on reciprocity, would otherwise die out unless we actively and constantly uphold it. Part of this is also the sub-obligation to be

informed about matters of public concern. This first obligation is based on two grounds: first, it is based on the value of democratic legitimacy and the idea that it can be assured via citizen participation and second, on the idea that moral agency is important to individuals and that they will consequently want to take part in the making of their own society. Second, we are obligated to help those co-citizens who are in need because without their needs being satisfied, citizens will be unable to uphold socio-political practices, and thus the whole public practice of citizenship is endangered. Third, we are obligated towards our compatriots to try to forward our aims in the public arena with a concern for the diversity of views out there and for those things that might unite our own views with those of the various others; also, as part of this obligation, we should endeavour to present our arguments in a coherent and rational manner. This obligation springs from the idea that it is part of the nature of republican citizenship for individuals to care for and respect their co-citizens in such a way as not to undermine the sense of recognition and value that each individual requires.

How does this republican notion of political obligation, which I have tried to sketch in this paper affect our understanding of political communities in both the formal and the more substantive aspects? Could such a notion of political obligation be sustained at a post-state level, in the European Union context for example? Authors who advocate a republican reading of the EU as a polity in the making that requires an active, deliberative notion and practice of citizenship would probably endorse the justification of political obligation that I have tried to outline.30 The problem with this is that just as Habermas’ notion of ‘solidarity among strangers’ is actually well grounded in a specific political-cultural context and is dependent to some extent on a form of political identification, so this notion of political obligation is particularist insofar as it requires a general sense of identification with the political and legislative life of the polity, which seems to be hardly in place in the case of the EU. Because, however, the driving force of the argument rests with the notion of a shared normative concern with democratic legitimacy, and because of the analogical argument that the relation among citizens is similar to that among professionals as colleagues, it might seem that republican political obligation could be recognized to extend even at trans-national levels. The argument then is strongly dependent on the idea of democratic legitimacy as a sort of moral imperative. It is difficult to think of the EU in terms of citizens perceiving themselves

as the potential authors of the laws and rules governing the union in the context of the usual charge of a characteristic democratic deficit. And the recent rejection of the constitutional treaty gives no reason for optimism, but if we are to think it possible for this line of justification for political obligation to be extended beyond the nation-state, then the line to follow is that according to which “instead of the constitution being a precondition for politics, political debate becomes the medium through which a polity constitutes itself.”

**Concluding Remarks**

In this paper, I have tried to do the following things. I have argued that in the absence of a republican notion of political obligation, contemporary republicanism may well register as nothing more than a loose narrative of virtues. On this point, of whether a republican theory can provide a coherent and appealing notion of political obligation, my concluding remarks can only be provisional. The arguments that I have considered here can be taken rather as a starting point for a more elaborate defence or rebuttal of the approach I suggest at the end of this paper. Next, I have engaged in a discussion of the associative obligation approach. The argument that obligations flow from mere membership in a political community was shown to be unable to ground republican obligations. Then, I looked at two grounds for political obligation: interdependence and the intrinsic value of republican citizenship as developed on the analogy with obligations friends have to one another. Finally, I have argued that the most promising venue in arguing for republican political obligation is that developed on the analogy with colleagues, with the amendment that they should be conceived as professionals. Considerations of intrinsic value, interdependence, as well as a driving normative concern for democratic legitimacy were seen to combine in the justification. Then, I have outlined how this would fit within a view of the republican practice of citizenship as a necessary condition for constitutional, democratic legitimization as supported by Jürgen Habermas and partially, Hannah Arendt. This view is based on the idea that state legitimacy requires civic authorization by the people, and that moral agency is important to individuals in such a way that they would want to exercise a sense of authorship over the laws and political processes governing their lives by participating in a constant process of deliberation that underlies the formal process of politics.

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