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Allied Identities

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Allied Identities[1]

Kurt M. Blankschaen

Abstract
Allies are extremely important to LGBT rights. Though we don't often enumerate what tasks we expect allies to do, a fairly common conception is that allies "support the LGBT community." In the first section I introduce three difficulties for this position that collectively suggest it is conceptually insufficient. I then develop a positive account by starting with whom allies are allied to instead of what allies are supposed to do. We might obviously say here that allies are allied to the LGBT community, but I will argue that this community is better thought of as a loose coalition because there are often intersectional issues and conflicting interests that challenge any unified sense of community. I argue that people typically become allies because a friend or family member is experiencing some kind of specific harm; if that harm or discrimination is what causally explains why people become allies, then allies are required to do more than we commonly think. Although allies have a prima facie obligation to honor what members of a subcommunity identify as a harm, this obligation is defeasible if an ally believes fulfilling the obligation would be harmful. I conclude by looking at how we can understand what an ally is in terms of a larger discussion about moral obligations. If people already have these obligations, whatever they are, because morality requires it, then the status "ally" is redundant. I conclude by showing that certain social statuses can not only transform or reprioritize prior moral commitments, but can also introduce new kinds of responsibility that an agent did not have before.

Keywords: LGBT, feminism, allies

Allies are extremely important to LGBT rights. Though we do not often enumerate what we expect allies to do, a fairly common conception is that allies "support the LGBT community." In the first section I introduce three difficulties for what I call the "broad conception" that collectively suggest it is insufficient for

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explaining what an ally is: (1) whether the tasks that constitute what an ally is are obligations or supererogatory, (2) if those tasks turn out to be obligations, then whether the obligations are partial or impartial, and (3) determining who has the prerogative or authority to determine which obligations an ally has—which in turn is a question about who can determine or disqualify whether or not someone is an ally.

In the second section I suggest a different approach. Instead of starting with what allies are supposed to do, we can start with who allies are allied to. We might obviously say here that allies are allied to the LGBT community, but I will challenge that unified conception of the LGBT community by pointing out intersectional issues or otherwise conflicting interests. I argue that people typically become allies because a friend or family member is experiencing some kind of specific harm; if that harm or discrimination is what causally explains why people become allies, then I argue that allies are required to do more than we commonly think. I then explain that though allies have a prima facie obligation to honor what members of a subcommunity identify as a harm, this obligation is defeasible if an ally believes fulfilling the obligation would, in fact, harm those members.

I conclude by looking at how we can understand what an ally is in terms of a larger discussion about moral obligations. If people already have these obligations, whatever they are, because morality requires it, then the status "ally" is redundant. However, I will show that certain social statuses can not only transform or reprioritize prior moral commitments but can also introduce new kinds of responsibility that an agent did not have before.

Before getting started, I want to establish that allies occupy a certain social status. We typically develop social statuses to fulfill some kind of purpose or function, and so we often assign or associate certain tasks with a social status; doctors heal, judges decide cases, and DMV bureaucrats issue licenses. Social statuses can also incorporate different kinds of norms (e.g., legal, social, moral) that can sometimes coincide or break apart. A lawyer has a legal and moral obligation to not betray her client's trust; when a lawyer pursues opportunistic lawsuits, she breaks a social norm and is criticized as being an ambulance chaser. If allyship is social status, then it can be responsive to social or moral norms, in which case it is not wholly a moral identity.

Since we often are not able to tell what social status someone occupies just by looking at them, we develop social markers or emblems to help us identify who has what status. A wedding ring denotes someone's marital status but does not itself constitute the norms about being a spouse. So we often use status markers to help bridge some kind of epistemic gap between the status holder and other people. Allies, then, could fly a rainbow flag outside a business, use a Human Rights Campaign logo, or sport a Safe Zone sticker to let other people know that they

support the LGBT community. While these social markers sometimes are acts of symbolic power or solidarity, they ultimately only mark someone as having the allied status, which is different than actually occupying that status. Just as someone could wear a wedding ring and not actually be married, so too could someone have some kind of marker for being an ally but not really care about the LGBT community. Merely identifying, then, as having a social status is not sufficient for actually occupying that status.

Alternatively, people can occupy a social status without knowing it. Sally Haslanger explains that behavior or actions matter more than identification because people can still affect their status without knowing or recognizing that they occupy that status. Someone might go to a country that marks her as having a certain social role without her knowing so (Haslanger 2012, 127–28). If a man finds out one day that he is, in fact, a father, he does not then suddenly occupy a new social status as a father; he was already a father, even if he or nobody else knew it. If he only becomes a father when we recognize him as such, then it would make no sense for him to feel regret about not helping raise his child because he would be believing he failed the norms of a social status he did not have at that time. Along similar lines, Charlotte Witt points out that in the U.S. whites tend never to reflect on their racial status but nevertheless contribute to how that status functions in a society in terms of racial privilege or discrimination (Witt 2011, 61–62). So someone might do all the tasks we think an ally should do yet never bother to identify herself as an ally because she does not care about the social status (i.e. “I’m here to help, call me what you like”). So even if allies never adopt the term or decline any of the obvious markers, we could still count them as allies if they performed or were responsive to the tasks that constitute being an ally.

Similarly, while we can self-identify as a kind of shorthand for those tasks, that self-identification does not typically count as being part of the status. I might say “I am a doctor” to let people know I can treat wounds and prescribe medicine, or at least that I am qualified to do both, but those abilities, and not the identification, are what make me a doctor. If someone claims to be an ally without engaging in any of the tasks that constitute being an ally, whatever those tasks might be, then she is not really that different from someone who claims to be a doctor but knows nothing about medicine.

One last point before going on. I initially designed these arguments to talk about allies to the LGBT community, but this discussion might have included more and different letters and identities, like (Q) queer, (I) intersex, (A) asexual, or (P) pansexual. The problem or issue with any list I have seen is that it tends to become obsolete or exclude a new group as time goes on. I wrote about what I was most familiar with and tried to structure these arguments so that if they worked in the base case with LGBT issues, then we could go on to apply them to any future or

additive case, letter, or identity. If the arguments do not hold, then this set up may be wrong. Until then, I hope to use this framework to help connect this project with future work.

Issues with the Broad Conception

In this section I present three problems with the broad conception of being an ally and consider some ways we could modify it in light of those concerns. Despite these modifications, I think the broad conception is ultimately insufficient.

The broad conception defines allies in terms of support. The Human Rights Campaign and Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network state that allies are indispensable for gay rights but do not quite spell out what allies are, beyond saying they need to be supportive or by listing the various ways allies can be supportive (Movement Advancement Project et al. 2012; GLSEN 2016). These organizations have done a lot of good in actually advancing LGBT rights, so I am not criticizing their work. Similarly, other people working in different fields (e.g., social psychology, developmental psychology) also hold something like the broad conception when they show all the ways allies can be (and are) supportive of LGBT rights, but I have not seen too many accounts that set down clear conceptual lines for what it means to be an ally (Jones et al. 2009, 183–85; Dhillon et al. 2013, 334–36). The point of this project is not to have philosophy "come to the rescue" and tell people what they are *really* talking about when they talk about allies. Rather, I want to try to clarify a few of the defining features of what it means to be an ally.

Suppose we list all the ways an ally can be supportive: are the tasks that show up on that list obligations, or are they supererogatory? If we understand these tasks as obligations, and these obligations in turn constitute the set of tasks that make one an ally, then failure to do these obligations would disqualify that person from being an ally. But interpreting these tasks as obligations might downplay the historical risks and heroics that allies performed on our behalf. If, however, we were to suppose that all the tasks that make someone an ally are supererogatory, then we accept that these tasks are good to do but, by definition, not required, since they are not bad not to do (Urmson 1958, 199). While thinking of these tasks as supererogatory helps capture the historical heroics of allies, if we retain the supererogatory criteria now, then all the tasks that constitute being an ally would be good to do, but not bad to not do. If it then turned out that all the tasks current allies have to do are supererogatory, or are tasks that allies do not have to do, then current allies would not, by definition, have to do anything.

Think about the task of publicly supporting the LGBT community. It seems reasonable to think that if someone identifies as an ally in, say, a contemporary liberal democratic society, then she is obligated to publicly support the LGBT community. If someone in the United States identifies as an ally but fails to stand up

for a coworker who is bullied, discriminated against, or fired for being gay, then we might have a hard time identifying her as an ally because she fails to do what an ally is supposed to do. But there might be cases where those same tasks might be supererogatory: if contesting the firing of a coworker for being a lesbian would also cost an ally her job, or if calling out a slur would result in severe bodily harm, then it seems that an ally's action here would be good to do, but not bad not to do insofar as the cost is so severe. So we might modify the broad conception of what it means to be an ally and include some kind of context sensitivity, where sometimes these tasks are obligatory, sometimes supererogatory, and sometimes a mix of obligations and supererogatory acts.

Even after we add in context sensitivity, there is another issue with the broad conception of being an ally. To make the discussion easier, I will focus only on the cases in which the tasks that constitute being an ally are obligations. Suppose we could list all of the obligations an ally has: are those obligations partial or impartial? Impartiality requires us to treat like cases alike; we are not swayed by our personal relationships when we are evaluating the moral thing to do. We are partial when we base our moral decision making on our personal relationships and give those relationships priority over other considerations to strangers. I want to propose two examples to show how this tension is important for allies.

> Case 1: John identifies as an ally. John's brother kicks out John's nephew for coming out as gay. Since there isn't any other family in the state, John's nephew knows John identifies as an ally and asks him to take him in.

There are two reasons to think John is obligated to take care of his nephew: (1) his nephew is part of his family, and (2) John identifies as an ally. But these reasons just happen to coincide and do not really tell us much about whether we think allies are partially or impartially obligated.

To help figure out this tension, consider:

> Case 2: John identifies as an ally. John does not really know his neighbor but comes home one day to see her in the yard yelling at her teenage son and screaming that she does not want a gay son in her home. As the boy walks past John's house, he tells John he has nowhere to go because all his family lives out of state. He knows John identifies as an ally and asks if he can stay with him for a few days.

Here, in Case 2, the reasons in Case 1 come apart. If John, as an uncle, is obligated to take in his nephew but not the neighbor's son, then John only has a partial

obligation. If John is obligated, as an ally, to take in both his nephew and his neighbor's son, then John has an impartial obligation.

Suppose John, or any ally, only has partial obligations to his friends and family who happen to be LGBT. If so, John has no obligation, as an ally, to take in his neighbor's son, and if that is the case, then it seems that the status "ally" is really just tracking the obligations a person already has as a friend or family member, so "ally" is not doing much moral work. So someone who accepts that the broad concept of being an ally here means supporting the LGBT community, not just friends or family who happen to be in that community, would have to say that allies have impartial obligations to the LGBT community.[2]

If John has an impartial obligation to take in his neighbor's son, then is there a moral difference between the neighbor's son and other LGBT teens who are currently in homeless shelters because they were kicked out for coming out? I fail to see much of a moral difference. We might argue that John can discharge this obligation imperfectly by donating cash rather than taking in a stranger, but this modification still presents a problem because it would still require allies to donate sums of cash. We could even weaken this requirement: allies need not be moral saints donating all of their disposable income to LGBT homeless shelters; they would just have to donate some money so that they help some number of individuals. Now, it is certainly an empirical question as to how many allies there are, let alone how many allies donate how much, but given that many LGBT homeless shelters for teens are grossly underfunded, it seems as if there are not a lot of donors (See Ray 2006; Quintana, Rosenthal, and Krehely 2010). Insofar as meeting these attenuated obligations still constitutes what it means to be an ally, then allies who failed to donate would fail to be allies.[3]

Even if supporters of the broad conception grant that allies do not fulfill their impartial obligations, the problem lies with the commitment, not the conception. After all, if allies did step up their efforts, then there would be no issue with the broad conception of allies as those people who support the LGBT community—even if allies are obligated to do more than they currently think. The last conceptual worry I want to raise here is how, on this broad account, we would determine what counts as an obligation and who has the authority or prerogative to (de)classify people as allies in the first place. We might think of the case of a straight person

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[2] Some obligations are entirely partial but also happen to coincide with being an ally. Attending a sibling's wedding to someone of the same sex, for instance, is a partial obligation that might coincide with being an ally but is not wholly explained or generated by being an ally.

[3] Of course, since ought implies can, if an ally had no spare money or time to donate, then she would not be held liable to this impartial obligation.

who insists she is an ally while someone in the community she is supposedly allied to is denying or questioning her commitment; but I want to draw this worry out in a different way.

What about the Catholic Church? Is it an ally? Certainly the Magisterium, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF), or any particular curia have never, so far as I know, claimed to have the ally social status. Even so, the CDF has explicitly claimed that

> it is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent malice in speech or in action. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the Church's pastors wherever it occurs. It reveals a kind of disregard for others which endangers the most fundamental principles of a healthy society. The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law. (Ratzinger 1986)[4]

U.S. bishops have repeatedly put forward documents that echo the CDF's condemnation of violence and re-emphasize commitments to social justice while simultaneously rejecting any kind of legal union that resembles marriage between two people of the same sex.[5] The CDF understands this denial as completing its position as an ally to the LGBT community insofar as it promotes a chaste lifestyle grounded in Christian ideals.[6] Given the Catholic Church's emphasis on prohibiting gay marriage initiatives, many other allies and members of the LGBT community deny the Catholic Church is an ally—its support for equal housing and working conditions notwithstanding.

We might say that for a long time, the vast majority of people in the LGBT community considered marriage to be the marquee issue to support for gay rights;

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[4] I do not mean this particular quotation exonerates some of the other more disrespectful passages the CDF has approved. The very next sentence, for instance, is particularly disrespectful, if not a tacit indifference to harms LGBT people experience. I'm making this point more to show that despite all the other problematic aspects of its position, the Catholic Church has committed to social justice.

[5] See, for example, "Persona Humana" (Seper 1975), "Always our Children" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 1997), and "Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care" (USCCB 2006).

[6] The CDF grounds some of its argument in scripture, but it also offers an entirely separate justification through Natural Law without appealing to any revealed text. See Ratzinger 1986.

not supporting marriage amounted to not supporting gay rights at all.[7] But not everyone held marriage in such high esteem: some doctrinaire LGBT Catholics do support the CDF's stance. "Courage" is a group of Catholics who experience same-sex attractions but still strive to live the chaste lifestyle the CDF prescribes. It seems perfectly reasonable, then, that people in "Courage" could call the Catholic Church an ally—whether it be the hierarchy in Rome or their local priest who supports them—insofar as the Church helps them live the life they find valuable. Surely the people in "Courage" are just as much a part of the LGBT community as the ones who do not consider the Catholic Church as an ally, so it does not look as if someone in the LGBT community's say-so would be sufficient to confirm an ally's status, because another member in the community might equally issue a denial. I do not think people who support gay marriage could charge this subcommunity as somehow "not really" being LGBT without falling prey to a "No True Scotsman" fallacy. Further, I take it that any appeal to the fact that "most" or "the vast majority" of LGBT people supported marriage initiatives would work here, as they would fall prey to a sorites paradox. So the interesting tension here is not between an ally insisting she is an ally in the face of the community's denial, but rather between the ally, part of the community that acknowledges that allied status, and part of the community that rejects that allied status.

The issue at stake here is not whether marriage is a moral good for the LGBT community; rather, it is who has the purview to accept or disqualify someone's status as an ally in the first place.[8] Since the broad conception holds, with the above additions, that an ally is "someone who has context sensitive obligations that can be imperfectly or weakly met to support the LGBT community," the issue now is the "to the LGBT community." This commitment leads to conceptual difficulties because the LGBT community is composed of different people with different, competing, and, sometimes, conflicting interests. It's possible that the broad conception could be used in some way to resolve this issue, but because the issue is about how we hypostatize the LGBT community as if it were a homogenous group with the same interests, I think those additional modifications might be epicycles on epicycles.

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[7] While other issues are beginning to take center stage for importance, I merely mean that marriage dominated discussions. Hence, philosophers like Cheshire Calhoun (2000, 106–60) or Richard Mohr (1988, 17–18, 137–188; and 1992, 54–86) emphasized marriage as a way to make gays and lesbians socially or politically legitimate agents.

[8] Lots of queer theorists, for instance, also reject same-sex marriage on the grounds that marriage itself is heteronormative and, further, that same-sex marriage instantiates homonormativity. Some libertarians also reject gay marriage on the grounds that they reject any kind of state sanctioned marriage for anyone.

To reiterate, I do not think this conceptual confusion indicates any lack of success. Allies, whatever they are, have used this broad definition to make real gains for the LGBT community. Even so, it is important to get clear on what we mean by "ally" because we should know what we expect allies to do so allies can know what we expect of them. I now want to turn to my positive account to try to explain and address some of the worries I raised in this section.

The Positive Account: Partial Allies and Impartial Obligations

Since I thought the problem with the broad account was that it fails to recognize the competing and conflicting differences in the LGBT community, I'll begin with a deflationary account of that community. From there, I will suggest that allies are actually allied to various subcommunities, rather than *the* LGBT community at large, and have prima facie obligations.

In order to be an ally, I have to be allied to someone or something. If we understand allies as acting on context-sensitive and imperfect obligations to improve the well-being or state of affairs for the LGBT community, then it seems as if we are presupposing a LGBT community exists, above and beyond the conflicting interests its members have. Activists for transgender rights, for instance, rightfully complain that the LGB members often overlook or leave out issues that affect the trans community. Compare the amount of political capital spent on gay marriage to the amount of access to hormone therapy or surgeries. While there has been outrage and activism against recent (2016) anti-trans bills that restrict access to bathrooms or locker rooms these issues are not new (Weinberg 2010, 150–53). This outrage is encouraging, as it shows promising signs that we are moving towards a community, but it is not evidence of a historically shared political agenda.

In another way, some of the most vitriolic prejudice bisexuals face is from gays and lesbians. Often, the claim is that bisexuals are just not out of the closet all the way or that, in bitter irony, they are just "going through a phase" (Burleson 2005, 105). Even when the hostility isn't overt, bisexuals regularly report that they experience micro-aggressions denying, or otherwise disparaging, their ability to know they are bisexual from their lesbian or gay friends (Bostwick and Hequembourg 2014, 493–98). So the idea that *the* LGBT community is united by some common interest or shared identity does not seem to hold up, because if it were, then there should not be this kind of rejection, or outright denial, that one of the letters even exists. Even though younger bisexuals, at least in the U.S., report more positive experiences in coming out as bisexual than older demographics do (McCormack et al. 2014, 1208–11), the fact that there was this rift in the first place suggests that *the* LGBT community is not some monolithic entity united by a common purpose or set of political interests. In short, there is tension between the letters in the LGBT community.

Even within letters there is infighting. While intersectional concerns about race or class could show issues in each letter, just consider the community of male homosexuals. Michael Warner contends in *The Trouble with Normal* that the current gay rights movement is really just a political movement for wealthy white suburban gays who only want to have dinner ready for their boyfriends. Warner argues that this desire for marriage domesticates the edgier ethos of Stonewall that challenged gender, social, and sexual norms. Wealthy white suburban gays, on this account, have hijacked the gay rights movement. Hence, Warner distinguishes between gays, who live a life of quiet, suburban desperation, and queers, who truly embody the revolutionary spirit of Stonewall (Warner 1999, 30–32, 60–95). Even if we reject Warner's distinction between gays and queers, other work suggests that race, class, or ethnicity can alter the experience of homosexual males.[9]

If we understand allies in terms of their obligations to an oppressed community, that community is still fractured by the different ways it is oppressed. Passing equal marriage initiatives, for instance, might help LG members, but might not, in principle, affect any B or T members. Granting easier access and funds for hormone therapy or single-stall bathrooms might redress some of the T oppression, but it does not seem like it would alter much LGB oppression. So each group might share the trait of being unjustly oppressed for their sexual orientation or gender identity, but this commonality might not mean much if they are unjustly oppressed in different ways.

While I have been using examples of a straight/cis person being an ally to somebody in the LGBT community, each letter can be an ally to another. Someone who is gay can be an ally to someone who is bisexual; someone who is trans can be an ally to someone who is a lesbian (Brooks and Edwards 2009, 137). Much recent work has explored how we have expanded talking about allies from just helping the LGBT community to anyone in a dominant group helping redress a particular issue (Casey and Smith 2010, 955–56; Brown and Ostrove 2013, 2211–12). So if anyone, not just the straight/cis person, resolves to redress those harms, then she starts to adopt the obligations that would constitute her as an ally. In the beginning I pointed out that these tasks are what determine whether or not someone is an ally; self-

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[9] Joseph Massad (2007) claims in *Desiring Arabs* that binary Western models of sexuality have warped traditional models of Arab sexuality and pressured people to adopt an alien sexual identity. Jeffrey Q. McCune Jr. (2014) argues in *Sexual Discretion* that down-low culture offers a different way to approach and understand how African American men who have sex with men identify. Jane Ward even suggests in *Not Gay: Sex between Straight White Men* (2015) that military and fraternity hazing rituals or cruising for anonymous sex in bathrooms shows that other social statuses can affect how identity can come apart from acts.

identification may coincide with being an ally, but it does not explain what being an ally is. So someone becomes an ally if she tries to help her friend or family member with harms or issues that affect her in virtue of being LGBT.

We should take a step back and think about how people become allies in the first place. There are many factors—like cultural representations of LGBT people, educational levels, age, influence of religion, or access to internet—that affect people's attitudes towards LGBT rights and show strong correlations with people being positively disposed to LGBT people or equal rights, but being positively disposed is not quite the same as taking a more active role as an ally. It seems that people usually become allies because they find out a friend or family member is LGBT and realize their loved one is harmed, discriminated against, or otherwise disadvantaged for being LGBT.[10] Parents and Friends of Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG), a large advocacy organization formed in the 1970s, was founded on this principle, as are many Gay/Straight Alliance groups in high school or college (McCormack 2012). Notice here that the ally is responsive to the harms or discrimination that is affecting their loved one.[11] If these harms or discrimination are what generate an ally's set of tasks, then an ally's obligations to redress these harms or discrimination constitute what an ally is. Causally speaking, someone might become an ally because of a partial obligation, but since what mattered for becoming an ally was acting in response to a specific harm that just so happened to localize in their partial relationship, then an ally would actually be responsive to that particular harm—irrespective of who experienced it.[12] So if Maria is upset that her brother Kareem cannot get married to his boyfriend, Moussa, then she might initially feel outraged that Kareem and Moussa cannot get married and so advocate for marriage equality. But Maria's advocacy is not aimed only at getting Kareem and Moussa the ability to get married, but rather at granting anyone in the same situation the option of getting married. An ally might initially believe she has a partial obligation, but I want to claim that the obligation is, in fact, an impartial obligation.

This point is controversial because it would commit allies to doing a lot more than they normally believe they are responsible for. From an ally's point of view, it probably seems as if their obligations expand; from their friends and family to

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[10] See Mohr 2005, 1–17; McCormack 2012, 57–66; Flores 2014; Flores and Barclay 2015; and Pew Research Center 2015.

[11] If this account is right, then there might be additional and unconscious attitudes, like care or benevolence, that also accompany the transformation of non-ally to ally. Unfortunately, I do not have space to explore how these attitudes or emotional commitments would affect allyship here but want to flag this point for future work.

[12] An ally could be wholly responsive to these harms but still not self-identify as an ally.

strangers who experience the harm. Allies might resist this perceived expansion because it would mean they are responsible for much more than they initially thought. Return to the cases of the homeless nephew and the homeless neighbor; an ally might think that she is initially only obligated to help her nephew, but if there is not much of a moral difference between the nephew and the neighbor's son, then allies do have a larger scope of commitment than they previously thought. Similar to what we said in the broad conception, we could argue that allies can meet their obligations in a weaker sense. Even if we reduce the amount of responsibility in terms of what allies are obligated to do, allies would still probably have to do more.

Another reason this point is controversial is that it might simply overwhelm allies by charging them with a lot of obligations. If Travis is an ally to Sonia, who is discriminated against in five different ways, and Travis is impartially responsive to those five different harms or forms of discrimination, then, as an ally, Travis is facing a lot more responsibility than he might have first anticipated. If he learns that more friends are discriminated against for being LGBT in different ways, then his list of obligations becomes overwhelming. This overwhelming-ness shows that being an ally means seriously committing to a group of people who need help and is not a social status to bandy about just to appear progressive. We can mitigate this overwhelming-ness by returning to "ought implies can." If an ally takes stock of her means in being able to meet the tasks that constitute being an ally in a particular context, then she is able to determine what she can actually do. If the tasks outstrip her resources, be they time or money, then those tasks would not be obligatory but would instead be supererogatory. From that initial point of figuring out what an ally can do to help with what she has, she could also prioritize which obligations are more pressing. So the concern about overwhelming our allies with obligations is not as daunting as it might first appear.[13]

If being an ally requires more than we might ordinarily think, then some people might fail to be allies even though they claim to be allies or mark themselves as allies. Some people demonstrated that they were allies by changing their profile pictures or liking posts on social media in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling. If that minimal effort was the extent of their support, then their commitment to the cause is fairly shallow. These are false allies—they are marked as being allies, probably take advantage of using the social capital they get for being allies, but merely claim to be allies by declaration, not action. This hollow demonstration not only disingenuously represents what a false ally commits to; it can also be a dangerous false flag of support. A false ally might wear a rainbow pin

[13] Most of this paper has been focused on the needs the ally is responding to. I would have liked to have included more of a discussion about how we weigh these demands against an ally's own needs.

or post a HRC sticker to have the right social markers for the ally social status but not actually plan to do anything but flaunt the social marker, which people would interpret as a sign of potential aid. While the false ally is not causing harm per se, she is still reproachable for falsely identifying or marking herself as someone who intends to help. So false allies are dangerous because there is a real possibility that people who need an ally (e.g., to stand up for them at the office) have the false impression that there is someone nearby who will help them if they need it.

Mia McKenzie talks about a related issue, "bad allies," in *Black Girl Dangerous* and contends that bad allies render the whole idea of "ally" a politically useless concept. One reason is that allies tend to slip into what she calls "ally theater," where the ally does what he perceives as helpful but only in front of an audience so that he can look better or be recognized as being open-minded (McKenzie 2014, 26–30). Another problem McKenzie rightfully identifies is that allies tend to sometimes overemphasize one smallish act as somehow consummating their ally status forever. Rachel McKinnon develops this same point to show that allies might not help in some cases *because* they believe their identity as an ally is fixed and secure, so they do not have to help in a new context. McKinnon points out that some allies might unknowingly gaslight reports of legitimate insults or harms "where a hearer does not believe, or expresses doubt about the speaker's reliability at perceiving events accurately" (McKinnon forthcoming, 2). McKinnon explains that when allies say things like "you're being too sensitive, I'm sure they didn't mean it *that* way," they are actually reinforcing other stereotypes of being overly sensitive to slights that are not "really" there, which in turn makes someone less likely to report future harms, insults, or disparaging remarks.

McKenzie and McKinnon conclude that we should scrap any talk of allies and instead think about standing in solidarity with oppressed groups or behaving as active bystanders. While I agree with McKenzie's criticisms about bad allies and share McKinnon's concerns about gaslighting, I disagree that those faults condemn the concept altogether or that we need to think of "ally" as a static or one-time identity. I'm now going to introduce a positive account that helps fend off the issues of bad or false allies, while showing why ally is still a useful identity.

If people become allies due to partial reasons or relationships, then allies might be allies to some individuals and subcommunities but not others. Not being an ally, however, does not mean that someone is an enemy; diplomatic and moral history is littered with neutrals. If Isabella is advocating for equal marriage, then she might not also be advocating for job security or equal access for housing—not because she would not support those goals, but because she is not aware of them. If Vladimir were to be fired for being gay, for instance, then Isabella would see that Vladimir is vulnerable and so would have an obligation to help redress unjust business policies or practices. If this kind of awareness is how we understand and

causally explain how people become allies, then there is not some grand overarching list that enumerates all the tasks that constitute the status "ally." Instead, this status is constituted by tasks that affect the specific needs of individuals and subcommunities. As a result, being an ally is more dynamic and flexible; it would vary with the social position and relationships an ally happens to have when she decides to become an ally.

We should also be aware that moral neutrality or inaction can be due to some external factor. Suppose Hasani identifies as an ally and is aware that transgender people face legal barriers to filing for sexual harassment, are far more likely to ideate or attempt suicide as teenagers than their peers, and face discrimination in hospitals or medical settings. While Hasani is something of a moral saint, he has dedicated most of his life to ending Israeli settlement policies in the West Bank and Gaza strip. Hasani does not contribute to efforts that alleviate the ways transgender people suffer, not because he does not think they are worthy causes, but because his time, talent, and treasure are already committed to the Palestinians.[14] If life got better for the Palestinians, then Hasani would gladly shift his resources and attention to help with some transgender causes, but, until then, he is otherwise committed.

It's hard to know what to say about Hasani or other moral saints. If Hasani were to do minimum upkeep, say continue to vote for politicians that promise to help with trans issues while he is still focusing all of his time and energy on the another cause, then I think we could still call him an ally. But if Hasani were to have absolutely no time or resources left over for us, then it seems as if he would not be an ally anymore—which, of course, would not make him an enemy, just a neutral/potential ally. I want to use the moral saint case to try and draw out the fact that while we should expect allies to prioritize their commitments to us, we also have to realize that they are often committed to other causes, have limited resources or energy, and cannot always let their obligations to us override every other aspect of their lives. Even though every ally is not a moral saint and not involved with other causes, we also have to be aware that there might be other reasons or events that take precedence over their commitment. While we should expect a certain kind of priority in terms of time, talent, or treasure to causes, we can also accept that an ally can, and does, have a life outside of being an ally.

I now want to shift the discussion from how people become allies to how that status functions. For starters, allies have a prima facie obligation to accept what the people they are allied to identify as harms or as ways to improve their lives. Miranda Fricker (2007), for instance, argues in *Epistemic Injustice* that certain social positions put people in better positions to know more about certain social issues

[14] I'm not suggesting that there are no LGBT Palestinians that Hasani could help.

that affect them. So, in this case, if an ally disregards the testimony of someone in that relevant subcommunity, then she not only fails to acknowledge the epistemic gap (i.e. that she does not have access to that epistemic standpoint), but also she commits an epistemic injustice because she disregards what the person who does occupy that socials status tells her.

This prima facie obligation can be challenged if an ally feels that honoring the obligation would, in fact, leave the individual or subcommunity worse off. Even if someone in a subcommunity claims that meeting some demand or satisfying some desire would make them better off, an ally might actually have an obligation to try to dissuade that person from fulfilling their desire. Consider Tim Dean's account (2009) of an extremely small subcommunity of bug-chasers, people who are HIV negative and want to seroconvert (i.e. contract HIV) through unprotected sex. If we accept that contracting HIV, intentionally or otherwise, leaves someone worse off, then it seems that an ally's attempt to meet a bug-chaser's demand to help facilitate opportunities for seroconversion makes the bug-chaser significantly worse off. An ally's role, then, is not to "just listen" because an ally would be remiss if she did not challenge this prima facie obligation in cases where there would be an obvious harm. If we want allies to be more involved, then I see no reason why they cannot also be involved in helping us determine what goals or projects we should or should not pursue.

There might not always be a clear criterion for when it is appropriate to challenge a request for help as an ally. Consider:

> Case 3: Juanita is a bisexual orthodox Catholic who just came out and accepts the Church's stance on same-sex relationships. She is struggling to figure out how to be both bisexual and Catholic. Lorenzo identifies as an ally to Juanita and thinks her strife is due to her religious identity. When she requests that he be supportive of her staying with the Church, he challenges her to consider a different faith or to leave religion altogether. He thinks her desire to be religious will leave her worse off because he believes it conflicts with her sexual identity.

It is not clear, however, that Lorenzo has the right to challenge his prima facie obligation. It might be true that organized religion does not have the best track record in terms of making LGBT members feel welcome, but this generality is not sufficient for Lorenzo to doubt Juanita.

Oddly enough, we might actually find some support for why religion might still matter *despite* this strife when we look at conversion therapy of all things. Not surprisingly, some recent psychological studies on individuals who underwent conversion therapy for religious reason showed higher rates of ideated suicide,

lower self-esteem, and higher rates of risky behavior—all supporting the idea that rejecting religion would be beneficial for LGBT people. What is surprising, however, is that many of the people initially felt a large amount of *relief* when they started therapy because they finally met other people who understood that religion was just as central to their lives as their sexuality was (Robinson and Spivey, 2007, 652–56; Weiss et al. 2010, 310–12). Thus, encouraging someone who is LGBT to reject their religious beliefs because other people who are LGBT have found solace in doing so could be exceptionally damaging (Flente et al. 2014, 1261–63). Allies would then have to help different communities in different ways; that is, helping someone who wants to work through her faith is different from helping someone convert to a different faith or no faith. So before allies challenge their prima facie obligation, they need to find out more information about that individual or subcommunity to help explain why they are asking for help or support in the first place.

One problem with this view is that since the LGBT community is also composed of a myriad of intersectional aspects, allies might end up with conflicting obligations. Consider:

> Case 4: Zara considers herself an ally to Micha, who was recently fired from his job for being bisexual. Micah asks Zara to vote for an upcoming law that would prohibit employment discrimination based on sexual orientation. Zara also considers herself an ally to Scott, who is a dyed-in-the-wool libertarian and also bisexual. Scott staunchly believes that market solutions are ultimately the best way to empower minorities, insofar as those solutions winnow out bigoted firms as uncompetitive. Scott asks that Zara vote against the upcoming law that would prohibit employment discrimination.

Zara cannot fulfill both obligations because she cannot vote for and against the same issue in the same election. Just as allies can question prima facie obligations, Zara can sort through these conflicting obligations by figuring out which obligation would be best for the people she is allying with. If it turns out that market solutions are the best way to promote LGBT employees, then Zara would be able to meet Scott's obligation and then try to show Micah the argument or rationale for not fulfilling what he takes to be an obligation—not because she does not want to, but because she believes that his request would be not be the best for him.

But if allies and those they are allied with should do what is best for them, then do these partial relationships matter at all for being an ally? Would we instead be on better footing if we talked about what people are obligated to do as moral agents rather than as allies? I want to spend the last section trying to understand an ally's obligations within the larger context of people's moral obligations.

Impartial Allies and Morality

In this last section, I want to look at the idea that some people might accept that they are obligated to members of the LGBT community or various members of the subcommunities not because they are allies, but because it is the decent or moral thing to do. I'll briefly try to locate how we understand what an ally is obligated to do in light of the larger discussion of what people are morally obligated to do.

What makes an ally different than a decent person? After all, it seems as if all of the ways I've described that an ally could help would equally apply to a decent or moral person. John should take in his nephew or neighbor (or donate money to LGBT homelessness), not because he is an uncle or an ally, but because he's a decent person. Decent people, then, would make their decisions irrespective of their partial relationships and would meet obligations to LGBT people whether they personally know any or not. Or, rather, since decent people try to fight injustice wherever it is, their decision to meet these obligations is due to some larger moral principle rather than commitment to these partial relationships.

While this explanation is appealing, I want to be careful about how much stress we put on it. One reason for caution is that decent people, in this context, might be pretty rare in terms of psychology. Margret Walker explains that our social, economic, and political conditions strongly affect our moral epistemology; without a different standpoint outside those conditions, we tend to develop moral blind spots and therefore are simply unaware of the ways certain groups that do not share our particular social position are discriminated against, harmed, or otherwise excluded from moral discourse (Walker 1998, 54). People do not typically think about the ways a society excludes certain members until they have some kind of interaction with them or read about their stories or history. Without people in those social positions explaining the harms and forming bonds with the kinds of people who would identify as decent people, decent people might struggle to correctly identify what people classify as harms or oppressions. While decent people might struggle to correctly identify harms to LGBT people, I accept that they could, in principle, do so without having any personal friends or relationships in any of those subcommunities. So while I claim that having friends or family who face some kind of harm is a likely explanation for why people become allies, I do not think it is a necessary condition.

How do we understand what allies are obligated to do in terms of a larger discussion about what people are already morally obligated to do for LGBT people? We do not think, for instance, that allies alone are the only people who should support equal rights. Someone who is homophobic does not avoid criticism because she does not identify as an ally—in fact, that very opposition gets branded as morally backwards or hidebound. So if we criticize non-allies for being homophobic

or not supporting equal rights legislation, then it looks like the moral obligations would exist prior to any obligations or tasks someone would incur when she becomes an ally. So if the status "ally" really just groups the obligations or tasks someone already had all along, while not adding anything new to those obligations itself, then the status itself is redundant.

Instead, I think we need to think about how a social status can add on to our obligations. John Searle argues that when an agent steps into a social status, she can gain deontic powers (i.e. rights and responsibilities) that she did not have prior to adopting that status (Searle 1995, 100–101). Searle also contends that we can instantiate moral obligations through speech acts. Since we create institutions by conventions and participate in those institutions through speech acts, those deontic powers can carry moral weight (Searle 1969, 175–82). If we accept Searle's position, then we can argue that allies do have moral obligations in virtue of their social positions as allies that they might not have had prior to adopting that social status.

On Searle's account we can only talk about rights or responsibilities if they are grounded in some social status or institution: no social status, no deontic powers, and in turn, no responsibilities or rights. If, as I argued, being an ally is a social status, then I think Searle can explain what deontic powers an ally has in terms of social statuses. I'm less sure that Searle can explain how we would criticize non-allies, or people who lack the ally social status. If a social status or institutional fact alone is what explains deontic powers, and non-allies do not have a relevant social status, then non-allies are not responsive to the kinds of deontic powers Searle is concerned about. We might contend that being a bigot or being morally hidebound is a social status, albeit an informal one. While Searle himself thinks we can apply his account to every level of social reality (1995, 87–88), he thinks these informal social statuses are really just descriptions and do not have a place in an institution. Since our social institutions are what generate deontic powers, and Searle thinks these informal statuses have no specifically recognized deontology (Searle 2009, 92) then I find it hard to see how we could criticize a bigot, at least in terms of a social status, because the description or "informal social status" lacks a social institution to give it a normative status.

We might approach the issue on Searle's behalf from a different perspective. In *Making the Social World*, Searle argues that we think about human rights as rights and responsibilities we afford someone just for being human. Since people in the LGBT community count as humans, they have certain rights as human that non-allies might infringe on if they are bigots. Since this approach is entirely compatible with Searle's stance on allies as a social status, he can now explain what allies are required to do and how we can still criticize non-allies, even though they lack a salient social status. But I am still hesitant. While Searle does argue for human rights, he is fairly critical of any kind of positive human rights (2009, 174–98). Searle

thinks human rights are best understood as negative rights, such as not interfering with someone's pursuit to acquire property or housing. This non-interference might help with state-level issues but does not seem to do much when a landlord refuses to rent to a trans couple—after all, there are plenty of other apartments the couple could try to rent. Even if the other apartments are well beyond the couple's price range, Searle's account, at least as it stands, would not require the landlord to rent to the couple because he is not responsible for why the trans couple cannot make rent elsewhere.

Charlotte Witt argues for a different approach: while a social status does not generate moral obligations, it can create new social or political obligations (Witt 2011, 59–66, 110–17). Social statuses can create new political or social obligations, which in turn can reorganize or reprioritize which obligations we meet. We might say, for example, that everyone has some kind of imperfect obligation to help orphans, either by donating money or paying taxes that support foster care or orphanages, but when someone enters into the social status "adoptive parent," her obligations transform in such a way that it adds on new obligations that did not exist before, or it reprioritizes all the other moral obligations she previously had, because she now has this new social role. An adoptive parent can be praised or blamed for meeting her new and old obligations in a way that people without the status cannot. But the obligations someone gains when she steps into the social position "adoptive parent" do not affect the obligations other people have to help orphans; the status only affects the obligations of the person who is in that social position.

Similarly, we might say that all people have some vague or imperfect obligations to support LGBT people and are blameworthy when they fail to meet these obligations, but the "ally" social status reorganizes those obligations in such a way that requires allies to prioritize the obligations to people in LGBT subcommunities. If a social status can introduce new obligations and reprioritize prior, if vague, moral obligations, then it seems as if the social status "ally" would be meaningful insofar as it would reorganize or reconstitute the vague general moral obligations decent people have prior to becoming allies. We can also recognize that while becoming an adoptive parent affects our moral responsibilities, it also introduces social or political norms and attitudes that evaluate whether or not someone is a good parent. Parents who feed their children begrudgingly, or are resentful for having to make dinner, fail in some respect, even though they still perform the task they have to and provide the benefit they need to. Analogously, allies who begrudgingly help, or resent being asked to help, also seem to fail in the same way, even if they do actually help. So being an ally can contain moral obligations or supererogatory elements but can also contain elements that are bound up in social or political contexts.

Towards a Conclusion

An ally is someone who actively and continually tries to help people in the LGBT community. I argued that although people typically become allies because their friends or family members experience certain harms, allies are, in fact, responsive to anyone who experiences those harms. Being an ally takes time and work; it is not a moral shield from reproach, nor should it be a fashion accessory in the latest social craze. Being an ally is a serious commitment, and those who take it lightly should be taken lightly. I did not develop a grand list of what allies need to do because I think that would defeat the whole point: that allies listen and engage in conversation with the specific people to whom they are allied. I have not provided anything like an authoritative account here, and there is still much work to be done. Despite these shortcomings, I have tried to flag the major issues and points of tension in this discussion to clear the way for more, and better, work.

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