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The Duties of Refugees

In this talk, I consider the question of the duties of refugees. The perceived failure of refugees to fulfill their duties is often a powerful political weapon used by political leaders to justify curtailing refugee rights through detention and measures that prevent access to asylum. Yet there has hitherto been little explicit reflection on the question of refugee duties. In this talk, I illustrate the importance of conceptualising refugees as duty-holders and I critically examine some of the duties that have been ascribed to refugees in recent political debates. In terms of the former, I provide political and moral reasons why it is important to emphasise the duties of refugees. I note, in particular, that seeing refugees as full human agents requires seeing them as possessing obligations as well as rights. In terms of the latter, I focus on three particular duties: “the duty to fight”, “the duty to leave” and “the duty to wait”. I consider these three duties in part because they touch upon matters of great significance for refugees, reveal how refugees' obligations to various communities may conflict, and have contemporary political relevance. The discussion of these duties also serves to highlight the way the language of obligations is often manipulated to deny refugees their legitimate entitlements and to curtail duties of states to offer asylum. While the focus of this talk is primarily on the weaknesses of current statements of refugees' duties, I finish by noting some of the features of a more convincing account, in part by drawing on the preceding examination.