Should I Stay or Should I Go? In Search of a Duty-free Theory of Political Obligation

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Mogens Herman Hansen

I Popping the Question

In this short but quite insightful book Mogens Herman Hansen addresses what has been rightly called ‘The fundamental question of political philosophy’:1 ‘why must citizens obey the laws of their country and be loyal to its constitution?’ (p. 7).2 Being a remarkable ancient historian – arguably the leading scholar on Athenian political institutions – Hansen foreseeably tackles this issue in the light of the following question: ‘what did the ancient Greeks think and do about the issue of political obligation?’ (p. 7). Mind you, Hansen does not fail to go through modern and contemporary political thought on the issue.

2 Hereafter all parenthetical numbers without further specifications refer to pages of the book under review. Unfortunately, there are a few typos here and there in the book: at p. 23 (line 12 from the bottom), p. 32 (line 14 from the top), p. 33 (line 6 from the top), p. 34 (n. 165, line from the top), p. 47 (line 12 from the bottom), and p. 70 (line 2 from the top).
His is ‘a comparative study of the problem of political obligation in ancient Greek city-states (poleis) and in modern democratic states’ (p. 2). We could say then that Hansen attempts to get the best of both worlds as he endeavours ‘to combine a philosophical discussion of political obligation in the modern world with a historical study of the various forms of civic oath in the ancient Greek city-state culture’ (p. 7).

Hansen is right on the money as he distinguishes between thinking and doing about the issue of political obligation since thinking about an issue and doing something about it often are in an inversely proportional relationship and political obligation is no exception. Indeed, whereas in modern times civic bonds have been highly debated because there has been no tradition of explicit acceptance of legal or civic obligations on the part of all citizens, in ancient Greece, on the contrary, there was such a rich tradition of civic oath-taking that no issue was made of political obligation at least in philosophical terms in the first place.

The sole and well-known deviation from this indifference towards political obligation was Plato’s *Crito*, which happens to be the proverbial exception that proves the rule, for Socrates does discuss the issue but he does it in terms that sound remarkably modern to our ears: gratitude, membership, fairness, tacit consent, etc.\(^3\) In fact, Hansen claims that the main reason for the modern outlook of Socrates’ arguments is that Socrates himself never took a civic oath to abide by the laws of Athens (p. 31). Hansen, thus, sets out to retrieve archaeologically from ‘the ancient Greek sources… a substantial amount of evidence that is relevant in this context, but passed over in silence both by Socrates and by modern philosophers’ (p. 24).

Those who are interested in the quintessential problem of political theory are in for a treat here since Hansen deals with arguably three of the main questions of politics in one hearty sweep: the concept, the grounds, and finally the extent and limits of political obligation. He kicks off by describing the issue of political obligation and then he moves on to discuss social contract theory (mainly of the Hobbesian and the Lockean kinds), Hume’s criticism of social contract theory, and the modern debate on political obligation. Having done that, he goes back in time to Socrates’ views on political obligation in the light of modern discourse on the subject. Finally, he offers a learned and insightful account of civic oath as the ground of political obligation in ancient Greece and ventures on how it may bear upon our contemporary political reality.

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\(^3\) I had a stab myself at attributing a theory of political authority and obligation to Aristotle of all people and my conclusions on Aristotle are rather similar to Hansen’s on Plato. See, *e.g.*, my *Political Authority and Obligation in Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), especially pp. 140-144.