

A Theory of Political Obligation: Membership, Commitment, and the Bonds of Society, by Margaret Gilbert. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006. Pp. x + 332. H/b £30.00.

Gilbert's central thesis in this book is that membership of a political society furnishes one with political obligations, and, in particular, that it obligates one to uphold one's society's political institutions. This thesis is carefully qualified. Here are but two of Gilbert's qualifications. First, one who is *resident* in a political society need not be a *member* of it, (I venture an analogy that may give one a handle on Gilbert's way of drawing this distinction: contrast something that is merely *inside* you, like a swallowed coin, with a *part* of you, like your liver). Secondly, whilst rationality requires that one's political obligations override one's inclinations and self-interest as reasons for action, these obligations may, in turn, be overridden by moral considerations, (I do not say 'by *other* moral considerations', for Gilbert does not wish to assert that political obligations are themselves moral considerations). Hence, for Gilbert, a resident in an evil society need be under no obligation to uphold that society's institutions, and even though a member of such a society *is* under an obligation to uphold its institutions, this obligation may be 'trumped' by moral considerations.

Gilbert's argument for her thesis has, in essence, two premisses, which I shall number (i) and (ii):

- (i) For any agents a_1, \dots, a_n and political society p , if a_1, \dots, a_n are p 's members, then a_1, \dots, a_n are jointly committed to uphold p 's political institutions.
- (ii) For any agents a_1, \dots, a_n , if a_1, \dots, a_n are jointly committed to φ , then each of a_1, \dots, a_n is obligated, to the others among a_1, \dots, a_n , to play his part in executing this joint commitment.

Gilbert says that 'joint commitment' is 'a technical phrase of my own', which, for all that, corresponds with 'a fundamental everyday concept' (p. 125). She never goes as far as to define it, but she appears to embrace the following biconditional regarding the genesis of joint commitments, which I shall call (JC):

- (JC) For any agents a_1, \dots, a_n , a_1, \dots, a_n are jointly committed to φ when and only when it is common knowledge amongst a_1, \dots, a_n that each of a_1, \dots, a_n has expressed his readiness to enter a joint commitment to φ with the others among a_1, \dots, a_n .

(Gilbert allows that the content of the sort of common knowledge spoken of here might be such as to identify both a_1, \dots, a_n and φ -ing by means of general descriptions that contingently apply to them, like 'the people living hereabout' and 'do whatever Rex decides', respectively.)

Gilbert recognises that her account of political obligation bears analogy with contractarian accounts. Certainly, there is a formal parallel: substitute 'have agreed' for 'are jointly committed' in (i) and (ii), and 'agreement' for 'joint commitment' in (ii), and Gilbert's argument comes to resemble a more

or less familiar contractarian approach to political obligation. Make like substitutions in (JC) and you will derive what is—to my mind—a pretty plausible constraint on any definition of agreement.

But, for Gilbert, whilst any agreement is a joint commitment, the converse is not the case. Likewise, any expression of readiness to agree to φ is also an expression of readiness to jointly commit to φ , but an expression of readiness to jointly commit to φ need not be an expression of readiness to *agree* to anything, even ‘tacitly’: it might simply be a meaningful look, or an act preparatory to φ -ing, or an initiatory (*tendentious*, even) use of the first-person plural, (as in ‘Let’s φ ’, ‘We’re φ -ing’ etc.), or a mute expression of acquiescence in the import of some such look, act or utterance, occasioned by another. For Gilbert, such occurrences can constitute expressions of readiness for joint commitment even when they occur in coercive circumstances, (allow me to supply an example: a mute acceptance of an aggressive ‘We’re leaving’ from one’s spouse). Finally, the requisite expressions can, Gilbert thinks, be temporally ‘scattered’, such that the joint commitment that they generate has a protracted birth.

Given this notion of joint commitment, Gilbert is able to cite in support of (i) the fact that within political societies it tends to be common knowledge that members are apt to either use the first-person plural to speak of ‘our’ country, institutions, laws, and so on, or accept such uses without demur, even as she grants that such uses and acceptances may be temporally ‘scattered’, may occur in coercive circumstances, and may—in particular—fall short of anything that we should call an agreement.

I want to focus, however, on Gilbert’s argument for (ii). It proceeds from the assumption that joint commitment is a plural analogue of the sort of reflexive commitment that an individual agent performs when he unilaterally decides or intends to do something. When, say, *I* thus commit myself to perform some act, I enter into a special sort of relationship with myself: I render myself *indebted* to myself, such that, for as long as the commitment remains in force, and simply by virtue of the fact that I ‘authored’ it, I and I alone owe its fulfilment to myself, and have the standing to demand that this debt is paid and to rebuke myself if it is not. Or so Gilbert thinks. And likewise, for Gilbert, if, say, *you and I* enter a joint commitment to do something, we enter a special sort of relationship with each other, which renders each of us *indebted* to ..., well, *to us*, such that, for as long as the commitment remains in force, and by virtue of the fact that we ‘authored’ it, each of us—and no one else—owes his participation in its fulfilment *to us*, and has the standing to demand that these debts are paid and to issue rebukes if they are not.

I think there is another interesting departure from contractarianism here, one to which Gilbert does not draw attention.

According to a more or less traditional contractarian picture, a ‘social contract’ consists of a plurality of acts (e.g. of consent, transfer, promising or some such), each performed by an individual member, rendering him indebted (perhaps via some intermediary) to all members. The upshot is that each

member owes something to all, because of something that *he* (the 'debtor') did, not something *they* (his 'creditors') did. Even if each of the plurality of acts is in some sense conditional in content, such that when and only when *each* has been performed do the relevant relations of indebtedness transpire, still, 'at bottom' there are as many acts as there are members, each with a member as its sole agent.

By contrast, for Gilbert, a societal joint commitment to uphold political institutions is a *single* act (however 'scattered' its prelude expressions of readiness), jointly performed by a plurality of individual agents, and generating a plurality of debts, each from one member to all members. As on the contractarian picture, the upshot is that each member owes something to all, but unlike that picture, this is not because of something that *he* (or he alone) did, but because of something that *they* (the 'creditors', who include him) did. They created his debt by authoring the joint commitment. And the same is true of every other debtor's debt.

For Gilbert, there is *owing* here because there is *owning*: creditors own the debtors' relevant actions, even before they are in the creditors' 'possession'. But, if I am right, each action is such that they come to own it by taking it (by *appropriation*), and not by being given it (by *donation*). Each transfer from one to all can only be a donation if, as on the traditional contractarian picture, it has the *one* as its agent, and can only be an appropriation, if, as on Gilbert's picture, it has the 'all' as its agent.

I do not mean to raise a worry here, only to mark a departure from contractarianism. But I think that it is worth noting that *individual* commitment, unlike the plural analogue postulated by Gilbert, can be thought of as either taking or giving. When I render myself indebted to myself by deciding or intending something, I am both debtor and creditor, and nothing seems to determine that I created the debt either qua debtor or qua creditor. I speculate that one emphasises one or other aspect at one's peril. Philosophers who think of exercises of an individual will as *vows*, *promises* or *pledges* given by and to oneself seem to have a donation model in mind: rights of self-governance that one might otherwise have had in the future are relinquished, handed over. Others, who think of such exercises of will as *commandings* or *constrainings* of a future self seem to have an *appropriation* model in mind: the relevant rights are taken. I hope to say more about the use of such inter-personal notions in accounts of individual decision and intention in future work.

These are but some of the thoughts that Gilbert's rich, comprehensive, ambitious and admirably clear book provoked me to entertain. Her great achievement is to remind us that, by virtue of the fact that there is, or ought to be, a place for joint intentional phenomena in our 'folk' theories of mind and action, concepts like those of authority, punishment, rights and ownership have a home in those 'folk' theories too: these concepts are not the sole province of law and state politics. For this reason, philosophers of many different specialisms ought to ponder Gilbert's book, (if they could do so jointly, all the

better). Here, perhaps even more than in her earlier work, the personal really is political.

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Plato and Aristotle in Agreement? Platonists on Aristotle from Antiochus to Porphyry, by George E. Karamanolis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. viii + 419. H/b £53.00.

There is increasing recognition that we need to address more seriously the commonplace of later Platonism that Plato and Aristotle were in substantial philosophical agreement. Whether or not one is persuaded that the idea itself has any future (a position for which Lloyd Gerson has recently been arguing in a string of publications culminating in *Aristotle and Other Platonists*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), the issue represents an important test of our understanding of the Platonist project as a whole. Yet so far we have lacked a systematic review of the evidence—even of the scope and nature of claims made for, or against, the agreement of Plato and Aristotle. So Karamanolis has done immeasurable service with this lucid and comprehensive account of the attitudes taken towards Aristotle by some seminal thinkers in the debate—attitudes which he shows to have been more various and more complex than has been recognised. In seven chapters, he discusses in turn Antiochus of Ascalon, who (in Karamanolis's eyes) initiated the return to Plato and was assisted in this by his reading of Aristotle; Plutarch, who also used Aristotle, but with greater reserve; Atticus, and then Numenius, both of whom dissented from the harmonist view altogether; Ammonius Saccas, who reintegrated Aristotle into the Platonist tradition; his pupil Plotinus; and finally Porphyry, whose own work in exploring the harmony of Plato and Aristotle represented a decisive legacy for the subsequent Platonic tradition.

Karamanolis quickly establishes in his discussion of Antiochus the value of a careful, open-minded approach to the evidence, and the vital conclusion, which resonates in every subsequent chapter, that Platonist *approval* of Aristotle, however strongly expressed, never implies their *systematic, universal agreement* with him. He shows that Antiochus, as the Platonists who come after him, distinguishes between relatively important and relatively unimportant areas of agreement. Antiochus, for example, is basically well-disposed towards Aristotle just because and in so far as Aristotle is faithful to what he considers the most important area of Platonic philosophy, namely ethics. Disagreements