

ambivalence Americans—or at least the contributors to this volume—have about rights. Like most collections, this one is very uneven both in quality and theme. But one thing that runs through most of the essays is strong feelings about rights. Although the main topic, so far as there is one, is the status of rights both in theory and practice at the time of the American founding, it is evident that attitudes about them in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries figure in many, even most, of the authors' views about rights at the founding. Thus, there are some who are aghast at what has happened to them in theory and practice since World War II and they, for the most part, attempt to establish that the rights the founding generation affirmed were nothing like the rights that, say, the Warren Court or the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirmed. Others, friendlier to the rights of our day, see somewhat more continuity between then and now or, if not, tend to speak of progress in rights.

The essays in this book were originally presented at a conference held at Colgate University in 2000–2001, that is, before the events of 9/11. The essays, despite their very disparate character, show some of the advantages of their common origin, most notably an occasional tendency to address one another. It is striking that it took so long for the essays to migrate from the conference circuit to the printed page, but one reason may be that there was no sense of urgency here, for many of the contributions cover ground familiar from earlier work. Some of the essays are almost extracts from earlier work. Thus, Richard Primus gives a brief restatement of the functional account of rights he expressed at greater length in his 1999 book, *The American Language of Rights*. John Phillip Reid gives a very close restatement of his book on *The Authority of Rights* (1980). Barry Shain, the editor of this volume, expands on but essentially restates the position taken in his *The Myth of American Individualism* (1994). Akhil Amar largely restates the position he defended in *The Bill of Rights* (1998).

This is not to say that all the essays rehash older material or even that the rehashes are without merit. Indeed, it is a worthy collection for any reader wanting to catch up on some of the most important writings on rights in the past few decades. The collection is especially strong in giving us views of historians. It contains essays by some of our most prominent historians of the founding era—Gordon Wood, Jack Rakove, James Hutson, Daniel Rodgers—all of whom make valuable contributions. A reader will not see much of the recent philosophic thinking on rights, with only one essay, that by Leif Wenner and Stephen Macedo, venturing into that territory. The absence of philosophic thinking about rights is unfortunate for many of the historical essays would be improved by a sharper conceptual grasp of the rights idea.

Although the essays are disparate in character, there is one overriding theme more or less common to both those

who like contemporary rights and those who do not—the “rights have changed” theme. All the essays in one form or another speak of such change. Beneath that commonality, however, is a much greater diversity in the way the starting point and the later points are described. Some see a shift from negative to positive rights. Some see a shift from communal and corporate to individual rights. Others speak of a shift from religiously grounded to rationally grounded rights. As the Introduction well says: “The contributors to this volume . . . certainly do not agree in all matters concerning the history of American rights” (p. 1). That same introduction, however, claims that despite the disagreements, there is a deeper “agreement reached by the contributors in finding that culturally accepted seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rights claims, with the exception of religious conscience, were not primarily individualistic” (p. 2).

That surely describes the position of the editor of the book; it does not in fact describe the position taken by all the contributors. Thus, for example, James Hutson traces the emergence and rise to dominance of a new kind of rights talk, based on Ockhamist nominalism. The new rights are “subjective rights.” As Hutson puts it, “this new species of right was subjective because power, its essence, was part of the individual subject. . . . A subjective right was an attribute of the subject” (p. 30). It was these subjective rights, says Hutson, that rose to prominence in the America of the founding era. A few other essays also escape this so-called consensus, including Rakove’s on the Bill of Rights, Wood’s on the “history of rights on early America,” and Rodgers’s on “rights consciousness in American history.”

The editor, then, perhaps overstates the consensus, but the identification of a consensus actually misleads as to the book’s most valuable feature—the very disagreement and the sharply argued presentation of quite different views on “the nature of rights at the American founding.”

Rousseau’s Platonic Enlightenment. By David Lay Williams. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007. 344p. \$25.00.
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— James Miller, *New School for Social Research*

Anyone who knows Rousseau knows that he was someone intimately familiar with Plato. On a variety of levels—as a literary stylist, as a theorist of education, as a critic of culture—Plato inspired, informed, and provoked Rousseau. The *Republic* was one of his favorite books, and he was constantly re-reading and re-interpreting Plato’s words throughout his most productive years.

But do any of these facts, significant though they are, mean that Rousseau was in some sense a Platonist?

Commentators in the past hundred years have varied in their responses to this question. A few, Charles Hendel

above all, have stressed Rousseau's affinities with Plato. And although most scholars acknowledge that Rousseau's metaphysics were Cartesian, and thus neo-Platonic, they also tend to argue that Rousseau's metaphysical views are "detachable" from his moral and political theory, which owes a much more substantial debt to realists and empiricists like Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Condillac, and Montesquieu—a tradition of modern thought far removed from Plato's frank idealism.

Moreover, how Rousseau reconciled his metaphysics with his moral and political theory is itself a topic of controversy. Some scholars have argued for a systematic coherence while others take it as symptomatic that Rousseau himself from time to time conceded that his lifework was complex, and perhaps even contradictory, notoriously quipping that he "preferred to be a man of paradoxes than a man of prejudices."

In trying to make sense of this complicated lifework, some of Rousseau's most provocative modern readers have narrowed their focuses, concentrating on an overarching theme in order to cast Rousseau's life and work in a fresh perspective. For Jean Starobinski, it was the theme of transparency; for Judith Shklar, it was Rousseau's paradoxical approach to authority; and for David Lay William in this sophisticated study, it is the author's preoccupation with Plato.

The argumentative arc of *Rousseau's Platonic Enlightenment* hinges on a very broad categorical distinction, between what Williams calls "Platonic transcendentalism" and "Hobbesian positivism" (p. xxvii). Surveying post-Renaissance Western philosophy, Williams sorts thinkers into one of these two camps, with Descartes, Leibniz, Malebranche, and Rousseau on the transcendentalist side, and Hobbes and most of Rousseau's contemporaries—Diderot, d'Holbach, La Mettrie—on the positivist or materialist side. He makes his case in eight varied chapters. While half the book covers Rousseau's alleged Platonism in detail, the other four chapters are devoted in turn to Hobbes and Locke, to materialism and Platonism in early modern Europe, to Rousseau's influence on Kant, and—most surprising of all—to a comparison of Rousseau's views with those held by Marx and Foucault. (He argues that the latter, despite their professed philosophical views to the contrary, both succumb to what he calls "the gravitational force of transcendent ideas" [p. 274], which is plausible, given the constant, sometimes surreptitious, recourse of both Marx and Foucault to *freedom* as a transcendent criterion for judgment.)

According to Williams, who is refreshingly straightforward about defining his terms, "Platonism" involves five substantive commitments: (1) to a metaphysical belief in the existence of immaterial ideas; (2) to an ontological assumption that key normative ideas—of the good, of justice, etc.—are transcendent, in the literal sense that they exist outside the ebb and flow of lived experience in

time and space; (3) to an epistemological claim that knowledge of the ideas is possible, at least to a few blessed souls gifted with an ability to reason and to master the intricacies of "dialectical" argumentation; (4) to a moral claim that the ideas of the good, and of justice, etc., should regulate the conduct of life; and, finally, (5) to a political and institutional argument that those who truly know should rule over those who do not, just as reason ought to regulate the passions in the embodied individual (p. xix–xxiii). Since Williams counts Descartes as a modern Platonist, he adds three additional commitments of "modern European Platonism": the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the freedom of the will.

In works like the *Second Discourse*, and famously in the "Creed of the Savoyard Vicar" in *Emile*, it is true that Rousseau, like Descartes, sharply separated the body from the soul, and asserted freedom of the will as an issue of faith and an explicitly "metaphysical" proposition, independent of the material world and inexplicable and indemonstrable through a science of physics. Most scholars, too, have acknowledged the Platonic cast of the argument against theatrical entertainments Rousseau makes in his *Letter to d'Alembert*, and Williams has a helpful discussion of the short text Rousseau wrote at around the same time, "On Theatrical Imitation," his "[e]ssay taken from the dialogues of Plato."

There are many things to like about *Rousseau's Platonic Enlightenment*: it is clearly organized, lucidly written, and crisply argued. Williams has read virtually everything Rousseau ever wrote, he knows the secondary literature inside-out, and he also knows a lot about the history of philosophy. The chapters on morality and the general will in Rousseau are both first rate, as is the chapter on Kant.

But Williams sets the interpretive bar for himself very high, by asserting that Rousseau's work represents a systematic whole, and that its philosophical identity is essentially "Platonic." He presents a vigorous argument on almost every page, and the overall effect is stimulating. Yet his single-minded interpretation forces him repeatedly to downplay Rousseau's complex views on knowledge and conscience, and Rousseau's equally ambivalent embrace of reverie. Where Plato ostensibly establishes the perfect polity of the *Republic* through a rational dialectic, Rousseau, in depicting perfect republics, especially in the pages of his novel *La Nouvelle Heloise*, but also in his evocations of Geneva, trusts to the resources of the imagination the freeing of images from their subordination to ideas. And whereas Plato stipulates that it is philosophers who can truly grasp the eternal ideas of the good and of justice, Rousseau raises a host of skeptical doubts about our capacity to know, raising doubts as well about any putative inner sense, not least by demonstrating, in the *Second Discourse* above all, how thoroughly evil and unjust currently prevalent conceptions of the "good" and "justice" truly are. And when Rousseau flatly asserts, as he occasionally

does, that eternal ideas are “engraved in the human heart,” he leaves the reader uncertain if the heart is really an open book, or if any of its ideas are really legible, never mind trustworthy.

Rousseau’s skepticism about the reliability of our inherited moral categories, like his preoccupation with reverie, does not make Rousseau a “Hobbesian positivist,” but nor does it make him a Platonist, either modern or ancient. In fact, this book’s dichotomy between Plato and Hobbes is much too simple. Rousseau himself was drawn to a variety of philosophers who cannot be easily sorted according to the categories devised by Williams. The most conspicuous example is Montaigne, someone crucially important to Rousseau’s way of thinking, but the great Renaissance pyrrhonist is not mentioned by Williams, not even in passing.

Williams, in other words, presents a one-sided reading of Rousseau. But then, so did Judith Shklar, and so did Jean Starobinski, even more brilliantly. That David Lay Williams does not seem entirely out of place in such exalted company suggests the extent of his accomplishment in this superbly tendentious new study.

A Philosophical Theory of Citizenship: Obligation, Authority, and Membership. By Steven J. Wulf. Lanham, MD:

Lexington Books, 2008. 162p. \$60.00.

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— George Klosko, *University of Virginia*

In recent years, political obligation has become a subject of intense controversy. Beginning with Robert Paul Wolff’s *In Defense of Anarchism* (1970), a range of theorists have questioned the traditional belief in the moral requirement to obey the law because it is the law. In reaction to the rise of this so-called “philosophical anarchism,” a series of works have sought to defend more traditional conclusions about obligation, often by developing new grounds for the traditional position, especially by developing theories based on membership or association. In spite of their differences, most such scholars share a particular, non-foundational approach to these problems, the method of “reflective equilibrium,” which is generally accepted in contemporary analytical moral and political philosophy. Scholars who take this approach attempt to substantiate their claims by systematizing our moral intuitions, with special attention to our “considered judgments,” those moral judgments in which we are most confident.

In terms of substance and conclusions, Wulf’s “philosophical theory of citizenship” is generally conventional. He swims against the tide of philosophical anarchism by defending general moral requirements to obey the laws of legitimate states, with little regard to the content of individual laws. The laws in question are those of nation-states, and Wulf regards them as necessary for familiar practical reasons. However, Wulf’s theory is highly ambitious and unconventional in rejecting dominant meth-

ods in political philosophy, especially those associated with the turn toward “reflective equilibrium.” He grounds his position on “absolute idealism,” following in the footsteps of F. H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, Michael Oakeshott, and other theorists, including G. W. F. Hegel. In the heart of the book, chapters 3 and 4, Wulf argues that “reality is an implicitly unified world of experience” (p. 27), which gives rise to “a coherence theory of reality that supports coherence methods of explanation” (p. 5). Central to his account is a view of the self as socially constituted, based on “learned idioms”: “coherent conduct adheres to learned, customary, ever developing ‘idioms,’ such as languages, crafts, games, scholarly disciplines, and everyday skills, which make rational conduct possible” (p. 35).

Given differences between societies and between individuals within societies, the particular idioms that constitute individuals will vary. But Wulf regards the self as not only socially constituted but teleological. For him, developing the idioms that make us what we are is essential to our nature. Thus, individuals should “seek idiomatic coherence in [their] conduct.” “We therefore acquire obligations because our selves are teleological: we are obligated to observe the idioms that compose us, because the idioms (and hence our selves) aim at making our apparent world wholly real” (p. 40–41).

Having established a basis for attributing obligations to individuals, Wulf moves on to more familiar territory. Chapter 5 addresses the responsibilities and limits of political authority. It provides familiar arguments for the necessity of the state and works out a concise liberal position in regard to when authority runs out. Chapter 6 addresses the objects of political allegiance. For obvious reasons of common sense, the polis is too small, while Wulf worries about the practical consequences of a world state. Unsurprisingly, he opts for nation-states, although he recommends various forms of confederation between states. Chapter 7 moves beyond standard discussions of political obligation to consider issues in international justice. These include obligations to obey the laws of foreign governments and the ability to coerce foreigners, and three topics more remote from political obligations: international distributive justice, border enforcement, and humanitarian intervention.

Unquestionably, the book’s main attraction is Wulf’s account of absolute idealism and the movement from an idealist metaphysics to political obligations. Choosing to be concise, Wulf does not provide detailed discussion of competing ethical theories or other accounts of reality and truth (p. 6). More surprisingly, he avoids “an expansive reconstruction and critique” of the competing versions of absolute idealism provided by his distinguished predecessors (p. 8 n. 4). The resulting presentation is both extremely brief and extremely vague. Wulf devotes four pages to the nature of reality, three to coherent experience, and four to