

David Lay Williams

Rousseau's Platonic Enlightenment

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David Lay Williams has written an important book. Its several virtues include a careful treatment of Rousseau's primary texts, generous engagement with the secondary literature, and a style characterized by a clarity and precision that renders its arguments accessible not only to specialists but to a wide range of political theorists and historians of ideas. It also develops its argument with conviction and verve, and engagement with this argument will be essential for students of Rousseau, even if it fails to persuade on all fronts.

The aim of Williams's book is clear: to demonstrate that 'Rousseau was indeed a Platonist' (88), indeed one of the 'greatest and most consistent Platonists of the modern era' (94). By 'Platonist', Williams means something very specific. In part he means to argue that Rousseau was influenced by the historical Plato—an influence usefully noted in several places, including the treatment of Rousseau's engagement with Plato's theory of the relationship of poetry to philosophy and politics in Rousseau's short and largely neglected 'On Theatrical Imitation' (155-62). But more fundamentally, Platonism here represents a type of intellectual commitment. Thus, Williams explains, 'the core essence of Platonism, as discussed throughout this book,' is largely that the idea of justice is 'absolutely constant or transcendent' and 'in no way subject to human creation or alteration' (xix). Defined thusly, Platonism represents one pole in an epic struggle. The other is occupied by various metaphysical and moral conceptions, from materialism and empiricism to positivism and utilitarianism, which find common ground, according to Williams, in the belief that justice is ultimately a matter of convention or social construction, and hence relative rather than universal. Williams identifies this view with thinkers from Heraclitus to Helvétius, but chiefly with Hobbes. Rousseau's Platonism—and indeed his broader philosophic and political significance—is thus described as consisting in his anti-Hobbesian 'commitment to transcendent ideas as the ultimate authority for moral and political arguments' and his insistence that justice 'exists independently of all human convention' (xxvii, xxv).

Williams develops this thesis in eight chapters, four focusing on Rousseau himself, and four on his predecessors and successors. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the central problem of the book via a review of Locke's and Rousseau's respective responses to Hobbes; arguing that Hobbes' materialist metaphysics compelled his legal and political positivism, Williams suggests that Locke's effort to join transcendence to empiricism is superseded by Rousseau's acceptance of anti-materialism as a foundation for universal justice. Chapter 2 turns to the broader debate in early modern Europe over Platonism and materialism, focusing on Rousseau's more immediate interlocutors and how they map onto this debate. Diderot, d'Holbach, La Mettrie and Helvétius are thus

cast as Hobbesian materialists, and Malebranche, Leibniz, and Fénelon as modern Platonists, in a reprise of the previous chapter's debate.

Chapter 3 shifts to Rousseau proper, focusing on the 'Creed of the Savoyard Vicar' from *Emile*. Against those such as Melzer and Gourevitch who distance Rousseau's own views from the Vicar's, Williams suggests that the Vicar's are Rousseau's own 'first principles' and indeed evidence of 'Rousseau's commitment to the central doctrines of modern Platonic metaphysics—the existence of God, free will, an immaterial soul, and transcendent ideas' (62). Chapter 4 turns to the general will; here we learn that just as the Vicar's creed stands as evidence of Rousseau's fidelity to Platonic metaphysics, the general will attests to his embrace of 'the ontological and political dimensions of Platonism' (94). The burden of Chapter 5 is to demonstrate Rousseau's 'epistemic Platonism' (170) via analysis of his use of the metaphor of 'chains' and its debts to Plato. In Chapter 6, Williams turns to Rousseau's institutional theory; it argues, contra twentieth-century interpreters like Jacob Talmon and Isaiah Berlin, that Rousseau is less the friend than the foe of totalitarianism, as evidenced in his underappreciated theory of checks and balances. Chapters seven and eight provide a concluding examination of Rousseau's legacy, offering readings of Kant and Marx and Foucault through the lens established in the previous chapters.

For Rousseau specialists, the upshot of Williams' argument is a challenge to the view that Rousseau's political theory is positivistic. For political theorists generally, its significance lies in its illumination of the influence of metaphysical and epistemological commitments on practical morality and politics. Both groups of readers will gain much from engaging these claims. Still, at least two questions might be raised.

The first concerns Williams's characterization of the debate between Platonism and Hobbesianism. This is the dominant motif of the book, and indeed the lens through which Rousseau's thought—as well as the thought of his predecessors and successors—is read. But occasionally one wonders whether the book's emphasis on 'the choice between Plato and Hobbes' is overdrawn (xxviii). While conceptually clear, this characterization at times threatens to overshadow the richness of the debate; for even if some of the early modern thinkers here profiled understood themselves to be engaged principally in such a struggle—say, Marsilio Ficino and Ralph Cudworth—the projects of a number of other major thinkers of the period map uncomfortably on these poles. More importantly, one wonders what might be lost in approaching Rousseau through such a lens. According to Williams, 'Rousseau viewed his own project' as 'the same battle that engaged Plato some two millennia before' (92). But of course much happened in those two millennia—Christianity, commercial society, the nation-state, the scientific revolution—and given the centrality of these very themes in Rousseau, the strong identification of Rousseau's project with Plato's would seem to require some tempering. Williams is right to say that 'a middle ground between Plato and Hobbes is difficult to sustain' (xxix, n. 8). Yet it may also be precisely Rousseau's efforts to define such a position—a position, moreover, that defies definition along traditional poles of 'ancient' or 'modern'—that makes him most worthy of our continued study.

Second, Williams' approach to textual analysis raises a question. In general, he proceeds by laying out a specific aspect of Platonism, then marshalling evidence from Rousseau's texts to demonstrate his fidelity to such. This approach is often successful, and at several points generates subtle and discerning interpretations of key passages. Yet readers may at times find themselves wishing that Williams had applied his interpretive skills to passages that seem to challenge his arguments. Two specific insistences come to mind. First, Williams writes that for Rousseau, 'the senses function to obscure moral knowledge of the first principles, such as justice and goodness' (xxv). But how then to square this with Rousseau's own claim, in the third Moral Letter, that 'our senses are the instruments of all our knowledge' and 'it is from them that all our ideas come' (*Complete Works* [CW] 12:183-84 / *Oeuvres complètes* [OC] 4:1093-94)? Second, Williams writes that a 'dominant theme' in Rousseau is his appeal to principles 'written on the heart' and labeled 'conscience' (74). Williams lists an impressive array of Rousseau's claims on this front. But how are they to be squared with Rousseau's own claim in the Letter to Beaumont that 'conscience develops and acts only with man's understanding', and is moreover 'null in the man who has compared nothing and who has not seen his relationships' (CW 9:28 / OC 3:936)?

These challenges may not be insurmountable, even from within the bounds of Williams's interpretation. But given that they all seem to signal departures from the core metaphysical and epistemological conceptions that Williams associates with Platonism, we would have welcomed the author's engagement with such potentially countervailing evidence. Yet this is ultimately a relatively minor quibble with an interpretation that most certainly deserves the careful attention of Rousseau scholars and political theorists more generally.

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