



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *A Philosophical Theory of Citizenship: Obligation, Authority, and Membership* by Steven J. Wulf

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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.
doi:10.1017/S1537592709090409

— 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 metaphysic 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

the nature of the self and “learned idioms.” He devotes approximately two and a half times as much space to the political topics noted above as to absolute idealism. With a few exceptions, such as using his conception of the self to justify preferences for one’s compatriots over inhabitants of other countries in distributive justice and immigration, little on the political topics is directly shaped by his idealist approach, while discussion of each topic is generally brief and superficial. For instance, the six international topics discussed in chapter 7 receive a total of twenty-four pages.

Because of the deep suspicion in which absolute idealism is currently held by most scholars, Wulf would have been well served to provide a stronger and more convincing defense of his position. This review is not the place for an in-depth critique of absolute idealism. But a century of analytical philosophers have had little trouble picking apart the position’s major claims, and it would not be difficult to do the same for Wulf’s. For instance, as noted, central to Wulf’s account is a view of the self as a collection of “learned idioms.” Such a view may have direct implications for conduct in a society that is extremely homogeneous. But in a pluralistic modern society, people are constituted by multiple conflicting idioms. Without guidance as to how to prioritize these, i.e., exactly which ones our natures require us to develop, the position offers very little.

Chapter 2 of the book briefly reviews competing “inadequate” theories of obligation. These include views based on consequences, gratitude, consent, fairness, Samaritanism, and membership. Once again, Wulf’s discussion is extremely cursory. For instance, gratitude receives approx-

imately two pages, consequences less than two, and consent approximately three. In addition to objections particular to each theory, Wulf generally contends that they are flawed because of unacknowledged moral assumptions. Thus, for example, consent theory rests on an unexplained requirement to keep one’s promises. In criticizing these theories, in general, Wulf does not seem to be aware of recent arguments and counterarguments (including, for full disclosure, the arguments surrounding my own theory of obligation based on the principle of fairness, which Wulf directly addresses).

But more important than particular lapses is his failure to develop a sustained critique of reflective equilibrium. Is it actually flawed by foundational commitments, or is reliance on considered judgments defensible on other grounds? In *A Theory of Justice* (1971), John Rawls famously writes, “A conception of justice cannot be deduced from self-evident premises or conditions on principles; instead, its justification is a matter of the mutual support of many considerations, of everything fitting together into one coherent view” (p. 21). Once again, this review is not the place for an in-depth discussion of reflective equilibrium. I do not contend that this approach is beyond criticism, but that the criticisms have to be developed properly. Let it suffice to say that there are obvious rejoinders to Wulf’s main claims. Although he is to be commended for striking out in a new direction, his new path is far thornier and beset with more difficulties than he acknowledges. Like it or not, adequate defense of “absolute idealism” should provide a lot more by way of defense than Wulf offers in this book.

AMERICAN POLITICS

Media Concentration and Democracy: Why Ownership Matters. By C. Edwin Baker. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2006. 272p. \$73.00 cloth, \$24.99 paper.

Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections. By Markus Prior. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2007. 336p. \$89.00 cloth, \$27.99 paper.
doi:10.1017/S1537592709090410

— Michael W. Wagner, *University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

While humans need only one heart to pump life-sustaining oxygenated blood to the body, a democracy requires more than a single source to circulate the life’s blood of representative government—information—to its citizenry. It is generally argued that the wider the variety of sources informing the electorate about politics, the better. However, the degree to which issues like the increasingly concentrated ownership of the news media, juxtaposed against the simulta-

neous growing availability of different cable television channels and Websites, actually affect democratic health has received too little systematic, scholarly attention. Two exciting new books address these issues in strikingly different yet intellectually stimulating ways; their dissimilar conclusions about issues surrounding media ownership and the influence on democracy and democratic behaviors of media choice provide worthy grist for the scholarly mill.

C. Edwin Baker’s *Media Concentration and Democracy* makes the case for opposing concentrated media ownership. An accomplished legal scholar who has had much to say about media markets, democracy, and the First Amendment, Baker focuses on three major arguments. First, and most importantly, he puts forward a “democratic distribution principle” that “democracy implies as wide as practical a dispersal of power within public discourse” (p. 7). Flowing from this general principle are two additional arguments against concentrated ownership—that dispersion of ownership both creates democratic safeguards and thrusts media outlets into the arms of owners interested in quality rather than the bottom line.