



Rousseau's Social Contract: An Introduction (Cambridge Introductions to Key Philosophical Texts)

By David Lay Williams

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If the greatness of a philosophical work can be measured by the volume and vehemence of the public response, there is little question that Rousseau's Social Contract stands out as a masterpiece. Within a week of its publication in 1762 it was banished from France. Soon thereafter, Rousseau fled to Geneva, where he saw the book burned in public. At the same time, many of his contemporaries, such as Kant, considered Rousseau to be "the Newton of the moral world," as he was the first philosopher to draw attention to the basic dignity of human nature. The Social Contract has never ceased to be read in the 250 years since it was written. Rousseau's "Social Contract": An Introduction offers a thorough and systematic tour of this notoriously paradoxical and challenging text. David Lay Williams offers readers a chapter-by-chapter reading of the Social Contract, squarely confronting these interpretive obstacles, leaving no stones unturned. The conclusion connects Rousseau's text both to his important influences and those who took inspiration and sometimes exception to his arguments. The book also features a special extended appendix dedicated to outlining his famous conception of the general will, which has been the object of controversy since the Social Contract's publication in 1762.

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Editorial Review

Review

"[This] is a very good book indeed. As the author of a rival commentary, I would press the case for serious students of Rousseau to have more than one discussion of the *Social Contract* on their shelves, but David Lay Williams's book sets an impressively high standard in this area. Anyone wishing to decode the mysteries of the general will and to pick apart its ambiguities needs to read it." -- Christopher Bertram, Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews

"There is much to recommend in the book, but two things in particular stand out. First, Williams' emphasis on virtue is a welcome corrective to more procedural treatments of Rousseau's political theory. Second, Williams' careful reading of Books III and IV, which are often neglected in the scholarship on Rousseau, is the best available account of the relevance of Rousseau's history of Rome for the philosophical argument of Books I and II of the text." -- Jason Neidleman, Perspectives on Politics

"David Lay Williams's splendid new commentary on Rousseau's greatest contribution to political philosophy will rapidly become the "standard" work on this subject. In *The Social Contract* Rousseau formulates his most famous idea, "the general will", and Williams throws more light on this difficult notion than any scholar in the past half-century. This is a truly remarkable book."

Patrick Riley, author of *The General Will Before Rousseau*

"David Lay Williams's masterful Rousseau's *Social Contract* clarifies a notoriously difficult work without explaining away the paradoxes that animate it. Students, teachers, and grizzled political science veterans will all benefit from Williams's eye for textual detail, his attention to Rousseau's context, and his knowledge of and fair-mindedness toward rival interpretations."

Jonathan Marks, Ursinus College, Pennsylvania

"Both immensely useful to students and a deeply illuminating resource for scholars, David Lay Williams offers a fine-grained interpretation of Rousseau's *Social Contract* that incisively connects it to his other writings, to his intellectual forebears and contemporaries, and to some of his most important successors. An impressive achievement that will benefit readers of Rousseau long into the future."

Sankar Muthu, University of Chicago

"David Lay Williams has written a very helpful introduction to Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Organized around a systematic, chapter-by-chapter walk-through of the text, Williams's book stands as a valuable guide to the central lessons and tensions of Rousseau's most notable and notorious political work. The clarity of its analysis, together with its sensitivity to Rousseau's intellectual and political contexts as well as today's scholarly debates, will render this book extremely useful to students and teachers alike."

Ryan Patrick Hanley, Marquette University, Wisconsin

"[This] is a very good book indeed. As the author of a rival commentary, I would press the case for serious students of Rousseau to have more than one discussion of the *Social Contract* on their shelves, but David Lay Williams' book sets an impressively high standard in this area. Anyone wishing to decode the mysteries of the general will and to pick apart its ambiguities needs to read it."

Christopher Bertram, Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews

"Providing a thoughtful and clear guide for those who wish to study Rousseau's Social Contract, Williams' considerable knowledge and research not only about Rousseau, but also Western political thought make this work highly recommended."

Sharon K. Vaughan, Review of Metaphysics

"Williams does admirably well in addressing the most difficult problems Rousseau's text presents, while - and this is what most distinguishes the book - situating Rousseau's argument within the context of the history of political thought. ... There is much to recommend in the book, but two things in particular stand out. First, Williams' emphasis on virtue is a welcome corrective to more procedural treatments of Rousseau's political theory. Second, Williams' careful reading of Books III and IV, which are often neglected in the scholarship on Rousseau, is the best available account of the relevance of Rousseau's history of Rome for the philosophical argument of Books I and II of the text."

Jason Neidleman, Perspectives on Politics

"The chief merit of David Lay Williams's Rousseau's Social Contract: An Introduction lies in the way it confronts the many tensions of a work notorious for the extent of disagreement (and outright hostility) generated over its purported meaning. While Williams's reading offers a reliable guide to the conflicting interpretations, it also situates *Du contrat social* within the context of Rousseau's thinking and its philosophical legacy."

Marco M. Di Palma, French Studies

About the Author

David Lay Williams is Associate Professor of Political Science at DePaul University and the author of Rousseau's Platonic Enlightenment (2007) and *The General Will: The Evolution of a Concept* (forthcoming from Cambridge University Press), as well as numerous articles in journals such as *History of Political Thought*, the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, *The Journal of Politics*, *The American Journal of Political Science*, and *Polity*. He has twice held fellowships at the Institute for Research in the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, as well as a fellowship at the DePaul Humanities Center. He was formerly Professor of Philosophy and Political Science at the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point.

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