

The General Will

Although it originated in theological debates, the general will ultimately became one of the most celebrated and denigrated concepts emerging from early modern political thought. Jean-Jacques Rousseau made it the central element of his political theory, and it took on a life of its own during the French Revolution, before being subjected to generations of embrace or opprobrium. James Farr and David Lay Williams have collected for the first time a set of essays that track the evolving history of the general will from its origins to recent times. *The General Will: The Evolution of a Concept* discusses the general will's theological, political, formal, and substantive dimensions with a careful eye toward the concept's virtues and limitations as understood by its expositors and critics, among them Arnauld, Pascal, Malebranche, Leibniz, Locke, Spinoza, Montesquieu, Kant, Constant, Tocqueville, Adam Smith, and John Rawls.

James Farr is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Chicago Field Studies Program at Northwestern University. He is the author of numerous essays on Locke and on the history of political thought. He is also the editor of, among other volumes, *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge, 1989) and *Political Science in History* (Cambridge, 1995).

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The General Will

The Evolution of a Concept

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
 978-1-107-05701-2 — The General Will
 Edited by James Farr, David Lay Williams
 Frontmatter
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Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107057012

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First published 2015

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data

The general will : the evolution of a concept / edited by James Farr,
 David Lay Williams.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-107-05701-2

1. General will. 2. Legitimacy of governments. 3. Political science –
 Philosophy – History. I. Farr, James, 1950– editor of compilation.

II. Williams, David Lay, 1969– editor of compilation.

JC328.2.G46 2014

320.01'1–dc23 2014034127

ISBN 978-1-107-05701-2 Hardback

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Acknowledgments

Early modernity is often understood as the age that gave rise to the concept of the *sovereign individual* – inspired by Doctor Faustus in literature, Newton in science, and *homo economicus* in politics and society. To be sure, the sovereign individual has been a force for stunning change in all these domains, not least in politics and society. These changes have, however, an ambiguous legacy. Although scientific and technological advancements have exceeded the imagination and the global economy has expanded exponentially, there has been a lingering sense among some that these achievements come at a cost – that in blind pursuit of self-interest, the broader communal interest has been threatened. This volume is dedicated to tracing the development of an alternative concept that evolved in large part as a response to such concerns – that of citizens who understand their will as part of a larger communal whole: the general will. Before Rousseau appropriated it for expressly civic purposes, this concept emerged initially in theological debates over salvation and God’s will. Contentious from the beginning and certainly in Rousseau’s wake, it has had a vibrant life and remains part of political discourse to this day. This volume seeks to reinforce or reinvigorate analysis of the general will with attention to a broader spectrum of the concept’s history than has been previously available.

Several essays in this volume emerged from a symposium on the general will held at the University of Wisconsin–Madison on October 4, 2008, to honor the pioneering work of Patrick Riley. This symposium benefited

from the selfless general wills of several individuals, including Richard Avramenko, Debbie Bakke, Michael Dubin, Robert Booth Fowler, Susan Friedman, Ryan Patrick Hanley, Christopher Harwood, Alan J. Kellner, Jimmy Casas Klausen, Simanti Lahiri, Katherine Loeber, Steven Nadler, Sean Smalley, and John Zumbunnen. It also required financial assistance from multiple academic units, including several at the University of Wisconsin–Madison: the Institute for Research in the Humanities, as well as the departments of history, philosophy, and political science. The political science department at the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point especially deserves commendation for its foundational support.

The editors have subsequently acquired many other debts. At Cambridge University Press, Robert Dreesen’s enthusiasm for this project has been especially crucial, while his staff, particularly Liz Janetschek, has been most helpful. Terence Ball and three anonymous reviewers read the manuscript and offered many useful suggestions for improving the essays and the volume as a whole. J. Rixey Ruffin also read a portion of the manuscript, offering invaluable suggestions for its improvement. Jeni Forestal did an excellent job rekeying the long first chapter. Closer to home and for countless good reasons, Jim would like to thank Mary G. Dietz, and David would like to thank Jennifer Weiser and Benjamin Williams. Jim and David would also like to thank one another. We could not have predicted at the outset that we would have become Evanston neighbors, but this happy development has seen our relationship grow from mutual professional respect to a warm friendship.

We would like to thank the contributors to this volume, who have constructed thoughtful and engaging essays. They have patiently endured this process with the good faith that their work would ultimately see the light of day. One contributor, Patrick Riley, deserves special mention. His work on the general will returned scholars to this crucial concept – and reminded everyone that while Rousseau was certainly the central character in its story, its life extends far beyond him. Most contributors to this volume have been either Patrick’s students or his colleagues, and they can all attest to his ready willingness to set aside his particular will for the general will.

Some chapters have appeared in previously published works, and the editors would like to acknowledge them here. Patrick Riley’s “The General Will before Rousseau: The Contributions of Arnauld, Pascal, Malebranche, Bayle, and Bossuet” was previously published in *Studi Filosofici* (1982–83). Also, parts of his “Kant on the General Will” appeared in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau* (Cambridge

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University Press, 2001) and in *A Treatise of Legal Philosophy and General Jurisprudence*, volume 10: *The Philosophers' Philosophy of Law from the Seventeenth Century to Our Days* (Springer, 2009). Portions of Tracy B. Strong's "The General Will in Rousseau and after Rousseau" appeared in his *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Politics of the Ordinary* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002). David Lay Williams's "Spinoza and the General Will" appeared in the *Journal of Politics* (2010), and significant portions of "The Substantive Elements of Rousseau's General Will" appeared as Appendix A in his *Rousseau's "Social Contract": An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Finally, the editors note here that the contributors have had the liberty to employ their own preferred editions and translations of Rousseau and other classic works. All of these editions can be found in the comprehensive bibliography at the end of this book.

Editors' Introduction

The “general will” is a defining concept of modern political thought. For a time – in matters theological, philosophical, and political – it ranked alongside the concepts of liberty, sovereignty, and law, among others. Though defining, all were contested; and all were associated with paramount thinkers whom we still remember and debate today. Who can imagine discoursing about sovereignty or law in any sort of historical register without raising Bodin, Hobbes, or Bentham? And while liberty seems to be the legacy of alleged liberals such as Mill, there was liberty before liberalism¹ – as Machiavelli, Locke, and the Levelers remind us. Even then, there were precursors and successors – some famous, some obscure – indicating long lines of genealogy, evolution, and change in the conceptual configurations of modern thought.

It would be impossible to imagine modern political thought without Rousseau, who ranks with these other paramount thinkers. And it would be impossible to imagine Rousseau without the general will. In Rousseau, the general will intimates and animates so much of the range of modern political conceptualization. Besides liberty, sovereignty, and law, it invokes order, equality, virtue, citizenship, individuality, and the social contract. “The general will is Rousseau’s most successful metaphor,” Judith Shklar once judged. “It conveys everything he most wanted to say.”² Alas, what he most wanted to say was not entirely new or unprecedented. Neither was it perfectly clear or invariably well received. But the concept of the general will did succeed in becoming central to the contentious imagination of modernity after – and largely because of – Rousseau.

By turns celebrated and condemned, the general will in its history *after* Rousseau stirred passions as few ideas, concepts, words, or metaphors

have. Some figures found great inspiration in the general will as they imagined Rousseau envisioned it. The most immediate inspiration came in the opening days of the French Revolution when the Abbé Sieyès appropriated the term to elevate the Third Estate from “nothing” to sovereign.³ The same year, the Tennis Court Oath depicted on the cover of this volume would ultimately result in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, which proclaimed, “The law is an expression of the general will.”⁴ Not only revolutionaries but the ill-fated Louis XVI gave testimony to the power of Rousseau’s central concept when, at the National Assembly, he promised to “defend and maintain constitutional liberty, whose principles the general will, in accord with my own, has sanctioned.”⁵ Robespierre – who would have none of Louis’s will but thought Rousseau “divine” – found the general will at work in the Committee of Public Safety as it doled out the Terror.⁶ The most storied philosophers following Rousseau fell sway to the general will, as well. Kant celebrated Rousseau as the “Newton of the moral world” and appealed to the general will throughout his long career.⁷ Fichte’s ambition for his philosophy of right was “to find a will that cannot possibly be other than the common will.”⁸ Hegel insisted that “the general will is supposed to supervise the supreme power in general.”⁹ Admiration for Rousseau continued into the twentieth century. The liberal contractarian John Rawls identified himself as a Kantian insofar as Kant “sought to give a philosophical foundation to Rousseau’s idea of the general will.”¹⁰

Others have recoiled at what they thought were the dangers and darkness of the general will. In 1815, looking back on the results of the French Revolution, Benjamin Constant wrote of “this despotism of the so-called general will, in a word, this popular power without limits, dogmas which are the pretext for all our upheavals.”¹¹ In the aftermath of the First World War, John Dewey came to a similar conclusion. Rousseau had created “an overruling ‘general will’” which “under the influence of German metaphysics was erected into a dogma of a mystic and transcendent absolute will.”¹² In a world again at war, Bertrand Russell warned in 1945 that the “doctrine of the general will [has] made possible the mystic identification of a leader with his people, which has no need of confirmation by so mundane an apparatus as the ballot-box.”¹³ Likewise, Karl Popper complained that, having unleashed the concept of the general will, Rousseau was “one of the most pernicious influences in the history of social philosophy.”¹⁴ “In marrying [the general will] with the concept of the principle of popular sovereignty, and popular self-expression,” J. L. Talmon added shortly thereafter, “Rousseau gave rise to totalitarian

democracy.”¹⁵ And, quite recently, Jeffrey Abramson has remarked that Rousseau’s general will projects a “spooky character.”¹⁶

The range of these historical judgments on Rousseau and the general will reflects, in part, the political, ideological, and philosophical options in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But it also reflects the “inherent indeterminacy” of Rousseau’s principles, as well as widely divergent conceptions of what, precisely, he meant by the *volonté générale*.¹⁷ Rousseau was himself aware of his ambiguity and notoriety. He warned: “Attentive readers, do not, I pray, be in a hurry to charge me with contradicting myself. The terminology made it unavoidable, considering the poverty of the language; but wait and see.”¹⁸ To judge by the subsequent history of the general will after Rousseau, it would be a long wait indeed.

But there is even more to the invention, reception, and contention of the general will in modernity than either Rousseau or the history after him. Indeed, one must consider the history of the general will *before* Rousseau, as well. Shklar brooked no doubts that “The phrase ‘general will’ is ineluctably the property of one man, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.” She added, however: “He did not invent it, but he made its history.”¹⁹ No, he did not invent it. Immediately before his first discussion of the general will in an *Encyclopédie* contribution on political economy, Denis Diderot proclaimed, “the general will is always good” in his own 1755 contribution to the *Encyclopédie* on natural right.²⁰ Rousseau would also have been able to identify Montesquieu preceding Diderot in using the general will politically, given his close attention to *Spirit of the Laws*.²¹ However, he did not do so, though Diderot himself did.²² Much later – and much after Rousseau – so would scholars like Shklar, C. E. Vaughn, and Charles Hendel. By that later time, it did rather appear that Montesquieu, briefly, and Diderot, passingly, exhausted what could be said about the history of the general will before Rousseau.

Our understanding of the provenance and intellectual dynamics of the concept of the general will and its post-Rousseauian reception – and thus Rousseau himself – advanced considerably with the publication in 1978 of Patrick Riley’s essay, “The General Will before Rousseau.” Evolving into his *The General Will before Rousseau: The Transformation of the Divine into the Civic* (1986), Riley discovered many others beyond Montesquieu and Diderot who, before Rousseau, had promoted their views or criticized others explicitly using the terminology of “the general

will.” There was Antoine Arnauld who coined the term in 1644 in reaction to the theology of Nicolas Malebranche. There were also Pascal, Bayle, Bossuet, and Fénelon as well as – to a lesser degree – their contemporaries, Hobbes, Spinoza, Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Barbeyrac, Fontenelle, Voltaire, and Hume, among others. In titling his book, *The Transformation of the Divine into the Civic*, moreover, Riley offered a sweeping sketch of conceptual change of the first order. The general will had originated as a theological notion – about nature, grace, and the extent of “God’s general will to save all men” – but was “politicized” or “civicized” over the course of its history, culminating in Rousseau. In regard to the prospects of “a more general theory of the genesis and metamorphosis of ideas,” Riley summarized his own preference “to say simply that between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there was a rising consciousness that ideas once imputed or ascribed to God, such as justice, goodness, wisdom, generality, and constancy, are merely moral ideas made yet more attractive by being transplanted to heaven.” At the peak of this rising consciousness, Rousseau wrote in such a way as to make possible Kant’s subsequent efforts to bring these moral ideas “back to earth” as the demands of reason. For it was “Rousseau who completed Montesquieu’s conversion of the general will of God into the general will of the citizen.”²³

As a result, Rousseau was to be understood in a distinctly French discourse of political theology in which he inherited and transformed the terminology of the “general will.” Given its centrality in Rousseau’s political thought, this interpretation made greater sense than citing Rousseau in an English contractarian discourse or a German critical discourse. He could obviously be cited in these latter discourses, as well, indeed as he standardly had been. But Riley’s interpretation opened a new scene, one glimpsed but undeveloped by Shklar and Hendel. Moreover, Bayle, in particular, but the others, as well, became much more civicized and of greater note in the history of *political* thought. Moreover, the conceptual history of the general will – and genealogical inquiry, more generally – proved an essential historiographical method for understanding French, English, and German discourses, before *and* after Rousseau.

This volume – *The General Will: The Evolution of a Concept* – furthers the conceptual and interpretative work begun by Riley. An expanded version of the initial 1978 article – “The General Will before Rousseau: The Contributions of Arnauld, Pascal, Malebranche, Bayle

and Bossuet” – serves as chapter 1 of this volume.²⁴ The subsequent chapters take up the general will, not always in agreement, as well as endorsing, amending or criticizing Riley’s account. Not only Rousseau, then, but Arnauld, Pascal, Malebranche, Bayle, Montesquieu, and Kant appear at length in various chapters that follow. Some who were dealt with *en passant* by Riley – like Leibniz, Spinoza, and Locke – are treated at greater length, and new figures are represented here, too, like Benjamin Constant, Adam Smith, Alexis de Tocqueville, and John Rawls, with passing glances at Marx and Nietzsche, as well. Even Cicero and the Puritans emerge in this volume as having conceptual equivalents to the general will informing their religion and politics.

As broad as the coverage is here, however, the general will’s scope extends well beyond what could be found even in a volume such as this. While Andrew Murphy draws attention in this volume to a prototype of the general will in John Winthrop’s promotion of fraternal bonds among citizens, for example, this was merely the beginning of the general will in the American tradition. Alexander Hamilton in *Federalist* No. 32 acknowledges a domain for a sovereign national “general will,” while conceding to the Anti-Federalists that each state would retain a particular will and the associated rights of sovereignty for elements not “*exclusively* delegated to the United States.”²⁵ Two years later, James Wilson would offer his own formulation of the general will: “In order to constitute a state, it is indispensably necessary, that the wills and the power of all members be united in such a manner, that they shall never act nor desire but one and the same thing in whatever relates to the end for which the society is established.”²⁶ Thomas Paine commented that the best way to promote civic harmony in Britain is “that the general WILL should have the full and free opportunity of being publicly ascertained and known.”²⁷ In his fourth State of the Union address, President John Adams praised the early years of the American experiment for operating “under the protection of laws emanating only from the general will.”²⁸ In the majority opinion of *Cohen v. Commonwealth of Virginia*, Chief Justice John Marshall insisted on the right of the federal government “to preserve itself against a section of the nation acting in opposition to the general will.”²⁹ Later in the same century Woodrow Wilson asserted in Rousseauian fashion that “the will of majorities is *not* the same as the general will.”³⁰ And in the twentieth century the general will lingered in American political discourse by working its way into the 1970 edition *Robert’s Rules of Order*, which insisted, “The application of parliamentary law is the best method yet devised . . . to arrive at the general will.”³¹

Meanwhile, Prussian interest in the general will begins with Immanuel Kant, who first acknowledges in 1766 the moral sway of a “general will” in his *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*³² and goes on to develop it in his mature works. This tradition continues with Kant’s student, J. G. Fichte, who makes the general will central to his political philosophy, describing the fundamental problem of politics to “*find a will that cannot be other than the common will [gemeinsame Wille].*”³³ Along these lines, Fichte is especially concerned to contain powerful particular wills. This requires that “Each person must be convinced that the oppression and unrightful treatment of *one* citizen will result with certainty in the same oppression and treatment of himself.”³⁴ In his *Addresses to the German Nation*, he describes the severe limitations of particularism – “selfishness has annihilated itself by its complete development”³⁵ – where that particularism culminates in a thoroughly selfish and corrupt government that cannot rule for the general will.³⁶ Indeed, this selfishness extends beyond governance and even infects individual citizens such that “the individual no longer retain[s] any interest in the whole.”³⁷ To solve this problem, Fichte proposes replacing the “natural love” that is Hobbesian egoism with “another kind of love, one that aims directly at the good,”³⁸ largely through an ambitious educational program emphasizing love of the fatherland.

Hegel would further develop the tradition of the general will by explaining its development in the course of human history. While Hegel occasionally employs Rousseau’s terminology of “general” and “particular” wills, these terms evolve into “objective” and “subjective” wills. He characterizes the “general” or “objective” will as “the will of all *individuals* as such,” and he distinguishes it from particular wills, “factions,” or “atomic point[s] of consciousness.”³⁹ While the general will is morally superior to the subjective or particular will, it lacks the motivational force of particular, selfish wills. The aim, then, for Hegel is to channel the energies of particular wills into the cause of the objective will. As he writes in the *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, “a state is well constituted and internally strong if the private interest of the citizens is united with the universal goal of the state, so that each finds its fulfillment and realization in the other.”⁴⁰ This merger itself, however, is only attainable in its fullest form at the end of history, where individual private wills are not merely channeled into the cause of the objective or general will. Rather citizens will the general will *because* it is the general will, which for him represents highest manifestation of human freedom.

Hegel's conception of the general will found sympathy among the late nineteenth-century British Idealists, particularly Bernard Bosanquet. In the context of an emerging triumph of liberalism and utilitarianism, the Idealists sought to develop a political philosophy less reliant on the individual rights and wills that they associated with Locke and more oriented to teleology and the common good. Bosanquet, in particular, refers to the theories of Bentham, Mill, and Spencer as "theories of the first look," which are guided by an assumption of "the natural separation of the human unit."⁴¹ Bosanquet rejects this approach as validating the "actual will," which is egoistic, and advocates replacing it with a "real" or "general will," which may not be manifested in every individual articulation of interest, but is coherent and determined by its fidelity to the "common good."⁴²

Although no idealist, another self-described "pupil" of Hegel who inherited and deepened consciousness of the general will was Karl Marx. He used the concept both as a detached theorist of history and as an impassioned conduit of communist ideals. On the one hand, that is, he could look down on the modern state and declare that "in civil law the existing property relations are declared to be the general will" while harboring "the illusion that private property is based solely on the private will."⁴³ On the other hand, he could quote Rousseau admiringly on the "*volonté générale*"⁴⁴ and be read as connecting it to the ideals of communal life.⁴⁵ Later Marxists – like Louis Althusser – would follow Rousseau's and Marx's lead, keeping the general will alive as both explanation and ideal.⁴⁶

The above-mentioned thinkers and byways of the conceptual history of the general will – not otherwise covered in this volume – suggest that more such thinkers and byways may yet be discovered or revived. And they suggest where they might be found. Discoveries or revivals are possible, for example, in the popular pamphlets in the wake of the French Revolution or in the constitutional commentaries of late eighteenth-century Americans or in the lesser writings of nineteenth-century British Idealists or in the precincts of French Marxism or in the neocolonial discourses of Francophone revolutionaries. They are also possible nearer to the known beginning of the conceptual history, as Patrick Riley dates it, that is, in seventeenth-century theological debates about "God's will to save all men." Indeed, we think we have made a few such discoveries in religious writings and sermons from that period. They invite deeper inquiry than we can provide here, but they are very

suggestive without detailed commentary. One or another might suggest an older source, a different referent, or an alternative pathway in the evolution of the general will.

These early uses were often merely acknowledgments of the adjectivally “general” character of divine volition. A few brief examples suffice. When dealing with the medical dimensions of “enthusiasm,” for example, the classical scholar Meric Casaubon lectured in 1655: “When in matters of diseases, we oppose natural causes to supernatural, whether divine or diabolical; as we do not exclude the general will of God, without which nothing can be.”⁴⁷ Similarly, in *The Divine Right of Church-government and Excommunication* (1646), the Presbyterian pastor Samuel Rutherford gestured to “the general will and command of God” when distinguishing between “essential” and “arbitrary” worship.⁴⁸ And in a posthumous commentary on “the light of Christ” at the earlier date of 1623, Nicholas Byfield deemed “the instrument of receiving it, in respect of the general will of God, is the understanding.”⁴⁹ These references did not introduce or occasion spirited debate about what, precisely, was “general” about God’s will. His will could be anything, of course, not least of all general. The references often vied for place alongside other adjectives: God’s will was absolute, eternal, pure, simple, rigorous, severe, commanding, forbidding, gentle, permissive, adorable, and on and on. Hobbes thought these adjectives told us about ourselves, not God. “The attributes we give him are not to tell one another *what he is*, nor to signify our opinion of his nature, but our desire to honour him with such names as we conceive most honourable amongst ourselves.”⁵⁰

Other references in this early period carried greater theological import when divining the different ways in which God could will men’s salvation. In *The True Catholicks Tenure* (1662), for example, Edward Hyde the clergyman referred to instances of God’s judgments that “derogate from his general will by his special will.”⁵¹ In 1635, when commenting on Paul’s epistle to the Hebrews, William Jones proclaimed, “CHRIST came not only to doe the general will of God: but to do his particular will also as the Mediatour of mankind.”⁵² The nephew and namesake of Sir Walter Raleigh made the same distinction from the pulpit before the outbreak of civil war in 1642.⁵³ In these cases, “special” or “particular” contrasted with “general” in ways that Riley found in the French debates between Arnauld, Malebranche, and others. Indeed, one English reference provides a striking and sustained parallel to the French debates. In the first article, “Of God’s Predestination” in his

“Via Media: The Way of Peace” – collected later in *The Shaking of the Olive Tree* (1660) – Joseph Hall, the Calvinist-leaning Anglican bishop of Norwich and Exeter, theologized about God’s volitions regarding man’s salvation. Hall allowed both a “general” and a “special” will at work in God’s predestination.

Besides the general will of God, he hath eternally willed, and decreed to give a special, and effectual grace to those, that are predestinate according to the good pleasure of his will, whereby they do actually believe, obey, and persevere, that they may be saved: so as the same God, that would have all Men to be saved, if they believe, and be not wanting to his Spirit, hath decreed to work powerfully in some, whom he hath particularly chosen, that they shall believe, and not be wanting to his Spirit in whatsoever shall be necessary for their salvation.⁵⁴

This passage was posthumous, Hall having died in 1656. Who read or listened to the original? Could this be an independent development? Were their discursive connections between the bishop and the French authors? Are there perhaps yet earlier uses of the term – including those noted above by Byfield, Raleigh, or Jones that precede Arnauld’s reference in 1644 – that might throw new and different light on the origin and evolution of the general will?

The referent of these early uses was invariably the general will of *God*, as it had been in the French debates between Arnauld and Malebranche. However, at least one striking and suggestive usage points not to God, but to “*our selves*.” In *A Spiritual Treasure containing our Obligations to God, and the Vertues Necessary to a Perfect Christian*, as translated into English in 1660 and reissued in 1664, the Oratorian Jean-Hugues Quarré (1580–1656) wrote that “it is good for the soul to present her self often before God, exciting in her self an efficacious desire to do the pure will of God.” Then he continued:

Moreover it is very profitable to offer our selves to God, and to form a generall will to practice all sorts of good, though we have no light nor feeling, contenting our selves with a resignation to God, and taking care to follow him, and to co-operate faithfully with the graces and motions we receive from him.⁵⁵

Well before Montesquieu, Diderot, and Rousseau, then, we seem to have a “general will” or “*volonté générale*” that is the will of humans, individually or collectively. Furthermore, the French original by Quarré – *Thrésor spirituel contentant les obligations que nous avons d’estre à Dieu, et les vertus qui nous sont nécessaires pour vivre en chrestien parfait* – was first published in 1632, pushing back the known date of origin and inviting us to speculate on the lively discussions at the Oratory under Cardinal Pierre

de Bérulle, even before Malebranche's birth! This, too, raises further questions about origins and underscores the complexity – covered in this volume, otherwise known, or yet to-be-discovered – in the conceptual history of the general will.

Four sections divide up the volume: the general will *before* Rousseau, the general will *in* Rousseau, the general will *after* Rousseau, and *pre-history* of the general will tradition. As noted, Riley's sweeping chapter covers much of what is now known of the general will before Rousseau. It emphasizes the dramatic change that the concept underwent – from a divine concept, as found in Arnauld, Leibniz, and Malebranche, to a civic one in Montesquieu and especially Rousseau. Of special interest is the central importance of Bayle in the unfolding of the general will. In particular, Riley underscores how and the ways in which Bayle *civicized* the general will. Before he was the editor of the monumental *Dictionary*, Bayle took up the themes of the debate that preceded him. Whereas Pascal had hinted at the general will of “bodies politic” like churches, Bayle secularized and rendered more evidently civic the ways in which human associations in their collective actions exhibit a “general will.” It remained for Montesquieu to follow this train of thought in anticipation of Rousseau.

Following this overview, Steven Nadler, then, returns to the early salvos of the French debate. His “Malebranche's Shadow: General Will in the Leibniz-Arnauld Correspondence” explores theological dimensions of the general will in the important works of the Oratorian Nicolas Malebranche. Upon reading Malebranche's *Treatise on Nature and Grace* – which introduced an account of God acting according to general laws that were expressions of His will and consistent with God's constancy and perfection – Arnauld offered the first known assessment of the general will: he thought it completely undermined God's capacity for miracles, which he understood to be central to the very *meaning* of God himself. That is, God *must* be allowed to exercise a *particular* will. Armed with a new dedication to God as an agent of particular wills, Arnauld read Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics* as being in league with Malebranche in its unacceptable insistence that God can only legislate generally, even if this is supposedly consistent with the best of all possible worlds. Nadler reveals how Leibniz, in turn, artfully responded to Arnauld's objections in order to pacify Arnauld while still publicly maintaining a version of Malebranchian generality in divine will or providence.

The gap between the theological and political accounts of the general will was bridged indirectly by another figure of the greatest importance to early-modern political thought and Rousseau in particular – John Locke. Alas, this is not appreciated as much as it should be, so argues James Farr. As Farr notes, Rousseau not only respected Locke on matters of education and toleration, he credited him “in particular” as holding “the same principles” of politics and law. Upon inspection, these Lockean principles – which Rousseau glossed as matters of the “general will” – proclaimed the law to be “the Will of society” and necessary for liberty, for “where there is no Law, there is no Freedom.” These principles were adaptations of his theological views. So it is notable that Locke had read extensively those thinkers most responsible for debating the general will – Malebranche, Pascal, and Bayle – as well as speculating on the Pauline doctrine that most concerned them, namely, that “God wills all men to be saved.” Drawing yet closer to the “general will,” Locke found it necessary to refute the theory of ideas he found in Malebranche and his English followers. By His laws, God governed an orderly universe that He willed into existence, to be sure, Farr argues, but there was no coherent reason, Locke thought, to embrace Malebranche’s view that it was God’s “general will” that human beings have the *ideas* they do because they “see all things” in Him. For Locke, the (human) will – whether general or particular – has no role in the formation of ideas, which exist merely as a consequence of sense perception. At any rate, these competing accounts of ideas were “hypotheses” to which believers should submit humbly, not presupposing, as Malebranche, to “dictate” what God can do or how. In confronting Malebranche, Locke was among the first in English to quote (in translation) Malebranche’s use of “general will.” In light of this fact – and Rousseau’s later invocation of Locke as embracing “the same principles” – Locke deserves to be more fully incorporated into the conceptual history of the general will than has been the case hitherto.

The next two chapters take up the politicized general will implied in Locke, Bayle, and other early modern thinkers. In doing so, each challenges Riley’s narrative, though in different ways, that the general will takes this secular turn specifically with Montesquieu. David Lay Williams argues that the general will had been secularized generations before Montesquieu in the political writings of Benedict de Spinoza. Williams identifies Spinoza’s “common mind” as possessing many of the same qualities that later come to be associated with Rousseau’s secular general will. What is unique in Spinoza, he reasons, is that he offers three different

ways to achieve that union of wills: fear, love, and reason. Further, Spinoza stands outside of the rest of the general will tradition insofar as he resists the dominant tendency of general will theorists to appeal to Platonic metaphysics, instead resting on a modern naturalism. This leaves Spinoza with a compatibilistic conception of the will significantly different from the autonomous will found in Rousseau and Kant.

In “Freedom, Sovereignty, and the General Will in Montesquieu,” Sharon Krause asks whether or not Montesquieu *actually* embraces a secular, politicized general will in his *Spirit of the Laws*, as Riley claims. With careful attention to the text, she reveals that Montesquieu infrequently employs the term; and, when he does, it is not as his *own* normative principle. He rather speaks of a legislature, yes, legislating for all – but not for the common interest, as has been frequently supposed. In Montesquieu, Krause finds a liberal political theorist who is more concerned to effectively channel particular wills than to privilege a general will. As such, she describes a Montesquieu who is less a predecessor to Rousseau’s general will than an alternative.

The essays in the second section of this volume explore how the concept of the general will inaugurated in early modern French theology and political thought might nonetheless be found to have analogues or conceptual equivalents beyond and before its nascent roots. We think of this as the prehistory of the general will. These essays, then, suggest ways we might conceptualize an extension of the general will tradition. Daniel J. Kapust explores how, centuries earlier, Cicero’s *On Duties* bears on matters that became relevant to the general will. He notes the dangers that Rousseau associated with rhetoric as a particularizing force, hence subversive to the general will. By contrast, he finds that Cicero comes down on the opposite side of this question, suggesting that rhetoric has the capacity for both generalizing and effecting consent. That Cicero might have differed from Rousseau on such matters may not be surprising, since Rousseau was quick to say of Cicero in the *Social Contract* that he “loved his glory more than his fatherland.”⁵⁶ Yet Cicero’s defense of rhetoric suggests alternative means by which to achieve the common good and hence the general will.

Finally, Andrew R. Murphy explores the fraternal dimension of the general will by examining the colonial Puritan, John Winthrop. For Winthrop, fraternity was a religious and specifically Christian duty – but with important political implications. Murphy observes Winthrop insisting, “That every man might have need of others, and from hence they

might all be knit more nearly together in the bond of brotherly affection.”⁵⁷ Murphy’s attention to Winthrop’s Calvinism provides an opportunity to consider Rousseau’s own possible debts to Calvinism, as suggested in a footnote to the *Social Contract*, where Rousseau notes of his fellow Genevan,

Those who know Calvin only as a theologian much underestimate the extent of his genius. The codification of our wise edicts, in which he played a large part, does him no less honor than his *Institutes*. Whatever revolution time may bring in our religion, so long as the spirit of patriotism and liberty still lives among us, the memory of this great man will be forever blessed.

This offers a potentially fruitful source for reexamining the source material for Rousseau’s unique formulation of the general will.

The third section turns its attention to the most famed proponent of the general will: Jean-Jacques Rousseau. We offer four strikingly different accounts of Rousseau’s general will. David Lay Williams grounds Rousseau’s general will in Platonism, arguing that the general will involves consent on the part of the people to a pre-existing eternal idea of justice. As such, Rousseau represents a curious blend of an ancient commitment to immaterial substance and a modern commitment to consent for assuring legitimacy. In order to maintain this will, Williams emphasizes the importance of fraternal love in Rousseau’s republic. By contrast, Richard Boyd finds a more ambiguous Rousseau with greater liberal sympathies than are typically assumed. While there is an element in Rousseau emphasizing benevolent feelings or sentiment, there is another casting aside those very sentiments in favor of procedural justice. And even when Rousseau cultivates civic feeling, this is where he is potentially most dangerous – insofar as sentiments of nationalism emanating from fraternity work against all external communities. Implicit in this is a challenge to any sort of cosmopolitanism. So Rousseau’s general will is a kind of particular will in the end – the will of one particular society among many in the world.

Sankar Muthu acknowledges and develops the problem identified by Boyd, namely, the problem that Rousseau’s general will presents for cosmopolitanism of any sort. Despite some derisive remarks by Rousseau about the “cosmopolites,” Muthu shows that Rousseau was nonetheless open to the *idea* of a general society of humankind and thus a “general will of humanity.” He did not believe, however, that it could play any feasible role in the political affairs of the world of his day, or in the future. In a complex investigation, Muthu reveals that the citizen of

Geneva expressed a longing for the fellowship that a universal society could provide, endorsing the conceptual validity of a general will that pertained to all humanity. Ultimately, though, what could be defended in *theory* was tragically inapplicable in *practice* in a world dominated by predatory states and commercial societies. Thus, a general society of all peoples was impossible. This followed because of features of the human condition itself; the curious mix of sovereign legal power and natural liberty that characterized that condition; the pathologies endemic to commercial relations; and the requirements necessary for the realization of the general will of *particular* societies. Ultimately, as Muthu concludes, Rousseau's critical analysis of the general will of humanity illustrates – from an all-encompassing, global perspective – the profoundly tragic sensibility of his social and political thought.

Finally in this array of overlapping or competing readings, Tracy B. Strong offers a reading of Rousseau's general will that emphasizes *commonness*. Even more cosmopolitanism than either Boyd or Muthu, Strong's Rousseau sketches out in his general will “what it means to live as a human being . . . capable of living with other human beings as human beings and as a human being.” In order to achieve this, Strong emphasizes the role of law in Rousseau's political theory. For it “*requires* a people to be able to see itself as a people, to stand outside itself and, as itself, constitute itself.” This conception of humanity and law, however, must not be confused with a simply moral concept. Rather, the general will embodies at least as much *what is* as *what should be*, if not more so. Rousseau's general will is adamantly a will of and in the present. Strong concludes by suggestively tracing the evolution of the general will through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the very different figures of Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, and Rawls.

The general will after Rousseau – our fourth and final section – includes essays on Smith, Kant, Constant, Tocqueville, and Rawls. This set of thinkers is hardly of one mind about the value of Rousseau's general will. Kant and Rawls view the general will as a valuable contribution, needing some (rather important) refinement in order to achieve its purposes, while Smith, Constant, and Tocqueville, by contrast, view the general will as inadequate or even a genuine threat to the public good.

Rousseau's philosophical influence was immediately felt in Königsberg when Immanuel Kant turned his attention from the critiques of reason to politics and political theory. At least Kant felt this way when, shortly after the publication of the *Social Contract*, he spoke of “this compulsion we feel