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Ruth Grant
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Rousseau, Fénelon, and the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns

In Memoriam Judith N. Shklar

The great Rousseau scholar Judith Shklar was usually more concerned with Rousseau's striking originality — as a psychologist, as a pre-Freudian group psychologist, as the very prototype of the *homme révolté* — than with his intellectual debts. “His enduring originality and fascination,” she urges in *Men and Citizens*, “are due entirely to the acute psychological insight with which he diagnosed the emotional diseases of modern civilization” (1). But she made two large exceptions in favor of Locke and Fénelon: she thought that Rousseau's debt to the psychological theory of Locke's *Essay* was huge and central, and that his debt to Fénelon's political and moral thought was equally massive. For Rousseau owed to Fénelon nothing less than the legitimation of his obsession with Græco-Roman antiquity: if an early Genevan reading of Plutarch set off this propensity, it was Fénelon's *Telemachus* (1699) and *Letter to the French Academy* (1714) which confirmed and dignified it; thus Fénelon's “Roman” *auctoritas* and *gravitas* were worth a great deal. In Shklar's view Rousseau owed to Fénelon (above all) the notion of seeing and using two ancient “models” of social perfection — a pre-political “age of innocence” and a fully political age of legislator-caused civic virtue — as foils to modern egoism and corruption (4–5). Fénelon's familiar utopias of “Bétique” (celebrating pastoral innocence) and of “Salente” (depicting legislator-shaped civisme) in *Telemachus* were, for Shklar, echoed in Rousseau's “happy family” (in *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* and *Lettre à D'Alembert*), and in his Spartan-Roman “fantasies” (in *Government of Poland* and *The Social Contract*). Small wonder, then, that Shklar should direct us toward “Rousseau's admiring remarks about Fénelon” in the *Confessions*, in *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques*, in *Les Réveries du promeneur solitaire*, and in *Émile* (4–6).

But none of this can become clear enough until Fénelon's social thought is exposed to the light of present day. Rousseau may have known it by heart, as Shklar herself was later to do — but we no longer do. And therefore the first task is to recover those facets of Fénelonianism that Rousseau found irresistible.

I

François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon was born in Périgord

in 1651, the son of an aristocratic provincial family which was distinguished but threadbare. Ordained a priest in 1675, he was within three years given an important ministry in the Church — that of spiritual guide to the “New Catholics” (ex-Huguenots) in northern France. This ministry lasted for a decade (1678–1699), and was crowned by the publication of the treatise *On the Education of Girls* (1687), which first revealed Fénelon’s classicizing taste for the ancient pastoral simplicity depicted by Virgil in the *Aeneid* and *Georgics*. By this time the Abbé Fénelon had caught the eye of Bossuet, the most powerful French ecclesiastic of the Grand Siècle; and for the Bishop of Meaux Fénelon produced his *Réfutation de Malebranche* (ca. 1687–1688), which attacked Malebranche’s notion of a “Cartesian” *Providence générale* operating through simple, constant, universal laws, and sustained Bossuet’s notion (outline in the *Histoire universelle*) of a *Providence particulière* which had furnished David and Solomon to ancient Israel and Louis XIV to modern France. In 1689 he was named tutor to Louis’s grandson, the Duc de Bourgogne (1682–1712), and it was for his royal pupil that he was soon to write *Telemachus, Son of Ulysses* (ca. 1693–1695) and the *Dialogues of the Dead*. Rhetorically the high point of Fénelon’s “court” period was his speech on being received into the Académie Française (1693), with its fulsome praise of the Sun King. The Archbishopric of Cambrai followed in 1695, carrying with it the titles of Duke and Prince of the Holy Roman Empire (Carcassonne, ch. 1; Goré, *passim*).

But in the late 1680s Fénelon had also become deeply interested in the quietistic notion of a “disinterested love of God” free of hope for personal happiness — a disinterested interest fanned by the mystical pieties of his friend Mme Guyon. His insistence that one must “go out of oneself,” even “hate oneself” finally eventuated in the *Maxims of the Saints on the Inner Life* (1697) — a work in which Fénelon argued for degrees of “purity” or “disinterestedness” in human love of God. At the lowest end of the scale one finds the love of God, not for himself but for “the goods which depend on his power and which one hopes to obtain”: this Fénelon contemptuously calls “purely servile love.” One small notch above this Fénelon places loving God, not for “goods” which he can provide but as the “instrument” of our salvation; even this “higher” love, however, is still “at the level of self-love.” At the third and fourth levels Fénelon finds a mixture of self-love and true love of God; but what really interests him is the fifth and highest degree, the “pure love” of God that one finds only in “saints.” “One can love God,” Fénelon urges, “from a love which is pure charity, and without the slightest mixture of self-interested motivation.” In such a love, Fénelon adds, neither the “fear of punishment” nor the “hope of reward” plays any part at all (Fénelon, *Maximes des saints* 118–30). As is well known,

Bossuet and others — including Malebranche, in his *Traité de l'amour de Dieu* — argued that Fénelon's "disinterested" love excluded all hope of salvation, as well as all fear of justified punishment, and thus subverted Christianity: Fénelon's work was finally placed in the Index in March 1699. In this condemnation the prime mover was Bossuet, now Fénelon's greatest detractor: "To detach oneself from himself to the point of no longer desiring to be happy, is an error which neither nature, nor grace, nor reason, nor faith can suffer."

A month later *Telemachus* was printed, without Fénelon's permission, through "the infidelity of a copyist." Louis XIV had already banished the "chimerical" Fénelon to his Cambrai diocese in 1697, and with the double disaster of 1699 — condemnation at Rome followed (within a few weeks) by publication of the "Homeric" novel which Louis considered an attack on his faults — Fénelon was divested of his pension and of his tutorship of the Duc de Bourgogne. He never set foot in Versailles, or even Paris, again.

With the premature death in 1712 of the Duc de Bourgogne, whom Fénelon had carefully educated to be an enlightened successor to his grandfather, Fénelon's hopes for a renewed France collapsed like a house of cards. His *Démonstration de l'existence de Dieu* (1713) was a work of pure theology; and, indeed, had Fénelon not been a royal tutor for ten years, *Telemachus* and the *Dialogues of the Dead* would almost certainly never have come into existence. Conscientiously administering his half-Flemish diocese even as Louis XIV made perpetual war on its borders, constantly engaging in a wide-ranging correspondence as spiritual counsellor, Fénelon died, prematurely worn out, in January 1715. To this day many French Fénelonians view the Archbishop of Cambrai as a saint and martyr, the victim of the "interested" high politics of Louis XIV, Bossuet, and the Roman *curia*.

The year 1716 saw the posthumous publication of the magnificent *Letter on the Occupations of the French Academy* (written in 1714), in which Fénelon contributed to the "quarrel between the ancients and the moderns" by offering glowing praise of Homer, Plato, Demosthenes, Virgil and Cicero, and insisting that "it is our insane and cruel vanity, and not the noble simplicity of the ancients, which needs to be corrected." It was that "noble simplicity" which he had tried to illustrate in the demi-Platonic myths of "Bétique" and "Salente," in *Telemachus*.

When the ancient poets wanted to charm the imagination of men, they conducted them far from the great cities; they made them forget the luxury of their time, and let them back to the age of gold; they represented shepherds dancing on the flowered grass in the shade of a grove, in a delight-

ful season, rather than agitated hearts, and great men who are unhappy in virtue of their very greatness. (*Lettre sur les occupations de l'Académie Française* 3: 248–50)

Telemachus may have contributed to Fénelon's downfall, but the book was spectacularly successful: indeed the most-read literary work in eighteenth-century France (after the Bible). Cherished and praised by Rousseau, it was first translated into English in the very year of its publication, and was retranslated by no less a figure than the novelist Tobias Smollett in 1776. (In Rousseau's *Émile* the eponymous pupil is given *Robinson Crusoe* as his sole adolescent reading, then Fénelon's *Telemachus* on reaching adulthood — a striking concession from one who thought almost all literature morally suspect.)

II

Without doubt the two most important pieces of French political theory at the turn of the eighteenth century are Bossuet's *Politics Drawn from the Very Words of Holy Scripture* (completed in 1704) and Fénelon's *Telemachus*.¹ But while Bossuet offered the greatest of all defenses of divine right monarchy — in which Louis XIV's rule is unbrokenly descended from Abraham's covenant with God in Genesis ("kings shall come out of you") — Fénelon by contrast theorized what might be called a "republican" monarchy in which the key notions are simplicity, labor, the virtues of agriculture, the absence of luxury and splendor, and the elevation of peace over war and aggrandizement. This proto-Rousseauian, demilitarized "Spartanism" led Louis XIV, of course, to read *Telemachus* as a satire on his luxuriousness and bellicosity, and Fénelon fell permanently from official favor. Fénelon combines monarchical rule with republican virtues in a unique way: after him Montesquieu was to draw a necessary connection between monarchy and "war and the enlargement of dominion," and to separate monarchy by a categorical gulf from republican simplicity and "virtue," and Rousseau was to restore a more nearly Fénelonian view of "republican monarchy" in his glowing Plutarchian encomium of Lycurgus — in a Sparta not just temporally and geographically but *morally* distant from Versailles.

It was no accident that Rousseau so greatly admired Fénelon's fable: for like *Émile*, *Telemachus* is the story of the moral and political education of a young man by a knowledgeable and virtuous tutor. While *Émile*, however, is in some sense Everyman, the tutor in *Telemachus*, Mentor, is preparing a young prince to succeed Ulysses at Ithaca. (As Rousseau says, "Émile is not a king, nor am I god, so that we are not distressed that we cannot imitate Telemachus and Mentor in the good they did" [*Émile* 431].)

Fénelon himself, in a letter from 1710, indicates his objective in writing *Telemachus* for his royal pupil, the Duc de Bourgogne.

As for *Telemachus*, it is a fabulous narration in the form of an heroic poem like those of Homer and of Virgil, into which I have put their main instructions which are suitable for a young prince whose birth destines him to rule. [...] In these adventures I have put all the truths necessary to government, and all the faults that one can find in sovereign power. ("Letter to Letellier," *OC* 3: 653–54)

Louis XIV, for his part saw nothing but the alleged "faults" of sovereign power in *Telemachus* — faults which Fénelon describes at length in his account of misrule by Idomeneus, former King of Crete. (Since Idomeneus kills his own son and is deposed and exiled, one can understand Louis' displeasure!) One of Mentor's long speeches to the slowly reforming Idomeneus (now King of Salente) in Book x of *Telemachus* must have been read by Louis XIV as a veiled, mythologized version of what Fénelon would have wanted to say to, or rather against, Versailles:

Have you sought after people who were the most disinterested, and the most likely to contradict you [...] to condemn your passions and your unjust feelings? No, no: let us see whether you will now have the courage to be humiliated by the truth which condemns you.

You have exhausted your riches; you have never thought of augmenting your people, nor of cultivating fertile lands. Was it not necessary to view two things as the two essential foundations of your power — to have many good people, and well-cultivated lands to nourish them? I would require a long peace to favor the multiplication of your people. You should never think of anything but agriculture and the establishment of the wisest laws. A vain ambition he pushed you to the very edge of the precipice. By virtue of wanting to appear great, you let yourself ruin your true greatness. Hasten to repair these faults; suspend all your great works; renounce this display which would ruin your new city; let your people breathe in peace. (*Telemachus* 152–53)

That second paragraph, particularly, could be invisibly woven into Rousseau's *Social Contract*: "Devote your whole attention to agriculture, which causes man to multiply, and drive out the arts and crafts" (Book II, ch. 11). (To be sure, both Fénelon and Rousseau have their roots in Cato's *De Rustica*, with its praise of Cincinnatus's virtues and its equation of moneylending with murder.)

But Fénelon did not put such speeches only into the mouth of Mentor: at every turn, and in every chapter, the *inventions de la vanité et de la mollesse* are denounced. In Book VII, having escaped the seductions of

Calypso, Mentor and Telemachus are told a story of the land of Bétique by Adoam — who reveals that the luxuries of Greece and Egypt are anathema in that simple pre-political land:

Among these people (Adoam says) we found gold and silver put to the same use as iron — for example, as plowshares [...]. They are almost all shepherds or laborers (who practice only) those arts necessary for their simple and frugal life [...]. When one speaks to them of peoples who have the art of making superb buildings, furniture of gold and silver, fabrics ornamented with embroideries and with precious stones, exquisite perfumes [...] they reply in these terms: “These people are very unfortunate to have used up so much labor and industry in order to corrupt themselves. This superfluity softens, enervates, torments those who possess it: it tempts those who are without it to want to acquire it through injustice and violence. Can one call good a superfluity which serves only to make men evil?” [...] It is thus, Adoam went on, that those wise men spoke, who learned their wisdom only by studying mere nature. (*Telemachus* 109–110)

(Rousseau must have remembered this Fénelonian inversion of the usual value of precious metals when, in the *Government of Poland*, he suggested awarding gold medals to the lowest public benefactors, silver ones to those who contribute more, and plaques of steel to those who most advance the general good [3: 1016 ff.])

The unfortunate outgrowths of “vanity and flabbiness” are set in even higher relief by Fénelon’s account of the austere and noble pleasures of “just kings” who live in the eternal daylight of the Elysian fields. In Book XIV of *Telemachus*, Telemachus is ferried across the river Styx by Charon, where he sees rulers “who have governed men wisely” enjoying “a happiness infinitely greater than that of the rest of men who have loved virtue on earth,”

Neither blood-covered war nor cruel envy which bites with a venomous tooth, and which bears vipers wound around its middle and its arms, nor jealousy, nor mistrust, nor fear, nor vain desires, ever approach this happy abode of peace. [...] A pure and gentle light surrounds the bodies of these just men and covers them in its rays like a vestment. (252)

Here, of course, the *Champs Elysées* take on some of the coloration of a Christian Heaven — even if Fénelon’s avowed models are Homer and Virgil.

But what is least “Homeric” — and also most Rousseauian — is the transformation of the notion of “heroism” in *Telemachus*. The nominal hero, of course, is Telemachus — the son of a greater hero, Ulysses. But

the true hero of Fénelon's work is certainly Mentor: it is he who educates and restrains a Telemachus who could easily degenerate into another Idomeneus. The true hero for Fénelon is not the wanderer on an Odyssey to Ithaca, nor a *Louis le Grand* who sacrificed real goods to apparent ones; the true hero is the moral-civic educator who "denatures" natural egoists — the man whom Rousseau later called "the true miracle" in the *Social Contract*. The proof comes at the very end of Telemachus: Mentor undergoes a metamorphosis and is revealed as Minerva (goddess of wisdom), and the book ends abruptly before Telemachus is shown being reunited with Ulysses. The hero has already been resolved into pure Wisdom: the nominal hero barely reaches Ithaca.

What that true hero teaches is a political version of Fénelon's quietistic "disinterested love of God"; just as one truly loves God only by renouncing self-interested *amour-propre* (the hope for personal salvation), so too for Fénelon the "idea of pure disinterestedness dominates the political theories of all ancient legislators." In antiquity "it was not a matter of finding happiness in conforming to that order but, *au contraire*, of devouring oneself for love of that order, perishing, depriving the self of all resources." Fénelon completes this thought with a wonderful passage which Rousseau must have had in mind when he wrote his discourse on POLITICAL ECONOMY for Diderot's *Encyclopédie* sixty years later: "All these [ancient] legislators and philosophers who reasoned about laws presupposed that the fundamental principle of political society was that of preferring the public to the self — not through hope of serving one's own interests, but through the simple, pure disinterested love of the political order, which is beauty, justice, and virtue itself." If one "brackets" God out of Fénelonian thought, the Rousseauian "civic" ideal is more than half in place. And what is displaced is virtually everything imagined or accomplished by Louis XIV. That is clearest, perhaps, in Fénelon's "Sur le pur amour":

Nothing is so odious as this idea of a heart always occupied with itself: nothing delights us so much as certain generous actions which persuade the world (and us) that we have done the good for love of the good, without seeking ourselves therein. Self-love itself renders homage to this disinterested virtue, by the shrewdness with which it tries to take on the appearance of it — so true is it that man, who does not bring himself about, is not made to seek after himself, but to exist solely for him who has made him. His glory and his perfection consist in going out of himself [*sortir de soi*], in forgetting himself, in losing himself, in being swallowed up in the simple love of infinite beauty. (307–10)

The central truth about Fénelon, then, is that the whole of his practical thought — religious, moral, political — is held together by the notion

of disinterested love, of “going out of oneself” in order to lose oneself in a greater Beyond (or, in the case of God, Above). The disinterested love of God, without self-interest and hope for benefits, is pure “charity” (as in Pascal’s *Pensées*, in which “the self is hateful” and charity is “of another order” [nos. 473–83 and, above all, 792]): the disinterested love of one’s neighbor is “friendship” (as in Cicero’s *De Amicitia*); the disinterested love of the *polis* is a proto-Rousseauian ancient civic virtue. On this view of the moral world, an austere Pascalian *charité* and a Platonic “sublimated” *eros* meet. Small wonder that Fénelon, a brilliantly sympathetic classical scholar, loved the *Symposium* and *Phædrus* with non-concupiscent passion.²

III

Since one cannot hope to point out every parallel between Fénelon and Rousseau, the best course is to bring out affinities between Fénelon’s last work, the *Letter on the Occupations of the Académie Française*, and Rousseau’s first — the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750), the work which made Rousseau.

Fénelon’s *Letter* was written soon before his death in January 1715, and was posthumously published in the following year. It is the *summa* of his thought, drawing together his favorite themes. But above all the *Letter* is celebrated as the most important turn-of-the-eighteenth-century contribution to the “the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns” — the quarrel to which Rousseau was soon to contribute so much.

That quarrel itself, however, has a limited side, and a much broader significance. The limited quarrel was French, took place mainly from 1685 to 1715, and was fairly narrowly literary; the broader and more important quarrel was pan-European and political. The “large quarrel” goes back at least to Machiavelli’s claim in *The Discourses* that the golden age of ancient Roman civic virtue remains a perfect model for intelligent imitation by modern men, whenever *fortuna* affords the opportunity (Book 1, ch. 10; Book 2, introduction), and extends forward in time — after Rousseau’s ardent “Spartanism”³ — to Benjamin Constant’s celebrated essay on ancient vs. modern liberty in the post-Napoleonic period. The quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, then had a very long “run,” and it included phenomena as significant as Poussin’s and Lorrain’s paintings of Greek and Roman pastoral felicity at the very moment of Louis XIV’s glittering Versailles ascendancy.

Fénelon was an important contributor to that large political-cultural quarrel stretching from Machiavelli to Rousseau to Constant — though his *Letter* was nominally concerned with a more parochial fight within the Académie Française (between the classicist Boileau and the modernist

Fontenelle, for example). Fénelon's *Letter*, to be sure, deals with the local and narrow issues of the day — such as the question whether French is less adequate and expressive than Greek and Latin, or whether the rhyme schemes of Corneille are more forced and stilted than those of Sophocles. But in subordinating the “insane and cruel vanity” of the moderns to the “noble simplicity” of the ancients, in praising Homer, Virgil, Plato, Demosthenes and Cicero as nearly perfect models, Fénelon went well beyond Parisian academic quarrels about rhetoric and diction to offer a general encomium of pre-Christian civilization.

That is of course paradoxical, since Fénelon was not only a Christian but an Archbishop. But his view (in the *Maximes des saints*) was that most modern Christians love God from a base and “interested” motive (hope for personal salvation), while the ancients *disinterestedly* loved the *polis* and sacrificed themselves for it. For Fénelon the Christians have the right object (God) but the wrong motive (self-love); the ancients had a lower if estimable object (the city) but a worthy motive (disinterested affection). Here only Fénelon's own words in the *Lettre sur les occupations de l'Académie Française* will do:

Those who cultivate their reason and who love virtue — can they compare the vain and ruinous luxury which in our times is the plague of morality and the shame of the nation, with the happy and elegant simplicity which the ancients place before our eyes?

Virgil, who saw all the magnificence of Rome from close up, turned the poverty of the King Evander into the grace and the ornament of his poem [*The Aeneid*] [...]. Virgil even goes to the point of comparing a free, peaceable and pastoral life with the voluptuous actions, mixed with trouble, which come into play with great fortunes. He imagined nothing happy except a wise mediocrity, in which men would be secure from the desire for prosperity, and [full of] compassion for the miseries of others. (248 ff.)

It is easy enough to see why Rousseau so cherished Fénelon, and made Fénelon's *Telemachus* (with its quasi-Platonic utopias of pacific and agricultural simplicity) the only book which Émile is encouraged to read on reaching adulthood. (To be sure, one can understand the dismay of Archbishop Beaumont of Paris: Émile is not given Scripture, or even Bossuet's *Politics from Scripture*; he is given a “Greek” work bearing the subtitle “Continuation of the Fourth Book of the Odyssey.” He is given Tertullian standing on his head: if we have Greece, what need of Jerusalem?) If, indeed, Rousseau had died in the early 1750s, before the writing of the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* and *The Social Contract*, leaving the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* as his main legacy, he would now prob-

ably be thought of as a minor if eloquent embroiderer of familiar Fénelonian themes. For the first *Discourse* (1750) is Rousseau's first contribution to the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns; with its magnification of Spartan and Roman republican civic virtue and its denigration of Athenian aestheticism, it is an extension of the view that Fénelon had made famous in his 1714 *Letter*. It is almost as if Rousseau, on the road to Vincennes to visit Diderot in prison, were thinking of these Fénelonian lines:

Nothing so much marks a declining nation as this disdainful luxuriousness which rejects the frugality of the ancients. It is this depravity which overturned Rome [...]. I love a hundred time better the poor Ithaca of Ulysses than a city [Imperial Rome] shining through so odious a magnificence. Happy the men who content themselves with pleasures which cost neither crime nor ruin; it is our insane and cruel vanity and not the noble simplicity of the ancients which needs to be corrected. (Fénelon, *Lettre sur les occupations de l'Académie Française* 248 ff.)

Since Fénelon's *Lettre* is so proto-Rousseauian, Jean-Jacques needed only to enlarge a long familiar subordination of modernity to antiquity in "Arts and Sciences"; mainly he needed to add Cato and Brutus to the Socrates whom Fénelon had already made a civic saint. And he did this, in effect, by collapsing Socrates into Cato and Brutus: Socrates is now the only acceptable Athenian, but that is because he willingly died for the sake of the laws. The Platonic Socrates who hears the harmony of the spheres and sees the psyche as a Pythagorean geometrizing echo of a consonant kosmos yields to Socrates the civic martyr in the *Crito*. Socrates displays "the general will one has as a citizen" (*Du contrat social* 3: 351 ff.)

But that last phrase reveals what is not yet present in the first *Discourse*. If what is ancient, à la Fénelon, is fully "there" in the first *Discourse*, what has not yet appeared is modern (indeed Lockean) "voluntary agreement" as the basis of legitimate government in the *Social Contract* (*Du contrat social* 3: 351 ff.). There must be voluntariness as something morally crucial before "general will" can be a will of a particular kind; and that voluntariness is Augustinian/Christian as is Rousseau's stress on "conscience" in the *Lettres morales*, and his insistence on the final arrival of adult moral autonomy at the end of *Émile's* denaturing, transformative education (*Émile* 436). The civic *généralité* of Roman-Spartan antiquity has not yet been fused, in the first *Discourse*, with the autonomy and "will" of *Inequality* and the works that succeed it. Indeed, the key term *volonté générale* does not even appear until the *Discourse on Political Economy*.⁴ In time Rousseau's thought became far richer and more complex, but the final worry is whether that thought is as coherent as it is complex — whether

Fénelonian, Plutarchian, Lockean, Roman, Christian, Platonic, Machiavelian, Spartan and Augustinian strands really cohere. Whether Rousseauian thought is truly a *corpus*, or just a basket of enthused-over *disjecta membra*, is what is at issue. At the time of the first *Discourse* Rousseau was in his neo-Fénelonian vein: that is why he places Ovid on his title page (“here I am the barbarian because they do not understand me”); later he sought (and sometimes achieved) an equilibrium between ancient “generality” and modern voluntarism. And that is why the general will “expresses everything he most wanted to say” (Shklar 184).

Fénelon’s *Lettre*, then, made a crucial contribution to one of the greatest ongoing modern disputes. If he was certainly no Machiavellian, he loved Rome as ardently as the celebrated Florentine, and he bequeathed that love to the most intense and eloquent of modern “romanists,” Rousseau.

IV

Having brought out what links Fénelon and Rousseau — the devotion to Greek and Roman antiquity, the subordination of self-love to a larger general good — it is important too to stress the things which separate them. And the main thing which distances them is the crucial difference between “generality” and true “universality.” If the mature Rousseau consistently sought after a civic *general* will valid only for Sparta or Rome *en particulier* — so that “the general will one has as a citizen” is precisely particular with respect to the entire *genre humain* — Fénelon remained a believer in a Dantean universal *respublica christiana* held together by universal charity or “disinterested” love. (Unorthodox as Fénelon may have been, he was not about to deny Christian universalism; and indeed he and Leibniz were the last figures of the first rank to adhere to the ideals of Dante’s *De Monarchia*).

To be sure, the young Rousseau had at one time clung to the venerable idea of a *morale universelle*. In an early, unpublished manuscript called *Chronologie universelle, ou Histoire générale du temps* (ca. 1737) he had appealed to Fénelon’s notion of a universal Christian republic:

We are all brothers; our neighbors ought to be as dear to us as ourselves. “I love the human race more than my country,” said the illustrious M. de Fénelon, “my country more than my family and my family more than myself.” Sentiments so full of humanity ought to be shared by all men. [...] The universe is a great family of which we are all members. [...] However extensive may be the power of an individual, he is always in a position to make himself useful [...] to the great body of which he is a part. If he can [do this] he indispensably ought to.⁵ (1: 214–15)

Later, of course — most notably in his attack on Diderot's notion of a reason-ordained "universal morality" in the first version of the *Social Contract* — Rousseau would abandon the *universelle* in favor of the *générale*, and exchange the *respublica christiana* for more modest republics, such as Sparta, Rome and Geneva. That is especially clear in the first of the *Lettres écrites de la montagne* (1764), in which Rousseau shows very clearly that his concern is to produce a civic general will that is peculiar to some particular nation, not a Fénelonian universal will for the good of the whole human race — even if this entails abandoning Christianity as a universal religion:

All the ancient religions, not excepting that of the Jews, were national in origin, appropriated to, and incorporated in, the state; forming the basis, or at least making a part of the legislative system.

Christianity, on the contrary, is in its principles a universal religion, having nothing exclusive, nothing local, nothing peculiar to one country any more than to another. Its divine author, embracing all mankind in his boundless charity, came to remove those barriers that separated the nations from each other, and to unite all mankind in a people of brethren [...]

National religions are useful to a state [...] but they are hurtful to mankind in general [...]. Christianity, on the contrary, by making men just, moderate and peaceable is very advantageous to society in general, but it weakens the force of the political spring [and...] breaks the unity of the moral body. (201 ff.)

Rousseau ends this passage with a radical claim that proves how little he finally favored Christian universalism: "Christianity [...] inspires humanity rather than patriotism, and tends rather to the forming of men than of citizens." In the end, for Rousseau, no *morale universelle* — whether given by Christ or Reason — can help in the transformation of natural men into denatured citizens. The *générale* must be (somewhat) *particulière*.

Admittedly in the *Political Economy*, a comparatively early transitional work, Rousseau seems to vacillate between *universalité* and *généralité*. There he first says that "any body politic" is "a moral being that has a will," and that "this general will which always tends to the preservation and welfare of the whole and of each part, and which is the source of the law, is . . . the rule of what is just and unjust." But this "rule of justice," Rousseau immediately adds, while "infallible" for citizens within a particular polity, "can be defective with [respect to] foreigners." This is simply because "the will of the state, though general in relation to its [own] members, is no longer [such] in relation to other states and their members." At this early point, however, Rousseau was not yet ready to say (as he does

in the *Lettres écrites de la montagne*) that humanity must yield to patriotism, that men matter less than citizens; thus, having begun by making the general will the will of some particular body politic, Rousseau falls back on the more-or-less Fénelonian thought that “the large town of the world becomes the body politic, of which the law of nature is always the general will, and the various states and peoples are merely individual members” (*Political Economy* 3: 278 ff.). In his mature, fully confident and radically civic works, that last echo of the *Chronologie universelle*, of a Dantean-Fénelonian Christian *respublica* under Thomist natural law, finally vanishes altogether: after *Inequality*, there is usually no natural law with which the general will can be equated, and after the *Lettres écrites de la montagne* and the *Government of Poland* the “various states” are no longer “members” of a world body politic. In the *Political Economy* there is still some vacillation between the polis and the cosmopolis, the general and the universal; later that vacillation gave way to a radical constancy.

V

If, then, disinterested love of “Fénelonianism” will not explain everything in Rousseau, it nonetheless accounts for a great deal; at a minimum one must fold in Lockean “voluntarism” before one can begin to understand Rousseau’s crucial insistence that “the general will is always right.” Fénelonian antiquity and Lockean “will,” subtly fused, do indeed provide the substructure of Rousseau’s politics. And Rousseau captured his devotion to Fénelon’s love of antiquity and to Locke’s ardent modernism when he characterized himself, in a moment of brilliant insight, as one of those “moderns who has an ancient soul.” No one ever saw this unorthodox and unexpected Rousseauian *rapprochement* between Fénelon and Locke as clearly as Judith Shklar. But then she was in the habit of seeing, not through a glass darkly, but face to face.

Patrick Riley
University of Wisconsin

Notes

¹See introductions to both works by Patrick Riley.

²The notion that egoism is evil ties together figures as radically different as Plato, Augustine, Pascal, Fénelon, and Rousseau: in each of these there is a sublimated “ascent” from low to high. Here Kant is exceptional: for him all love is “pathological,” and ethics needs “reason-ordained objective ends,” not sublimated eros. See Kant 126–36.

³In his “Jugement sur la Polysynodie” of the Abbé de Saint Pierre, Rousseau seems to include himself among “those moderns who have an ancient soul” (OC 3: 651 ff.).

⁴Judith Shklar, “General Will,” 275 ff.

⁵Treated in Riley, *The General Will before Rousseau* 204–5.

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