

## Patrick Riley (1941-2015) In Memoriam

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It is often said that one can learn a great deal about others by the company they keep.<sup>1</sup> Among academics, it might be fair to extend this to say that we can learn a great deal about scholars by those whom they choose to study. I can think of no one for whom this is more true than for Patrick Riley, whose dedication to Leibniz is well-known to all readers of the *Leibniz Review*. For the better part of two decades, he faithfully contributed annual essays and substantial review essays to this journal. And for those who knew him, they would confirm that his dedication to Leibniz was not merely the exercise of a kind of intellectual curiosity. It was because he thought Leibniz's moral and political thought touched on important truths that wielded the potential to promote greater social harmony. Those of us who knew him were perfectly aware that this project to make the world a better place began with his own significant virtues – particularly his love and selflessness. Now that we have learned of Patrick's sudden passing on March 10, 2015, it is fitting that we return to consider those virtues he embodied so that they endure long after him. Because if we have learned anything from Patrick, it is a phrase he would regularly recite in his classrooms: "To be sure, all of the thinkers whose works we'll be reading in this course are dead, but only in the most trivial sense of the term."<sup>2</sup>

Patrick liked to think of scholars in triumvirates. He would often attribute the entirety of his career success to the attention and efforts of three individuals: Michael Oakeshott, Judith Shklar, and John Rawls. "Without them," he would frequently tell me, "I would be nothing." "No, truly – I'm quite serious," he would always insist on adding. He learned very different skills and dispositions from each. From Oakeshott, he would learn a respect for the lessons of the texts.<sup>3</sup> From Shklar, he would learn to subject those texts to rigorous scrutiny.<sup>4</sup> From Rawls, he learned the importance of employing the lessons of those texts – however delicately – to nudge the world in the direction of greater social harmony.<sup>5</sup>

Patrick would dedicate the majority of his scholarly career to elucidating the thought of another triumvirate: Rousseau, Kant, and Leibniz. Anyone who had the privilege of knowing both Patrick and those canonical figures could easily understand why. His first published essay was on Rousseau's general will.<sup>6</sup> This would be a theme to which he would repeatedly return. He would subsequently publish

a major essay tracing the general will's origins as a divine concept in Malebranche into its life as a civic concept in Rousseau.<sup>7</sup> That essay would itself evolve into his magisterial *The General Will Before Rousseau: The Transformation of the Divine into the Civic*.<sup>8</sup> What tied together the general will in its divine and civic manifestations, for Riley, was its emphatic rejection of selfishness. For Malebranche, God's general will was the same for everyone – Malebranche's God doesn't single out people for special favors. Despite this, there will be some who demand divine particularized interventions through (fruitless) prayers. As Riley summarizes, "Those who claim that God *ought*, through special ad hoc *volontés particulières*, to suspend natural law if their operation will harm the virtuous or the innocent, or that he ought to confer grace only on those who will actually be saved by it, fail to understand that it is not worthy of an infinitely wise being to abandon general rules in order to find a suppositious perfect fit between the particular case of each finite being and a *volonté particulière* suited to that case alone."<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Rousseau identifies a similar pathology on the social level: "Nothing is more dangerous than the influence of private interests on public affairs . . . which is the inevitable consequence of particular considerations."<sup>10</sup> The entire point of the general will was to discourage the emergence, much less the reign, of truly selfish, particular wills.

Knowing this about the general will clarifies Patrick's interest in it. His own *volonté* was the furthest thing from *particulière*.<sup>11</sup> He was in all important respects utterly selfless. Despite a long (legendary) commute, he would be available to every last student who expressed any interest in the history of political thought. I would commonly find him late at night in his North Hall office, finding the time and energy to meet with graduates and undergraduates – either in directing independent studies or in offering professional and even personal guidance. The general will was not merely a curious intellectual niche in the literature to be filled. Its call to subordinate private interests to the common good was a principle by which to live.

The second figure of Patrick's triumvirate was Kant, whom he praised as "the most adequate of the social contract theorists." It is difficult for many to imagine getting emotional about the quirky Königsbergian; and with praise like "most adequate," one is tempted to believe that his praise was as sober and devoid of feeling as most imagine Kant himself to have been. But Patrick would confide that his beloved copy of the *Groundwork* was "drenched in stains of coffee, wine,<sup>12</sup> and tears." While the term "most adequate" was inspired by Kant's careful fusion of ideas with the contract tradition, this is not what inspired his tears. Rather, Patrick

was moved to tears by Kant's Kingdom of Ends: "rational beings all stand under the *law* that each of them should treat himself and all others, *never merely as a means*, but always *at the same time as an end in himself*. But by so doing there arises a systematic union of rational beings under common objective laws—that is, a kingdom. Since these laws are directed precisely to the relation of such beings to one another as ends and means, this kingdom can be called a kingdom of ends."<sup>13</sup> This final formulation of the Categorical Imperative deeply affected Patrick, and he took it for a personal code. Others were not put on this earth, to his mind, to be made useful for his purposes. They possess their own peculiar dignity and should be treated accordingly. Along these lines, a former student<sup>14</sup> remembers fondly, "I recall Patrick holding my newborn son, Pete, for three hours while he slept, when we first brought him home, so that my wife and I could talk with friends, get something to eat, and have a shred of normalcy in our lives." Colleagues and students were not means for Patrick. They were ends in themselves. To the extent that he was able to help them – whether through his considered analysis of their written work or simply holding their newborns while they enjoyed the rare pleasure of adult conversation – he did all in his power to respect and promote their dignity. He felt this deeply in a Kantian sense.

Along these lines, in his modern political thought course, even though Nietzsche was the final thinker on the syllabus, Patrick refused to grant him the final word. He would instead insist on reserving that honor for Kant, quoting (sometimes *auf Deutsch!*) his favorite passage: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me*. I do not need to search for them and merely conjecture them as though they were veiled in obscurity or in the transcendent region beyond my horizon; I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence."<sup>15</sup> It was the immediacy of this moral law within him – and its pure sublimity – that made him return to Kant's texts repeatedly and weep.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, readers of this journal will be most familiar with Patrick's legendary contributions to Leibniz scholarship. What was distinctive about this work, beginning with his edition of Leibniz's political writings in 1972, was his interest in the Hanoverian as a moral and political thinker, rather than merely as a metaphysician or epistemologist. It had been Bertrand Russell's considered view, after all, that the best parts of Leibniz "are the most abstract, and the worst those which most nearly concern human life."<sup>17</sup> Patrick saw things rather differently – and changed

Leibniz scholarship forever in his determination to resurrect Leibniz the moralist. He uncovered a distinctive conception of justice as charity that fosters “the habit of rejoicing in the happiness of another. . . . [O]f converting the happiness of another into one’s own,” independent of “hope, fear, and of regard for any question of utility.”<sup>18</sup> For Patrick’s Leibniz, there is nothing more important than to set aside our own concerns and embrace the interests of others. This was a vision that could not help but move his own warm heart, even if he worried it might not hold greater sway:

who can doubt that the world would be better if Leibnizian universal jurisprudence were in place—if every rational substance in the universe not only refrained from harm but rejoiced in the ‘perfection’ of others? Who can doubt that the world would be best if wise charity and universal benevolence actually prevailed? Only an ungenerous heart would fail to be moved by so generous a moral vision.<sup>19</sup>

His students know precisely how much he internalized Leibniz’s teachings as a way of life. When they published their books, his joy would possibly exceed theirs. Their concerns were his concerns. Their struggles were his worries. Their joys were his joys. Their accomplishments were the source of his greatest pleasures. Who could doubt that a world populated by citizens possessing Riley’s Leibnizian disposition would indeed be the best of all possible worlds?

What drew Patrick to Rousseau, Kant, and Leibniz was their shared conviction that selflessness, love of others, and a respect for their dignity were necessary components of any serious solution to whatever problems burden our coexistence. This, above all, animated his scholarship. This is what he taught in his classrooms.<sup>20</sup> This was how he conducted his affairs. It is still difficult to determine how much sway such ideas may gain over the hearts and minds of people everywhere. But those who experienced his selflessness, love, and respect for our dignity know precisely how right he was.

In his acknowledgements to *The General Will Before Rousseau*, Patrick wrote, It is helpful to know that Raphael’s Peruginesque sweetness was transformed by the sight of Michelangelo’s Sistine power; but what finally matters is the *School of Athens* or the *Disputà*. It is useful to learn that Mozart drew together the Italian *buffo*, French *galant*, and German contrapuntal styles; but what finally matters is the *Jupiter Symphony* or *Don Giovanni*. It is interesting to find out that Rousseau inherited “general will” from a long line of distinguished French theologians; but what finally matters is *Émile* or *Du contrat social*,

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*en soi*. The history of ideas is no substitute for ideas, just as musicology is no substitute for musicianship—as we have learned through some unmusical “authentic” performances; but a little extra second-order light thrown on great works is always welcome.<sup>21</sup>

Patrick’s readers always welcomed the remarkable “second-order light” he shined on the history of ideas. But it was in his generous and loving life that those beautiful ideas he chose to study revealed their enduring power and appeal.

Good night, sweet prince,  
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!—

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> I need to thank several people for their timely assistance with this celebration of Patrick Riley: Glenn Hartz, Daniel J. Kapust, Matthew W. Maguire, Michael Locke McLendon, Andrew R. Murphy, and Sankar Muthu.

<sup>2</sup> As one of Patrick’s students, Sankar Muthu, recently reminded me.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick would dedicate two books to Oakeshott: *Leibniz: Political Writings* and his translation of Malebranche’s *Treatise on Nature and Grace*. He remarked in the former that Oakeshott “left an indelible imprint as my tutor at the London School of Economics, and . . . represents everything I most admire in English civilization and academic life” (*Leibniz: Political Writings*, second edition, ed. Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1972] 1987), x). In the latter, he wrote, “It is to Oakeshott that I owe my whole intellectual life: my reading of his introduction to Hobbes’s *Leviathan* when I was 17 was so inspiring that I determined to take up moral and political philosophy for my life’s work” (*Treatise on Nature and Grace*, trans. Patrick Riley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), vii–viii).

<sup>4</sup> Patrick would dedicate two books to Shklar: *The General Will Before Rousseau* and his translation of Fénelon’s *Telemachus*. The former was accompanied by the Latin inscription: “Non est auctoritas super terram qui comparetur ei” (“No

authority on earth compares to her”). The latter is accompanied by a French inscription: “*Le fruit de l’amitié est dans l’amitié même*” (“The reward of friendship is in friendship itself”).

<sup>5</sup> Patrick would praise Rawls as a crucial inspiration for his interest in Kant, as well as for Rawls’s “well known kindness” (*Kant’s Political Philosophy* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1983), ix).

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Riley, “A Possible Explanation of Rousseau’s General Will,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 64, no. 1 (1970): 86-97.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Riley, “The General Will Before Rousseau,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 6, no. 4 (1978): 485-516.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Riley, *The General Will Before Rousseau: The Transformation of the Divine into the Civic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). This book has recently been celebrated with a set of essays, *The General Will: The Evolution of a Concept*, ed. James Farr and David Lay Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Riley 1986, 30-31.

<sup>10</sup> Rousseau, *Social Contract, Social Contract*, in *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1762] 1997), 91.

<sup>11</sup> As Patrick’s former student, Michael Locke McLendon, has described him in aptly Rousseauian terms, he had no interest – in his classrooms or in his writings – in exercising his *amour propre*, in demonstrating that he was clever (which he certainly was). He simply “cared about right and wrong, justice, and truth – the stuff we are all supposed to care about.”

<sup>12</sup> I never knew Patrick to drink any wine other than sangiovese, though I suppose it is possible he at one time sampled other varieties.

<sup>13</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper Perennial, [1785] 2009), 101.

<sup>14</sup> This is Andrew R. Murphy, now Associate Professor of Political Science at Rutgers University.

<sup>15</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1788] 1996), 269.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick remarked in the preface to *Kant’s Political Philosophy* that it was his parents who “taught me the meaning of good will long before my formal introduction to Kant” (Riley 1983, ix).

<sup>17</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Leibniz* (London: Routledge, [1900] 1992),

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<sup>18</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *Codex Iuris Gentium (Praefatio)*, in *Leibniz: Political Writings*, ed., Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1693] 1972), 171.

<sup>19</sup> Patrick Riley, *Leibniz' Universal Jurisprudence: Justice as the Charity of the Wise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 274-75.

<sup>20</sup> Patrick's final course at Harvard this spring was, naturally, "Justice as Love and Benevolence."

<sup>21</sup> Riley 1986, xiv.