

The Jean Jacques Rousseau Concept of the General Will: A Critique

Tamunosiki Victor Ogan, PhD

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities
University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Etorobong Godwin Akpan, PhD

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities
University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Sampson Obok Edodi

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities
University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

Man is born free but he is everywhere in chains. There was need then to form a political organism known as the general will. As a political organism, the features include the guarantee of personal and social freedom, infallibility, representative democracy and public deliberations, and a glaring colossal confusion over what the 'will of all' is and that of the general will. Therefore, the main questions begging for answers in this work include what is the general will according to Rousseau? Is it a collective will or an independent organism different from individual will? What constitute Rousseau's general will? Aim of the study is to examine the concept of general will in Jean Jacques Rousseau. The study adopts a qualitative textual analytical research method. The study argue that Rousseau general will theory is systematic and outlines of how a government could exist in such a way that it protects the equality and character of its citizens. The study recommends that present-day political societies ought to embrace Rousseau general will theory and voluntarism.

INTRODUCTION

According to Jean Jacques Rousseau, the State of Nature was a peaceful and quixotic time. People lived solitary, uncomplicated lives. Their few needs were easily satisfied by nature. Because of the abundance of nature and the small size of the population, competition was non-existent, and persons rarely even saw one another, much less had reason for conflict or fear. Moreover, these simple, morally pure persons were naturally endowed with the capacity for pity, and therefore were not inclined to bring harm to one another. Nevertheless, man is born free but he is everywhere in chains (Rousseau *Social Contract* 1987). There is therefore the need to form a political organism known as the general will. As a political organism, the general will is an entity with life of its own. Certain critical features of this entity include the guarantee of personal and social freedom, infallibility, representative democracy and public deliberations, and a glaring colossal confusion over what the 'will of all' is and that of the general will.

The idea of the general will plays pivotal role in the independence of many nations. The United States of America *Declaration of Independence* in 1776 states that governments derive "their just power from the consent of the governed." The *Declaration of the Right of Man and of the Citizen* (1789 article 6) in the French Revolution was more direct stating that "Law is the expression of the general will." The "expression of the general will" according Swenson (2001), is the accurate summary of Rousseau's theory that reviewers often accept it without modifications.

However, the concept of general will was developed over the years from Christian theology in the mid-17 century through the work of Nicolas Malebranches. He attributed the general will to be God. For him the universe exists according to God's general law that is always right and infallible (Munro 2020). The concept was developed later through Pascal, Montesquieu and Diderot into a social and humanist phenomenon. However, as it is known today as a political theory, it is credited to Jean Jacques Rousseau.

Nevertheless, the pivotal role, for example in the French Revolution, Rousseau's political theory – the general will is fraught with several flaws. For example, for Hegel, the general will is synonymous with the reign of terror. For Constant, it usurps the wills and freedom of individual members of the given society (Reisert 2010). Furthermore, Isaiah Berlin argued that the general will oppresses the citizens in the name of defending their freedom (Crowder 2004). Talmon reasons that general will is a totalitarian democratic system, and Bertrand Russell submitted that it makes available a mundane apparatus to determine a leadership which is often decided via the ballot box (Williams 2014).

Corroborating Rousseau's theory, there are also a distinguished line of scholars who have supposed that Rousseau's theory is a forerunner to modern day representative government around the world. For example, Cranston and Leigh argued that the general will is a liberal theory and a precursor to modern day political philosophy across the globe (Leigh 1963). For Montesquieu and Machiavelli (Riley 1978), it is the best political philosophy in that it opines that the state is in best position to defend the rights of individual members of the society and to resolve their conflicts arising from human nature. It is also a theory in tandem with natural law and making available liberating information to natural law theorists like Hobbes and Grotius (Lennon & Olscamp eds. 1997).

While in the state of nature, Thomas Hobbes observed constant hostility in that life was brutish and short, Locke acknowledged the presence of struggle over private property in the state of nature. But Rousseau observed in the state of nature a society in a perfect tranquility, unadulterated state where everything was good. That is, state of war is a characteristic of civil society occasioned by private property. Rousseau further opines that, while state of nature is characterized by peaceful coexistence, both private property as in Locke and hostility as in Hobbes belong to social and cultural stages of human development (Gundogan 2008).

According Polin (Akal 1990), there are seven stages of human development that transit into civil society. These include solitary state and natural wealth, first progress and first barriers, age of childhood of humanity, adolescence of humanity, Iron Age or prosperity and working state, state of war, and age of contractual society. This progression is presented in another way by Gundogan (2008) in the following retrospective order: civil state, state of war, age of adolescence, tribal state and the fictitious state of nature. This transition into what is now called civil society is extensively explored by Rousseau's general will theory in very interesting and compelling manner.

However, that the general will is not the will of all but a political organism possessing life on its own self has been a source of major concern among admirers as well as critics of Rousseau's theory. This work explores this concern by examining the source of this major concern over the general will concept, state of nature, origin of inequality, social contract and the sublime doctrine of education from nature in Rousseau.

Therefore, this study offers to critique the concept of general will in Jean Jacques Rousseau. In this critique, we will examine antecedent to Rousseau's general will theory, examine various arguments in support as well as against the Rousseau's doctrine and state in clear and concise term the meaning of the general will as possibly intended by Rousseau. An evaluation of Rousseau's theory would be presented leading to summary, conclusion and recommendation.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In the state of nature, while John Locke recognized the presence of private property struggles, Thomas Hobbes observed constant hostility making brutish and short. Jean Jacques Rousseau observed that the state of nature is a society in a perfect tranquility, unadulterated state where everything was good. Rousseau's observation implies that, state of war is a characteristic of civil society occasioned by the quest for the accumulation of private property.

However, in the course of human development and transition into civil society issues arises such as equality or origin of inequality, need for social contract, peaceful coexistence, and education, and natural law among others. Rousseau believes that the simple panacea to these issues is the general will. Furthermore, it is observed that some characteristics of the general will is infallibility, representative democracy, public deliberations and personal and social freedom, and a noteworthy taking serious confusion over what the 'will of all' is and that of the general will. Therefore, the main questions begging for answers in this work include what is the general will according to Rousseau? Is it a collective will or an independent organism different from individual will? What constitute Rousseau's general will?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to examine the concept of general will in Jean Jacques Rousseau. The specific objectives include:

- To examine state of nature in Rousseau
- To examine the origin of inequality in Rousseau
- To examine social contract in Rousseau
- To examine the meaning of the general will in Rousseau
- To examine the implication of Rousseau General Will theory modern society.

METHODOLOGY

In the attempt to discourse the issues this work seeks to address and achieve the aim and objectives of the study, the work adopts a qualitative textual analytical research method. Data source are scholarly relevant peer-reviewed journal articles, books, conference papers and other relevant open-access materials available via the internet.

The study undertakes extensive review of relevant literature on the antecedent to Rousseau's general will theory, the various arguments in support as well as against the Rousseau's doctrine of General Will, and meaning of the general.

The primary materials are publications written by Jean Jacques Rousseau among which include *On the Social Contract or Principles of Political Right* (1762), *Discourse on Inequality among Men*, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750), and *Political Economy* among others.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study is significant in a number of ways. It is a contribution to extant literature on the concept of the general will. It contributes to discourse on inequality by tracing the origin of inequality in Rousseau. It contributes to social contractual discourses as it explicates how private property and human nature necessitates the need for social contract for a mutual and peaceful coexistence.

Furthermore, the study contributes to present-day political discourse by examining the implication of Rousseau general will theory to modern society. Thus, the study is valuable to researchers, academic, and the general public of inquiring minds on the implication of the general will to the modern day representative democracies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is an attempt to survey scholarly relevant peer-reviewed journal articles, books, conference papers and other materials relevant to the topic. It enumerates, describes, summarizes, evaluates objectively and clarifies these materials. It reviews relevant literature on the various arguments in support as well as against the Rousseau's doctrine of General Will and most recent issues in social contract – feminism and race-consciousness. It concludes by identifying the gap in the previous studies on the topic which this study fills.

The history of political philosophy is traceable to the history of classical philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. In his article "Ancient Political Philosophy" Melissa Lane (2018) says political philosophy was invented by Plato and by effect, reinvented by Aristotle. It compasses reflections on the origin of political institutions, the concepts used to interpret and organize political life such as justice and equality, the relation between the aims of ethics and the nature of politics, and the relative merits of different constitutional arrangements or regimes. For Aristotle in *The Politics*, a state is not a mere society, having a common place, established for the prevention of mutual crime and for the sake of exchange but a community of families and aggregation of families in well-being, for the sake of a perfect and self-sufficing life. In the view of Lane (2018), Aristotle valued and encouraged political participation of the people, in as much as it expresses virtue.

In his book *De re publica*, Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE) argued that 'people, as in a commonwealth, is the assemblage associated with one another by an agreement on law. The *Declaration of the Right of Man and of the Citizen* (1789 article 6) in the French Revolution declared succinctly that "Law is the expression of the general will." In corroborating this submission, Swenson (2001) went further to aver that the "expression of the general will" as expressed in the declaration is the faithful summary of Rousseau's theory that reviewers often accept it without modifications.

In his book *Authority and the Common Good in Social and Political Philosophy*, Iniobong Udoidem (1988) argued that the question of the relationship between law, authority, and freedom is indubitable. He went further to state that the relevance and significance of the three cannot be explained without recourse to the notion of the common good. Aldo Tasi (1977) and Yves Simon (1965) argued in line with Udoidem that sovereignty and freedom are essentially related with the common good. Meanwhile, Andre Munro (2020) argued that the common good is the aim of the general will. Corroborating the indubitable relationship between authority, freedom and law in the discourse of the general will, Michael Thompson (2019) argued that Rousseau's general will is a kind of social cognition that is able to preserve individual autonomy and freedom alongside the concern for the welfare of the community and equality. In other words, authority depends heavily on law to express itself and law is the expression of the general will.

Furthermore, in his book *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (trans. H. B. Nisbet 2003, 39) arguing against the concept of equality in Rousseau's general will theory, G. W. F. Hegel criticized the general will as constituting a reign of terror. He identified the general will in a pejorative way, with the French Revolution. Hegel argued that, the defect of understanding was how the general will treats a one-sided determination as unique and elevates it to supreme status which resulted in the reign of terror. Supporting on one hand, the reign of terror criticism, in his article "Hegel's Critique of Rousseau's theory of the general will," Tim Christiaens (2014) argued that Rousseau's theory is by necessity embodied in concrete individuals who have arbitrary wills. The arbitrariness contains the risk of the general will suppressing the individuality on which it is based.

Furthermore, supporting Hegel's reign of terror criticism, Benjamin Constant (Johnson 2014), criticized Rousseau in his famous speech "On Ancient and Modern Liberty." According to Benjamin Constant, everything should give way to collective will, and that all restrictions on individual rights would be amply compensated by participation in social power (Johnson 2014). By implication, Constant is saying that every individual right hitherto becomes sacrificial lambs on the

altar of general will. The resultant effect is the subjugation of the individual rights. However, Christiaens (2014) agreeing with Stern (2002) argued that, Hegel misrepresented Rousseau and criticized him for the wrong reason. Christiaens (2014) went further to establish that Hegel's argument reaches the core of Rousseau's philosophy revealing the paradoxes inherent in Hegel's criticism of Rousseau's general will. Besides, during the Cold War, Karl Popper criticized Rousseau for his association with nationalism and its attendant abuses commonly known to scholars as a totalitarian thesis (Reisert 2010, Johnson 2014).

In corroborating Popper's criticism, J. L. Talmon affirms the totalitarian thesis of the general will in his book *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1952). As argued by Maloy (Johnson 2014), Rousseau was considered to have advocated for the sort of invasive tampering with human nature which the totalitarian regime during the Cold War had tried to instantiate. Maloy asserts, "The totalitarian thesis in Rousseau studies has, by now, been discredited as an attribution of real historical influence" (Johnson 2014). The totalitarian criticism of the general will may also be a misreading of Rousseau as in the case with Hegel (Christiaens 2014; Stern 2002). Totalitarianism is not in tandem with the spirit of social contract.

According to the social contract theory, person's moral and political obligations are dependent upon a contract or agreement among them to form the society in which they live. In the book *Death and Trial of Socrates*, Socrates used something quite like a social contract argument to explain to Crito why he must remain in prison and accept the death penalty. However, social contract theory is rightly associated with modern moral and political theory and is given its first full exposition and defense by Thomas Hobbes. After Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau are the best known proponents of this enormously influential theory, which has been one of the most dominant theories within moral and political theory throughout the history of the modern West (Friends 2020).

According to Thomas Hobbes in his book the *Leviathan* (1985), given that men are naturally self-interested, yet they are rational, they will choose to submit to the authority of a Sovereign in order to be able to live in a civil society, which is conducive to their own interests. Hobbes argues for this by imagining men in their natural state, or in other words, the State of Nature (Friends 2020). In the State of Nature, which is purely hypothetical according to Hobbes, men are naturally and exclusively self-interested, they are more or less equal to one another, (even the strongest man can be killed in his sleep), there are limited resources, and yet there is no power able to force men to cooperate. Given these conditions in the State of Nature, Hobbes concludes that the State of Nature would be unbearably brutal.

In the State of Nature, every person is always in fear of losing his life to another. They have no capacity to ensure the long-term satisfaction of their needs or desires. No long-term or complex cooperation is possible because the State of Nature can be aptly described as a state of utter distrust. Given Hobbes' reasonable assumption that most people want first and foremost to avoid their own deaths, he concludes that the State of Nature is the worst possible situation in which men can find themselves. It is the state of perpetual and unavoidable war. For Hobbes therefore, the necessity of an absolute authority, in the form of a Sovereign, followed from the utter brutality of the State of Nature. The State of Nature was completely intolerable, and so rational men would be willing to submit themselves even to absolute authority in order to escape it.

According to John Locke in the *Second Treatise of Government* and *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (2003), the State of Nature is not a condition of individuals, as it is for Hobbes. Rather, it is populated by mothers and fathers with their children, or families – what he calls "conjugal society" (par. 78). According to Locke there are only two stable conditions for a political organization: the state of nature and the civil society. The state of nature in Locke's theory represents the beginning of a process in which a state for a liberal, constitutional government is formed. Locke regards the state of nature as a state of total freedom and equality, bound by the law of nature. Political society

comes into being when individual men, representing their families, come together in the State of Nature and agree to each give up the executive power to punish those who transgress the Law of Nature, and hand over that power to the public power of a government. Having done this, they then become subject to the will of the majority.

In other words, by making a compact to leave the State of Nature and form society, they make “one body politic under one government” (par. 97) and submit themselves to the will of that body. One joins such a body, either from its beginnings, or after it has already been established by others, only by explicit consent. Having created a political society and government through their consent, men then gain three things which they lacked in the State of Nature namely; laws, judges to adjudicate laws, and the executive power necessary to enforce these laws. Each man therefore gives over the power to protect himself and punish transgressors of the Law of Nature to the government that he has created through the compact.

However, contemporary critiques of social contract theory are feminists and race-conscious philosophers, in particular, who have made important arguments concerning the substance and viability of social contract theory.

In his book *The Sexual Contract*, Pateman Carole (1988) argues that lying beneath the myth of the idealized contract, as described by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, is a more fundamental contract concerning men’s relationship to women – the sexual contract. Contract theory represents itself as being opposed to patriarchy and patriarchal right. Patriarchal control of women is found in at least three paradigmatic contemporary contracts: the marriage contract, the prostitution contract, and the contract for surrogate motherhood. Each of these contracts is concerned with men’s control of women, or a particular man’s control of a particular woman generalized.

According to the terms of the marriage contract, in most parts of the world, a husband is accorded the right to sexual access, prohibiting the legal category of marital rape. Prostitution is a case in point of Pateman’s claim that modern patriarchy requires equal access by men to women, in particular sexual access, access to their bodies. And surrogate motherhood can be understood as more of the same, although in terms of access to women’s reproductive capacities. All these examples demonstrate that contract is the means by which women are dominated and controlled. Contract is not the path to freedom and equality. Rather, it is one means, perhaps the most fundamental means, by which patriarchy is upheld. According to this argument, Rousseau’s concept of equality is merely idealist conception. Thus, feminist critiques of the contractarian approaches to our collective moral and political lives continue to reverberate through social and political philosophy.

Furthermore, in his book *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills (1997) argued against social contract from a race-conscious perspective. Mills’ central argument is that there exists a ‘racial contract’ that is even more fundamental to Western society than the social contract. This racial contract determines in the first place who counts as full moral and political persons, and therefore sets the parameters of who can ‘contract in’ to the freedom and equality that the social contract promises. Some persons, in particular white men, are full persons according to the racial contract. As such they are accorded the right to enter into the social contract, and into particular legal contracts. They are seen as fully human and therefore as deserving of equality and freedom. Their status as full persons accords them greater social power. In particular, it accords them the power to make contracts, to be the subjects of the contract, whereas other persons are denied such privilege and are relegated to the status of objects of contracts.

From Charles Mills’ (1997) perspective, racial contract informs the very structure of our political systems, and lays the basis for the continuing racial oppression of non-whites. According to Lane (2018), we cannot respond to it, therefore, by simply adding more non-whites into the mix of our political institutions, representation, and so on. Rather, we must reexamine our politics in general, from the point of view of the racial contract, and start from where we are, with full knowledge of

how our society has been informed by the systematic exclusion of some persons from the realm of politics and contract. This “naturalized” feature of the racial contract, meaning that it tells a story about who we actually are and what is included in our history, is better, according to Mills, because it holds the promise of making it possible for us to someday actually live up to the norms and values that are at the heart of the Western political traditions.

However, in his article “Ancient Political Philosophy” Melissa Lane (2018) argues that Rousseau’s social contract theories together form a single, consistent view of our moral and political situation. We are endowed with freedom and equality by nature, but our nature has been corrupted by our contingent social history. We can overcome this corruption, however, by invoking our free will to reconstitute ourselves politically, along strongly democratic principles, which is good for us, both individually and collectively. Nevertheless, one of Rousseau's strongest critics during the second half of the 20th century was political philosopher Hannah Arendt. Using Rousseau's thought as an example, Arendt identified the notion of sovereignty with that of the general will (Johnson 2014). According to her, it was this desire to establish a single, unified will based on the stifling of opinion in favor of public passion that contributed to the excesses of the French Revolution.

From the foregoing, while John Locke recognized the presence of private property struggles in the state of nature, Thomas Hobbes observed constant hostility making life brutish and short. Jean Jacques Rousseau observed that the state of nature is a society in a perfect tranquility, unadulterated state where everything was good. But in the course of human development and transition into civil society issues have arisen such as equality or origin of inequality, need for social contract, peaceful coexistence, and education, and natural law among others which for Rousseau the general will is the panacea to these issues. It is also observed that the common good is the aim of the general will. Rousseau has argued that freedom and authority are not contradictory since legitimate laws are founded on the general will (Munro 2020).

Yet, other arguments from feminism (Pateman 1988) bordering on issues such as sexual contract, nature of the liberal individual and care, and race-consciousness issues (Mills 1997) have ensued to challenge the general will theory. However, there is a major concern over the misreading of what the ‘will of all’ is and that of the general will as seen in many criticisms of Rousseau. Therefore, the main questions begging for answers in the work include what is the general will according to Rousseau? What constitute Rousseau’s general will? Therefore, the remaining part of the work shall seek to address these issues.

JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU CONCEPT OF THE GENERAL WILL BIOGRAPHY OF J. J. ROUSSEAU

In 1712, Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born in the independent Calvinist city-state of Geneva, the son of Isaac Rousseau, a watchmaker, and Suzanne Bernard. Rousseau’s mother died nine days after his birth, with the consequence that Rousseau was raised and educated by his father until the age of ten. He left the city at the age of sixteen and came under the influence of a Roman Catholic convert noblewoman, Francoise-Louise de la Tour, Baronne de Warens. Mme de Warens arranged for Rousseau to travel to Turin, where he converted to Roman Catholicism in April 1728. Rousseau then spent a brief period training to become a Catholic priest before embarking on another brief career as an itinerant musician, music copyist and teacher (Bertram 2017).

In 1731 he returned to Mme de Warens at Chambéry and later briefly became her lover and then her household manager. Rousseau remained with Mme de Warens through the rest of the 1730s, moving to Lyon in 1740 to take up a position as a tutor. This appointment brought him within the orbit of both Condillac and d’Alembert and was his first contact with major figures of the French Enlightenment (Cranston 1982). In 1742 he travelled to Paris, having devised a plan for a new numerically-based system of musical notation which he presented to the Academy of Sciences. The

system was rejected by the Academy, but in this period Rousseau met Denis Diderot. A brief spell as secretary to the French Ambassador in Venice followed before Rousseau moved to Paris on a more permanent basis from 1744, where he continued to work mainly on music and began to write contributions to the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert.

In 1749, while walking to Vincennes to visit the briefly-imprisoned Diderot, Rousseau came across a newspaper announcement of an essay competition organized by the Academy of Dijon. The Academy sought submissions on the theme of whether the development of the arts and sciences had improved or corrupted public morals (Lester 1974). Rousseau later claimed that he then and there experienced an epiphany which included the thought, central to his world view, that humankind is good by nature but is corrupted by society. Rousseau entered his *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (conventionally known as the *First Discourse*) for the competition and won first prize with his contrarian thesis that social development, including of the arts and sciences, is corrosive of both civic virtue and individual moral character.

In 1754 Rousseau regained this citizenship by reconvertng to Calvinism. In the following year he published his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, again in response to an essay competition from the Academy of Dijon. The years following the publication of the *Second Discourse* in 1755 were the most productive and important of Rousseau's career. He withdrew from Paris and, under the patronage of, first Mmed'Epinay and then the Duke and Duchess of Luxembourg, worked on a novel, *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*, and then on *Emile* and *The Social Contract*. Unfortunately, both *Emile* and *The Social Contract* were condemned in Geneva on grounds of religious heterodoxy. Partly in response to this, Rousseau finally renounced his Genevan citizenship in May 1763. He was forced to flee to escape arrest, seeking refuge first in Switzerland and later, in January 1766, at the invitation of David Hume, travelling to England (Bertram 2017).

According to Bertram (1974) and Damrosch (2005), Rousseau's stay in England was marked by increasing mental instability and he became wrongly convinced that Hume was at the center of a plot against him. He spent fourteen months in Staffordshire where he worked on his autobiographical work, the *Confessions*, which also contains evidence of his paranoia in its treatment of figures like Diderot and the German author Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm. He returned to France in 1767 and then spent much of the rest of his life working on autobiographical texts, completing the *Confessions* but also composing the *Dialogues: Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques* and *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. He also completed his *Considerations on the Government of Poland* in this period. Rousseau died in 1778.

ANTECEDENTS TO ROUSSEAU CONCEPT OF GENERAL WILL

The notion of the general will precedes Rousseau and has its roots in Christian theology. In the second half of the 17th century, Nicolas Malebranche attributed the general will to God (Wokler 2017; Roosevelt 1990; Williams 2014). God, Malebranche argued, mostly acts in the world through a set of "general laws" instituted at the creation of the world. These laws correspond to God's general will, in contradistinction to particular expressions of God's will: miracles and other occasional acts of divine intervention. For Malebranche, it is because God's will expresses itself mainly through general laws that one can make sense of the apparent contradiction between God's will to save all of humankind and the fact that most souls will not actually be saved. Rousseau's own understanding of the general will emerged from a critique of Denis Diderot, who transformed Malebranche's understanding of the general will into a secular concept but who echoed Malebranche by defining it in universalistic terms.

In his article "*Droit naturel*" ("*Natural Right*") published in 1755 in the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot argued that morality is based on the general will of humankind to improve its own happiness (Bertram 2017). Individuals can access this moral ideal by reflecting on their interests as members

of the human race. The general will, Diderot believed, is necessarily directed at the good since its object is the betterment of all.

For Rousseau, however, the general will is not an abstract ideal. It is instead the will actually held by the people in their capacity as citizens. Rousseau's conception is thus political and differs from the more universal conception of the general will held by Diderot. To partake in the general will means, for Rousseau, to reflect upon and to vote on the basis of one's sense of justice. Individuals become conscious of their interests as citizens, according to Rousseau, and thus of the interest of the republic as a whole, not through spirited discussions but, on the contrary, by following their personal conscience in the "silence of the passions." In this sense, the public assembly does not debate so much as disclose the general will of the people. Rousseau argued that the general will is intrinsically right, but he also criticized in *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* the rationalist elevation of reason above feelings (Sreenivasan 2000; Starobinski 1988).

ROUSSEAU'S GENERAL WILL THEORY

The general will is a concept in political philosophy referring to the desire or interest of a people as a whole. It is most often associated with socialist traditions in politics. General will is what a fully-informed body politic (community of citizens) would unanimously do if, by using good reasoning and judgment unclouded by bias and emotion, it would make general laws and decisions intended to ensure the common good. The general will is central to the political philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and an important concept in modern republican thought (Munro 2020). Rousseau distinguished the general will from the particular and often contradictory wills of individuals and groups.

In *The Social Contract* (1762), Rousseau argued that freedom and authority are not contradictory, since legitimate laws are founded on the general will of the citizens. In obeying the law, the individual citizen is thus only obeying himself as a member of the political community.

STATE OF NATURE

The scope of modern philosophy was not limited only to issues concerning science and metaphysics. Philosophers of this period also attempted to apply the same type of reasoning to politics. One approach of these philosophers was to describe human beings in the "state of nature." That is, they attempted to strip human beings of all those attributes that they took to be the results of social conventions. In doing so, they hoped to uncover certain characteristics of human nature that were universal and unchanging. If this could be done, one could then determine the most effective and legitimate forms of government.

The two most famous accounts of the state of nature prior to Rousseau's are those of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke (Dent 1988). Hobbes contends that human beings are motivated purely by self-interest, and that the state of nature, which is the state of human beings without civil society, is the war of every person against every other. Hobbes does say that while the state of nature may not have existed all over the world at one particular time, it is the condition in which humans would be if there were no sovereign. Locke's account of the state of nature is different in that it is an intellectual exercise to illustrate people's obligations to one another. These obligations are articulated in terms of natural rights, including rights to life, liberty and property (Gourevitch 1997; 1997; Melzer 1990). Rousseau was also influenced by the modern natural law tradition, which attempted to answer the challenge of skepticism through a systematic approach to human nature that, like Hobbes, emphasized self-interest. Rousseau therefore often refers to the works of Hugo Grotius, Samuel von Pufendorf, Jean Barbeyrac, and Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui. Rousseau gave his own account of the state of nature in the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*.

EQUALITY (ORIGIN OF INEQUALITY)

According to Rousseau, by nature, humans are essentially peaceful, content, and equal. It is the socialization process that has produced inequality, competition, and the egoistic mentality. In the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau acknowledges that self-preservation is one principle of motivation for human actions, but unlike Hobbes, it is not the only principle. If it were, Rousseau claims that humans would be nothing more than monsters. Therefore, Rousseau concludes that self-preservation, or more generally self-interest, is only one of two principles of the human soul. He further explains the complex series of historical events that moved humans from state of nature to present day civil society. Although they are not stated explicitly, Rousseau sees this development as occurring in a series of stages.

From the pure state of nature, humans begin to organize into temporary groups for the purposes of specific tasks like hunting an animal. Very basic language in the form of grunts and gestures comes to be used in these groups. However, the groups last only as long as the task takes to be completed, and then they dissolve as quickly as they came together. The next stage involves more permanent social relationships including the traditional family, from which arises conjugal and paternal love. Basic conceptions of property and feelings of pride and competition develop in this stage as well. However, at this stage they are not developed to the point that they cause the pain and inequality that they do in present day society. If humans could have remained in this state, they would have been happy for the most part, primarily because the various tasks that they engaged in could all be done by each individual.

The next stage in the historical development occurs when the arts of agriculture and metallurgy are discovered. Because these tasks required a division of labor, some people were better suited to certain types of physical labor, others to making tools, and still others to governing and organizing workers. Soon, there become distinct social classes and strict notions of property, creating conflict and ultimately a state of war not unlike the one that Hobbes describes. Those who have the most to lose call on the others to come together under a social contract for the protection of all. But Rousseau claims that the contract is specious, and that it was no more than a way for those in power to keep their power by convincing those with less that it was in their interest to accept the situation. And so, Rousseau says, "All ran to meet their chains thinking they secured their freedom, for although they had enough reason to feel the advantages of political establishment, they did not have enough experience to foresee its dangers." (*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Vol. II, p. 54). Thus, by nature, humans are essentially peaceful, content, and equal. It is the socialization process that has produced inequality, competition, and the egoistic mentality.

THE GENERAL WILL (SOCIAL CONTRACT)

The *Social Contract* of Rousseau is quite systematic and outlines how a government could exist in such a way that it protects the equality and character of its citizens. In the chapter one of the *Social Contract*, it begins with one of Rousseau's most famous quotes, which echoes the claims of his political philosophy "Man was/is born free; and everywhere he is in chains." (*Social Contract*, Vol. IV, p. 131).

Rousseau's *Du contrat social* was epoch-making in its argument that law legitimately comes only from the sovereign people legislating for itself: from the general will. Rousseau followed in the social contract tradition of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), John Locke (1632–1704), and others, but sought to find a form of political association in which naturally free individuals can join with others and yet remain as free as before. His solution was direct democratic self-legislation in which each citizen, as a member of the sovereign, makes laws that apply equally to all. "Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and in a body we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole" (*Contrat social*, I.6).

Rousseau pressed a radically voluntarist principle into service as the binding force of the political community. Although he recognized a "universal justice emanating from reason alone," he argued that this justice is ineffective for want of a natural sanction (*Contrat social*, II.6). Rousseau's general will was confined to the limits of the state. "The general will is always right," claimed Rousseau. His statement has often been taken to imply a kind of mystical popular will in whose name the force of the state can be exercised.

The general will is not something that transcends the state, but is the will of the citizens qua citizens in their capacity as members of the sovereign. Immediately after claiming that the general will is always right, Rousseau pointed to what he saw as the central problem of the state: "But it does not follow that the people's deliberations will always have the same rectitude" (*Contrat social*, II.3). The people may err in their deliberations for several reasons, but the rectitude of the general will is distorted most importantly by the natural tendency of individuals to consult the particular will they have qua individuals. "Indeed, each individual can, as a man, have a private will contrary to or differing from the general will he has as a citizen. His private interest can speak to him quite differently from the common interest." Such a person, Rousseau infamously concluded, "will be forced to be free."

While this paradoxical statement has been interpreted as an authoritarian element in Rousseau's thought, less noticed is the continuation of the passage: "For this is the condition that, by giving each citizen to the fatherland, guarantees him against all personal dependence" (*Contrat social*, I.7). The mutual obligations of the political association ensure that the citizens are dependent only on the law of their own making, and not on the will of another individual. The law must come from everyone and apply equally to all. The general will is always directed toward the common justice and utility by virtue of its very generality: "the general will, to be truly such, should be general in its object as well as in its essence; that it should come from all to apply to all" (*Contrat social*, II.4).

Proper civic education and favorably egalitarian conditions are necessary for the deliberations of the citizens to have the rectitude they require to make the general will triumph over particular interests. Self-legislation as part of the sovereign makes possible a new kind of freedom, a civil and moral freedom that transcends the natural freedom we have as individuals. Rousseau's general will inspired his followers with what they saw as a promise of revolutionary moral and political transformation.

The General Will Rousseau tied the concept of general will directly to sovereignty. True sovereignty did not imply simply having power over the rest of society, but was always directed at the public good. The general will, therefore, infallibly pursued the benefit of the people. It is always general. It could establish rules, set up social classes, or even a monarchical government, but it could never specify the particular individuals who were subject to the rules, particular members of the social classes, or the particular rulers in the government (O'Hagan 1999; Rosenblatt 1997; Riley 2001; Reisert 2003)

The general will was directed at the good of the society as a whole, and was not to be confused with the collection of the wills of individuals, who would put their own needs, or the needs of their particular factions, above those of the general public. Rousseau emphasized that the general will (*volonté générale*) was not merely the cancelled-out sum of all the individual wills of those who participate in the social contract, the will of all (*volonté de tous*). There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will. The latter looks only to the common interest; the former considers private interest and is only a sum of private wills. But take away from these same wills the pluses and minuses that cancel each other out, and the remaining sum of the differences is the general will (Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Vol. IV, 146)

CRITIQUE, SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

CRITIQUE OF ROUSSEAU'S GENERAL WILL THEORY

The concept of the general will, first introduced in the *Discourse on Political Economy*, is further developed in the *Social Contract* although it remains ambiguous and difficult to interpret (Delaney 2020). The most pressing difficulty that arises is in the tension that seems to exist between liberalism and communitarianism.

On one hand, Rousseau argues that following the general will allows for individual diversity and freedom. But at the same time, the general will also encourages the wellbeing of the whole, and therefore can conflict with the particular interests of individuals. This tension has led some to claim that Rousseau's political thought is hopelessly inconsistent, although others have attempted to resolve the tension in order to find some type of middle ground between the two positions. Despite these difficulties, however, there are some aspects of the general will that Rousseau clearly articulates (Delaney 2020, Munro 2020).

O'Hagan (1999), Riley (2001) and Reiser (2003) argued that, first; the general will is directly tied to Sovereignty: but not Sovereignty merely in the sense of whomever holds power. Simply having power, for Rousseau, is not sufficient for that power to be morally legitimate. True Sovereignty is directed always at the public good, and the general will, therefore, speaks always infallibly to the benefit of the people. Second, the object of the general will is always abstract, or for lack of a better term, general (Wokler 2014). It can set up rules, social classes, or even a monarchical government, but it can never specify the particular individuals who are subject to the rules, members of the classes, or the rulers in the government.

This is in keeping with the idea that the general will speaks to the good of the society as a whole. It is not to be confused with the collection of individual wills which would put their own needs, or the needs of particular factions, above those of the general public (Roosevelt 1990; Sreenivasan 2000; Williams 2014). This leads to a related point. Rousseau argues that there is an important distinction to be made between the general will and the collection of individual wills: "There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will. The latter looks only to the common interest; the former considers private interest and is only a sum of private wills. But take away from these same wills the pluses and minuses that cancel each other out, and the remaining sum of the differences is the general will." (*Social Contract*, Vol. IV, p. 146). This point can be understood in an almost Rawlsian sense, namely that if the citizens were ignorant of the groups to which they would belong, they would inevitably make decisions that would be to the advantage of the society as a whole, and thus be in accordance with the general will.

SUMMARY

In summary, the general will is a concept in political philosophy referring to the desire or interest of a people as a whole. It is most often associated with socialist traditions in politics. General will is what a fully-informed body politic (community of citizens) would unanimously do if, by using good reasoning and judgment unclouded by bias and emotion, it would make general laws and decisions intended to ensure the common good. This is achieved through social contract. The social contract theory is developed from the concept of state of nature.

Rousseau's picture of "man in his natural state," is radically different that of Hobbes. Hobbes describes each human in the state of nature as being in a constant state of war against all others; hence life in the state of nature is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. For humans to be in a constant state of war with one another, they would need to have complex thought processes involving notions of property, calculations about the future, immediate recognition of all other humans as potential threats, and possibly even minimal language skills. These faculties, according to Rousseau,

are not natural, but rather, they develop historically. In contrast to Hobbes, Rousseau describes natural man as isolated, timid, peaceful, mute, and without the foresight to worry about what the future will bring. Furthermore, on the origin of inequality Rousseau, by nature, humans are essentially peaceful, content, and equal. It is the socialization process that has produced inequality, competition, and the egoistic mentality.

Rousseau tied the concept of general will directly to sovereignty. True sovereignty did not imply simply having power over the rest of society, but was always directed at the public good. The general will, therefore, infallibly pursued the benefit of the people. It is always general. It could establish rules, set up social classes, or even a monarchical government, but it could never specify the particular individuals who were subject to the rules, particular members of the social classes, or the particular rulers in the government.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, some of the characteristics of the general will include infallibility, representative democracy, public deliberations and personal and social freedom. The general will was directed at the good of the society as a whole, and was not to be confused with the collection of the wills of individuals, who would put their own needs, or the needs of their particular factions, above those of the general public. Rousseau emphasized that the general will (*volonté générale*) was not merely the cancelled-out sum of all the individual wills of those who participate in the social contract, the will of all (*volonté de tous*). There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will. The latter looks only to the common interest; the former considers private interest and is only a sum of private wills. But take away from these same wills the pluses and minuses that cancel each other out, and the remaining sum of the differences is the general will.

RECOMMENDATION

Since by nature, humans are essentially peaceful, content, and equal, the good practice of the tenets of the general will should eliminate inequality because it is the socialization process that has produced inequality, competition, and the egoistic mentality.

Furthermore, Rousseau general will theory is systematic and outlines of how a government could exist in such a way that it protects the equality and character of its citizens. Therefore, present-day political societies ought to embrace Rousseau general will theory and voluntarism. Rousseau pressed a radically voluntarist principle into service as the binding force of the political community.

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