Rousseau’s General Will: Totalitarian Perception Of a Virtuous Ideal

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“So long as several men together consider themselves to be a single body, they have but a single will...”¹ -- Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Introduction

In The Social Contract, Jean-Jacques Rousseau lays out a new vision of sovereignty and government. According to Rousseau, the sovereign is and can be only the citizenry as a whole, united by their expression of what he calls the General Will. This sovereign power cannot be alienated or divided or checked; if it were, the sovereign would cease to exist. Indeed, it can seem that through the creation of the sovereign, even the individual ceases to exist. If such is the case, Rousseau is a preacher of totalitarianism, and is in reality as dangerous to liberty as he seems to be vocal in its pursuit. Such is the interpretation of thinkers such as Bertrand Russell and Isaiah Berlin who have condemned Rousseau as a totalitarian and an enemy of liberty.² This interpretation of Rousseau correctly perceives the totalitarian tenor to Rousseau’s thought but it misses its real thrust. Rousseau’s purpose is educative. Rather than forging a radically new government, Rousseau is


far more concerned with forging a new mindset of citizenship. The changes he seeks to effect are internal, rather than external. Rousseau is interested in creating the perception of a sovereign, in service to which citizens can be rationally motivated to be civically virtuous. Unlike his predecessors Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau recognizes the limits of personal selfishness as a motive for an involved citizenry. He understands the need for civic virtue. And he understands that if society is perceived as nothing but a forum for competing selfishness, then civic virtue is impossible, or at the very least irrational. Rousseau attempts to make civic-mindedness also a matter of self-interest, by seeking to demonstrate that the common interest includes and sublimates selfishness. In trying to blend the advantages of the strong pull of self-interest with the advantages of civic devotion, he formulates this radical new conception of sovereignty. Hence the proclivity of readers to see him as a revolutionary, calling for the overthrow of all political regimes on Earth, or as a totalitarian, calling for a more all-encompassing state than has ever existed. Rousseau does not offer a call to action though. This is not a manifesto of revolution. Rousseau’s depiction of legitimate sovereignty is a foil by which we consider the need for something more profound than selfishness and something deeper than cold calculation in the ways we interact with our fellow citizens. I propose that the Rousseau’s idea of sovereignty should be viewed not as a justification for a despotic regime but as a lens through which citizens can alter their understanding of society and in so doing transform themselves into free beings and good citizens.
The Context of Hobbes and Locke

Understanding the meaning of Rousseau’s contributions requires beginning with the idea of sovereignty put forward by Locke in his 2\textsuperscript{nd} \textit{Treatise of Government}. Locke’s conception of the social contract is a great deal simpler than Rousseau’s. Locke bases a legitimate social contract on one fundamental idea: that society is workable and legitimate as a collection of selfish individuals who do not have any concern for the common good.

Locke argues that the society and government come into being because man, through the securities afforded by government, can better enjoy his rights to life, liberty and property than he can in the state of nature.\textsuperscript{3} From this understanding of the purpose of government one can measure whether the action of the government is legitimate: if it is counter to the citizens’ better enjoyment of their natural rights, then it is illegitimate. Rational calculation to further one’s interests defines both the basis of a sovereign’s legitimacy and the limits of its authority. A monarch cannot exercise arbitrary authority over his subjects because doing so would provide worse protection for rights than in the state of nature.\textsuperscript{4}

Within this simple construction of self-interested personal gain, the question arises what obligation a citizen has to obey the laws of society. In what sense does a citizen have a duty to society? Locke believes that the citizen is obligated to obey the government because he gives his consent to the government when the society is formed:


\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Ibid.}, 357.
And thus every Man, by consenting with others to make one Body Politick under one Government, puts himself under an Obligation to every one of that Society, to submit to the determination of the majority…

The obvious objection to this, which Locke explicitly recognizes but never convincingly addresses, is that most citizens are born into a regime and have no part in forming the constitution of their country. In what sense, then, are such native citizens obligated to follow the laws of the social contract if they have not actively used their reason to legitimize the contract through consent? Locke responds with his theory of *tacit consent*: an individual need not actively express his consent; simply by living within a community and taking advantage of all that it has to offer, one gives one’s tacit consent to be ruled by its laws. By not leaving the community, one consents to it. There is an obvious problem with tacit consent, though. What of those citizens without the resources to leave? Are they not, in a sense, coerced into this tacit contract, given that they have no other option but to remain where they are?

Scholars of Locke have since developed the theory of *hypothetical consent* as the strongest way to defend Locke’s position. Hypothetical consent is the idea that obligation need not stem from actual consent, but that as long as giving one’s consent would be the rational thing to do given the choice, then we can still think of citizens as obligated by consent. This is a flimsy argument as few would consider

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6 Locke, 347-348.

themselves obligated to adhere to a contract they never signed, or even have seen, but hypothetically would have or should have signed if they had been given the opportunity. It is undoubtedly a weak theory of obligation and one that is not likely to inspire a strong sense of duty among the citizens.\textsuperscript{8}

Clearly, then, obligation and duty is a section of Locke’s theory that is weaker than others. This weakness stems from Locke’s premise of the adequacy of selfishness as the basic social motivation. For Locke there is no transformation of man in the process of creating society. In the \textit{State of Nature}, people are naturally at risk at the hands of other competing, human beings. Everyone enters society in order to protect himself from everyone else. It is thus a truce between enemies. The enmity and competition between all human beings is natural, and although the social contract contains and neutralizes the enmity, the enmity remains. Locke restricts all political legitimacy to rational consent to protection against a hostile natural state.\textsuperscript{9}

Thus Locke runs into the problem of the ground of obligation to the state, given his understanding of consent. There is simply no reason for someone to obey the laws of the state if his comfort and enjoyment of life, liberty and property, can be reasonably shown to be furthered by disloyalty to the state. After all, the sovereign state is nothing but a collection of rivals with whom one makes a truce; if one can do better without the truce, why not do so? Locke rejects the possibility of civic virtue in constructing the state but does not provide an adequate alternative.

\textsuperscript{8} For a summary of the many and varied critiques and defenses of Locke’s theory of consent, see: A. John Simmons, \textit{On the Edge of Anarchy} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 197-218.

\textsuperscript{9} Locke, 282.
The General Will as Response to Hobbes and Locke

It is in response to the inadequacies of the contractualism of Hobbes and Locke that Rousseau presents his idea of the General Will. Whereas Hobbes and Locke had sought to find an appropriate balance between freedom and authority, Rousseau rejects the entire premise that a compromise between freedom and authority is legitimate. Thus the goal of The Social Contract is,

Find a form of association which defends and protects with all common forces the person and goods of each associate, and by means of which each one, while uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before.10

Freedom is inalienable and inviolable. No social agreement can legitimately do away with freedom. Therefore, in a legitimate society freedom remains unalienated and the individual can be understood to obey his own will when he serves the state. Rousseau calls the construction by which this is possible the General Will. Legitimate sovereignty, according to Rousseau, is simply “the exercise of the general will.”11

Rousseau first describes the General Will as “…the total alienation of each associate, together with all of his rights, to the entire community.”12 There are no reservations on the alienation: all of the individuals in the community give themselves equally and completely. But Rousseau qualifies this radical statement: “in giving himself to all, each person gives himself to no one.”13 In other words,

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11 Ibid., 153.
12 Ibid., 148.
13 Ibid., 148.
each person does not give himself to any other individual. When he gives himself to all, he is giving himself to an entity, the sovereign, which he is as much a part of as any other citizen.

If, therefore, one eliminates from the social compact whatever is not essential to it, one will find that it is reducible to the following terms. *Each of us places his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and as one we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.*

Sovereignty, then, according to Rousseau, is simply “the exercise of the general will.” As nothing more than the exercise of the *General Will*, it cannot be alienated or represented. The argument for this is rather simple: the *General Will* cannot be represented by an individual since there is no way that the will of this individual representative will always completely align with the *General Will* after the representative’s selection. Thus the population, in choosing a representative, is actually choosing to obey the will of their representative. By making such a promise, it makes the representative its master, and “the very moment there is a master, there is no longer a sovereign, and thenceforward the body politic is destroyed.”

As well as being inalienable, sovereignty is indivisible. A single will cannot be divided against itself, or else it would cease to be a singularity. The analogy that

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Rousseau uses to demonstrate the indivisibility of the sovereign is the organic body. For Rousseau, the sovereign is analogous to such a body; to think that the will is divisible is as absurd as thinking of each function of the human body, such as sight and smell, as representing a disparate body, removable from the whole. Those who think of the powers of the sovereign as divisible “turn the sovereign into a fantastic being made out of interconnected pieces.”

**Hints of Totalitarianism in the General Will**

The *General Will*, as indestructible and inalienable, seems to be an ominously totalitarian idea. If, after all, every individual is nothing but a limb or a part of the body that is the sovereign, then there is no sense in which the individual has rights against the sovereign, or can limit the authority of the sovereign:

> Just as nature gives each man an absolute power over all his members, the social compact gives the body politic an absolute power over all its members…

It is not readily apparent in what sense an “individual” can even be thought of as existing at all within the *General Will*. The sovereign, composed through the *General Will*, cannot, by definition, desire anything contrary to the wills of the citizens. If the *General Will* wishes for something, then the individual citizen must also wish for the same thing. An individual may think that what the *General Will* dictates is not in his own interest but then the individual is wrong about what he desires:

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18 *Social Contract*, 154. It is clear what Rousseau intends by making the sovereign indivisible. This is an oblique reference to the monarchies of Europe that ruled alongside parliaments on the basis of a division of authority. If there can be no division of sovereignty, and sovereignty comes from the *General Will*, then there is no way in which one can include a monarch as even a piece of the sovereign authority.

19 *Social Contract*, 156.
When therefore, the opinion contrary to mine prevails, this proves merely that I was in error, and that what I took to be the general will was not so. If my private opinion had prevailed, I would have done something other than what I had wanted. In that case I would not have been free.\textsuperscript{20}

Thus, if an individual resists the General Will, he is resisting his own will even though he does not know it. It is the prerogative of the sovereign then to force the individual to conform to the General Will. It is here that Rousseau delivers one of his most notorious lines which is the principal basis for the charge that he is a despotic totalitarian, "This means merely that he will be forced to be free."\textsuperscript{21}

It seems that in at least some sense, Rousseau’s Social Contract describes a totalitarian sovereignty. The General Will is certainly all-encompassing, and Rousseau has defined freedom in such a way that one can be “forced to be free.” For these reasons Isaiah Berlin and Bertrand Russell describe Rousseau as an enemy of liberty and a forerunner of the despotically totalitarian regimes of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.

Berlin submits that while Hobbes and Locke understood liberty in a negative sense, i.e. not being dominated by others or hindered in pursuit of what one wants, Rousseau understood liberty as what Berlin calls “positive liberty.” Positive liberty is mastery over oneself in order to achieve certain ends that are good by nature.\textsuperscript{22} Implicit in the idea of positive liberty is the idea that there are certain universal goods that people ought to attain. Berlin believes that this idea inevitably leads to

\textsuperscript{20} Social Contract, 206.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 150.

the abuses of oppressive and dictatorial governments, all of which have always believed that they are doing what is best for the people even if the people cannot recognize it and cannot be trusted with freedom. Berlin points out that the General Will can only express the true wishes of everyone if everyone can only have a single true wish. What one man wants cannot truly conflict with what another man wants, as far as the common good is concerned, since there cannot be a simultaneous pluralism of truths. Thus, if there is disagreement between citizens, one of them, at least, does not know what his true wish is and thus is made free when forced to do what he objects to. Freedom is self-mastery, which one only exercises when perceiving the correct rational end. Berlin summarizes:

To force a man to be free is to force him to behave in a rational manner. A man is free who gets what he wants; what he wants is a rational end. If he does not want a rational end, he does not truly want; if he does not want a rational end, what he wants is not true freedom, but false freedom.  

This idea that what one truly wants may be unknown to oneself is, in Berlin’s opinion, the aspect of Rousseau’s thought that is most pernicious. There is a single good end in pursuit of which all of us must devote ourselves unreservedly and against which we have no rights, and this good may not be apparent to the individual, in which case he should be forced to act in accord with it. Berlin writes that this is “a doctrine which leads to genuine servitude,” and that because of it Rousseau is “…one of the most sinister and most formidable enemies of human liberty in the whole history of modern thought.”


24 Ibid., 47; 49.
“Totalitarianism,” as opposed to “despotism”

Taken independent of the proper context in which Rousseau establishes the right of the sovereign to “force” the citizens to be “free,” Berlin’s interpretation seems to make sense. But when one considers what it means to be “oppressed,” and the definitively limited scope of the General Will, it becomes clear that Berlin’s accusation against Rousseau is in error. While it is true that Rousseau describes a state that is in some sense totalitarian, I would argue that it is limited in such a way that it cannot logically be extended to legitimize Communist or Fascist style dictatorships. While one may make the historical argument that such dictators took inspiration from Rousseau, one cannot then say that Rousseau advocates anything approaching despotism. Any idea can be perverted or misused. A man may be murdered with an ice pick, but it does not follow that an ice pick is an evil weapon designed for murder. To interpret Rousseau as despotic is a gross caricature.

The difference between the two terms totalitarian and despotic is often clouded by misuse. By despotic I mean an oppressive government that governs for its own interest, not for the interest of the governed. By totalitarian I mean all-encompassing, unlimited, and unchallengeable, under the authority of which all else is subsumed. Thus, while one can admit a degree of totalitarianism in Rousseau’s thought, despotism is incompatible with it. There is no logical extension from the totalitarianism of Rousseau’s General Will to the justification of a despotic government.

Government as Distinct from Sovereignty

One must examine Rousseau’s distinction between “government” and “sovereignty” to see how undespotic his teaching is. Rousseau draws a sharp
distinction between “sovereignty” on the one hand, and “government” on the other. The “sovereign” is the result of the social contract and exists only through expression of the General Will. But the General Will by definition can only decide issues that affect all of the citizens equally, and thus cannot speak to any specific issue, or state of affairs, or any public policy.\(^{25}\)

Public policy and the work of government require that the people assemble, and take votes which express the General Will respecting to the type of government they want, or any equally broad and universal questions concerning which the sovereign may speak.\(^{26}\) The rulers (if one can consider such servants to be rulers) that constitute the government are not validated through a contract. There is no mutual obligation between the people and their governors. The formation of government is “absolutely nothing but a commission, an employment….\(^{27}\)

As employees, the rulers or the government can be removed, or fired, as it were, whenever the General Will of the population desires. If one understands the ruler as merely an agent or employee who rules not through a mutual contract of obligation but only through the desire of the sovereign people, then there can be no despot over the people as a whole. The government may take the form of an individual ruler but he has no right whatsoever of coercion over the people and he has no rights against the sovereign by force of some mutually binding contract. If he acts in violation of the General Will, he, by every right, may be removed. The will


\(^{26}\) It is important to keep in mind that what type of nation, what kind of constitution, whether or not there will be income taxes etc., are as specific as the General Will can be.

\(^{27}\) Social Contract, 174.
of the governing magistrate is insignificant.\textsuperscript{28}

Although Rousseau admits of no theoretical limit to the authority of the sovereign, the distinction between the authority of the sovereign and the proper sphere of government does serve to balance power and keep both the power of the government and the actions of the people under control. While the government does almost everything, it is only a servant with no authority; while the sovereign has total authority, it can effectively do very little because it does not govern.

**Non-oppressive Aspects of the General Will**

In addition to not being able to speak to specific issues of governance, the General Will also can only be expressed by the people in very particular and free circumstances. The people must have the freedom to express the General Will, everyone must vote; all opinions must be fairly weighed. The sovereign can act only when the people are allowed to assemble and express their opinion.\textsuperscript{29} Only then can the General Will be known. For all of the above reasons it is implausible to think that the General Will is an excuse for despotic or dictatorial rule over the people. No ruler can legitimately speak for the General Will and use it as a pretext to oppress the people.

What is to prevent a freely associating and fully democratic sovereign from willing things that oppress those in the minority who disagree? Although they must be allowed to vote and express their opinions, the minority can be coerced into conformity with the General Will after a vote is taken, yet this merely “forces” them

\textsuperscript{28} The status of the government as merely an employee is a distinct difference between Rousseau and preceding social contract thinkers like Locke. According to Locke, the sovereign governs according to a “trust” between it and the people. This implies that unless it violates the trust, the sovereign has the moral authority to maintain control over the populace.

\textsuperscript{29} *Social Contract*, 195.
to be “free.” We come back to Berlin's criticisms.

First, Berlin greatly exaggerates the perniciousness of the idea that people might not be aware of what they truly want. This idea is, to some extent, in use in liberal societies everywhere. We have only to consider those who believe they would like to take addictive and life-threatening drugs. They are forcibly prevented by law from taking drugs as they wish, under the assumption that taking such drugs does not represent their best interest and the law knows their interest in this regard better than the individual does. One cannot legitimately make the decision to become a cocaine addict and society is in a position to prevent such illegitimate decisions. Is such a doctrine necessarily oppressive? It certainly does not have to lead to despotic fascist governments dictating every choice that everyone makes.

Furthermore, the distinction between private and public interest is crucial here. It is not a simple dichotomy. Hilail Gildin illustrates this distinction with the example of air pollution. Although as an individual I may not want to have to install an air filter or contribute my own money to making the air cleaner, I may at the same time desire clean air. I may not want to pay anything because I understand that whether or not I personally contribute makes no difference on the public scale but it does make a difference to my paycheck, so I may see it as in my interest not to pay for an air filter. If I am forced in the end to contribute to cleaning the air the same way everyone else is, it is not really fair to say that I am being oppressed.\(^{30}\) Given that there are certain things, like clean air, that are in the common interest, and given that the common interest is always at least a part of one’s private interest, if the *General Will* works towards the common interest in a sense it is always working

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towards the individual’s.

The basic theoretical limit to the authority of the *General Will* that prevents it from leading to oppressiveness or despotism is the fact that it must not only consider the opinions of each citizen equally, but that the legislation must affect each and every citizen equally. Nothing that persecutes any particular group is an expression of the *General Will*, by its very definition. No individual can draw personal benefit from anything that harms another, and any benefit that an individual can obtain must be equally available to every other citizen. It is difficult to imagine oppression arising from a condition where everyone is considered equal under the law and allowed to express their opinions freely and regularly.

I would suggest that, as ominous as the idea of being “forced to be free” sounds, given the context of Rousseau’s clear love of egalitarianism and liberty, it should be taken as meaning roughly the following: given that all of the liberty we enjoy as citizens is contingent on the laws, and that the laws must be enforced in order to have effect, all liberty we can have in political society depends on the force of the laws. Without the force of law, each citizen is oppressed by basic needs and desires and can no longer be considered free. In an anarchic state of affairs, no one would consider themselves free for this reason. By being “forced to be free,” then, Rousseau effectively means only that a citizen will be forced to comply with the laws through which each and every citizen can enjoy freedom.31

Rousseau understands that any government may become abusive of its power and rule illegitimately. The majority may become oppressive of the minority. But the majority is still the only place in which one can hope to find the *General Will*

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expressed. “This presupposes, it is true, that all the characteristics of the general will are still in the majority. When they cease to be, there is no longer any liberty regardless of the side one takes.”\textsuperscript{32} For all the totalitarian imagery, if one closely examines the practical workings of a Rousseauian system, one sees it is essentially a moderate and restrained liberal democracy as is commonly understood.

The Best Form of Government and Rousseau’s Practical Moderation

The fundamental moderation of Rousseau’s political system is made clearer by the types of government that Rousseau believes to be legitimate. The government he advocates is not particularly radical. In practical terms, it could be very similar to existing governments, with some adjustments. Rousseau endorses elective aristocracy as the best form of government which, given his distinction between government and sovereignty, does not contradict his idea of popular sovereignty. He flatly states that rule by direct democratic government is neither good nor effective.\textsuperscript{33} An aristocracy of wise men elected by the popular sovereign as its agent is “the best and most natural order” of government.\textsuperscript{34} In order to ensure that the popular sovereign is always able to express itself, Rousseau holds that there must be periodic assemblies of the people that cannot be abolished or prorogued by the government under any circumstances.\textsuperscript{35}

Much has been made of Rousseau’s rejection of “representatives,” and hence representative democracy. Rousseau is often considered a radical democrat for his

\textsuperscript{32} Social Contract, 206.

\textsuperscript{33} Social Contract, 179-180.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 182.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 196.
emphasis on the direct assemblage of the populace. But this rejection of “representation” is not what it is often taken to be. It is largely bark, with little bite. Rousseau rejects the idea that the members of the government should be perceived as possessing the authority of the sovereign. Thus he speaks of the government as the agent of the sovereign rather than its representative. But one could consider British parliamentary government to be legitimate government according to Rousseau’s model so long as the parliament is perceived as subservient to the popular sovereignty which exists independently of the government. The members of parliament need only act as employees, rather than representatives, while doing much the same things that existing parliaments do already. Rousseau then rejects only the idea, a perception of representative democracy, but does not reject the actual composition of such a government. Indeed, I would posit that his notion of “elective aristocracy” is in effect almost exactly a representative democracy as is commonly understood, with the addition of forums for expression of popular opinion.

What Motivates this Totalitarian Imagery?

The question in reading Rousseau then shifts to motive. What motivates Rousseau’s ominously totalitarian description of the General Will if, in the end, it is by and large a liberal and egalitarian system that he is describing? If he is not contributing towards a new totalitarian politics, then what does this accomplish? Why does Rousseau devote such energies to expounding this largely symbolic distinction between “agents” of the sovereign on the one hand, and “representatives” on the other?

36 Kevin Inston, Rousseau and Radical Democracy (New York, Continuum International, 2010).
I argue that Rousseau’s totalitarian imagery indicates that his intent throughout the *Social Contract* is primarily symbolic. Rousseau is not striving to effect radical change to the actual structure of government. He is striving to effect radical change in how the citizens view society and themselves. The idea of a totalitarian, or all-encompassing, sovereign is an almost entirely symbolic gesture, but one capable of inspiring civic virtue. This leads us to what I believe to be the crux of Rousseau’s idea of the *General Will*. The totalitarian nature of the popular sovereign is a matter of perception — if the citizenry believes in the *General Will* as an all-encompassing force, then it exists for them, and they can understand themselves to be free in a way that is impossible without this perception.

**Civic Virtue as Political Necessity;**

**The General Will as an Inspiration to Virtue**

The totalitarianism of the *General Will* is understandable if one considers that, as Rousseau sees it, civic virtue is absolutely essential for politics. Some readers of Rousseau old that Rousseau does not believe that the individual citizen should vote with the intention of virtuously promoting the common interest, and that it is sufficient that each considers his private interest.\(^{37}\) In particular, these readers point to passage where Rousseau writes “The quality of right and the notion of justice [the *General Will*] produces are derived from the preference each man gives for himself.”\(^{38}\) But this passage just illustrates the extent to which the citizen considers himself as a part of the common interest and general will. While it may be true that citizens are not expected to be selflessly virtuous, they still must consider the


\(^{38}\) *Social Contract*, 157.
common good as an inseparable component of their own good.

Furthermore, Rousseau states the need for civic virtue explicitly in his *Discourse on Political Economy*. There he writes that “Virtue is merely this conformity of the private to the general will.”

A state without civic virtue is doomed, it will collapse under the weight of corruption and greed, or else it will be kept functional only by the terror of a tyrant. Love of country provides the only antidote, and it is potent indeed, “joining together the force of self-love and all the beauty of virtue…”

In his *Discourse on Political Economy* Rousseau states explicitly that citizens must be educated in virtue so that they are able to perceive what the General Will is. I submit that the reverse is also true. I would posit that Rousseau formulates the General Will in such a way as to inspire civic virtue in its pursuit. If one believes that the General Will exists, even if one cannot yet perceive it, then one will act as a good citizen, confident that in so doing one is serving one’s interests either directly or indirectly. In order to grasp the true thrust of Rousseau’s purpose, one must consider the doctrine of the General Will as an educative lesson for the citizens to take to heart rather than a political manifesto. It is a doctrine designed to achieve civic virtue in those who believe it.


40 *Political Economy*, 118-120.

41 *Political Economy*, 120.

42 “The first and most important maxim of legitimate or popular government, that is to say, of a government that has the good of the populace for its object, is, therefore, as I have said, to follow the general will in all things. But to follow the general will one must know it, and above all, properly distinguish it from the private will, beginning with oneself: a distinction that is always most difficult to make, and only the most sublime virtue is capable of shedding enough light on it.” (*Discourse on Political Economy*, 116)
Rousseau makes the case for civic virtue by entirely rejecting Locke’s idea of a contract of competitors, both in its assumptions about the origins of social contract and about the nature of the resulting sovereign. Rousseau rejects the idea that society arises from the natural enmity of men towards one another. For Rousseau, Man in nature is naturally friendly and uncompetitive. All of the enmity and competition between human beings is nothing more than the results of the false social constructs that we see all around us. In entering into a legitimate civil society, then, an individual is not declaring a truce with enemies but joining together with natural friends to create the sovereign. By doing this, the individual loses certain types of natural liberties but gains others, such as civil liberty and moral liberty. Through these new liberties,

His faculties are exercised and developed, his ideas are broadened, his feelings are ennobled, his entire soul is elevated to such a height that, if the abuse of this new condition did not often lower the status to beneath the level he left, he ought constantly to bless the happy moment that pulled him away from it forever and which transformed him from a stupid, limited animal into an intelligent being and a man.\textsuperscript{43}

Rousseau describes a great transformation of the individual when he enters a legitimate society.\textsuperscript{44} Because of this transformative effect of a legitimate society on the very nature of Man, a citizen must think of his existence as tied to the existence of the sovereign. He is not the same being that he was in the state of nature. Rather than a deal with enemies to better enjoy liberties that he possessed already, the

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Social Contract}, 151.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 150.
sovereign represents a contract with others through which a citizen is transformed into a new being with new previously inaccessible possibilities of liberty. Since these possibilities of liberty cannot exist independent of society, in defending the society one is defending one’s liberties and working to one’s advantage. Thus the state can legitimately demand duty, devotion and civic virtue, with all of their benefits. This is why Rousseau describes the General Will at one point as combining all the advantages of both “duty and interest.”

**Totalitarianism as Incentive for Civic Virtue**

It is in order to motivate belief in the transformative force of the General Will through which the individual becomes a different type of being, capable of entirely new liberties, that Rousseau gives the sovereign an all-encompassing, or “totalitarian,” image. Rousseau describes freedom as following one’s will. In following the General Will we follow our own will, thus we remain free. If one is to think of oneself as following one’s own will, then one must equate the sovereign’s will with one’s own. For this one cannot think in terms of limitations and civil rights. If the General Will were something against which the individual had rights, then the individual would not perceive the General Will as himself, as he would never think of restricting himself with rights. Granting a limitation on the General Will is to grant a possible conflict between the General Will and the individual’s interest. Furthermore, if the General Will could be divided, then there would be no way the individual citizen could view the entire sovereignty as a single will comprising his and the other citizens’ collected wills. If the General Will were not

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46 *Social Contract*, 150. The exact words he uses are “obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself….***
always the ultimate authority over the government, then the citizen would not always that the actions of the state were reflective of his own will and thus his own interest.\(^{47}\)

In short, if the General Will is thought of as totalitarian or all-encompassing, it is much easier to justify duty to society and to equate self-interest with the common good. Rousseau makes the General Will totalitarian in order to make it possible for citizens to perceive of the sovereign as commanding their loyalty.

**The General Will as a Matter of Perception**

The General Will, then, is totalitarian because it is concerned with creating a perception of an ideal. It is not intended to justify a despotic regime or a totalitarian government. It is, as Rousseau wrote, the “moral” cause of government, not the “physical.”\(^{48}\) The best way to view Rousseau’s totalitarian pronouncements then is as truisms of perception: the General Will always does what is best for the citizens because the General Will is defined as their best interest. If it were to do otherwise, it would not be the General Will. The citizens have no rights against the General Will because it is not something against which rights could be invoked. It is the source of rights. If one had need of rights against it, it could not be the General Will. Thus while it is true that the citizens have no rights or recourse from the General Will, this is not because the General Will is an overbearing force from which citizens have no recourse; rather, if citizens perceived the sovereign as a force from which they needed recourse, then it would no longer be the General Will.

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\(^{47}\) The constant existence of the popular sovereign is a subtle but very important distinction between Rousseau and Locke. Locke writes that a community does exist as separate from the government, but only on those occasions when the government ceases to exist. During all periods of actual governance, there is not extant community as distinct from the government.

\(^{48}\) *Social Contract*, 173.
Perception then is key to understanding the General Will. The General Will should be thought of as the way citizens should perceive their relation to society. The citizen must believe that without the correct perception of the state and the sovereign, they are not legitimate. For Rousseau, perception does create reality to a large extent. If people believe that the General Will exists, then it does exist:

So long as several men together consider themselves to be a single body, they have but a single will, which is concerned with their common preservation and general well-being.49

In Letters from the Mountain, Rousseau writes that “A people is free, whatever form its government takes, when it sees in him who governs not a man but the organ of the law.”50 Here as well Rousseau implies that perception is what determines whether or not one is free. The chains of a society may be irremovable but if we can perceive these chains to be of our own volition, then we make ourselves free in some sense.

Conclusion

In The Social Contract Rousseau aims to explain how citizens may consider themselves free while still obligated by duty and a type of self-interest to act virtuously. The General Will can exist only if it is thought to exist and Rousseau’s task is to show how a citizen can perceive it as existing. As I have shown, in order to perceive the sovereign as obligating virtue, one must understand the General Will as totalitarian, in the sense of being all-encompassing. If the General Will is less than

49 Social Contract, 203.

totalitarian, then the case for civic devotion is weakened as society is nothing more than a contract among competitors. Yet this totalitarianism of the sovereign does not in any way signify despotic government. There is no way to justify despotism on the basis of the all-encompassing qualities of the General Will. Totalitarianism is a matter of perception and based on a moral argument. It is a way of showing both how a citizen should view society and the difficulties inherent in such a view. Rousseau's totalitarianism is not a justification of despotic or oppressive government; it is against such oppression, more than anything else, that Rousseau constantly strives. Rousseau is consistently a moderately liberal advocate of restrained government and the inviolability of liberty as the only true foundations of society. So I claim that if one understands the General Will to be an educative tool of perception, then the entire debate over whether Rousseau is a totalitarian or a liberal is shown to be off the mark.\(^\text{51}\) He is certainly a liberal, and as such a totalitarian as well. In practical politics, he is a liberal; in his ideals of civic-mindedness, he preaches totalitarianism. The thrust of the totalitarianism of the General Will is towards a virtuous citizenry of free men. Those who ask whether Rousseau is a totalitarian or a liberal are thus asking the wrong question — he is both.

Bibliography


\(^{51}\) John W. Chapman, Rousseau: Totalitarian or Liberal? (New York: AMS Press, 1968). Chapman does not distinguish between despotism and totalitarianism, and moral perception versus the practically applied spheres of society and thus, although he correctly shows Rousseau not to be despotic, he makes the error of assuming that therefore Rousseau is not totalitarian.