

Political Philosophy Lecture 4—Rousseau and the general will

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) was a Genevan-born writer, autobiographer, composer, musical theorist, educationalist, novelist and, for our purposes most importantly, a political philosopher. One way to understand Rousseau's thinking in political philosophy is to see him as responding to problems posed by his predecessors as social contract theorists: Hobbes and Locke. Locke rejects Hobbes's absolutism in the name of freedom, but Rousseau, in his *Discourse on Inequality* argued that a Lockean state, by giving inequalities among individuals the backing of law, also threatened freedom by fostering relations of dependence among individuals.

1 Moral psychology and *amour propre*

Rousseau argues that the threats to our freedom in modern societies are of two sorts – internal and external. On the one hand of course tyrannical government will threaten freedom. But more insidious is the fact that in order both to satisfy our material wants and to feel assured in our need to have others grant us due moral recognition we enter into relations with others that are subversive of our autonomy. Rousseau's emphasis on our need for such recognition (on what he calls our *amour propre*) is a striking feature of his thought generally.

2 The fundamental problem of the *Social Contract*

One option for Rousseauian man might be thought to be solitude. But Rousseau rejects this as a practical possibility. At this point in our history we have to live together in society.

The problem is to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before. (SC 1.6)

3 The general will as solution

Rousseau argues that individual freedom will be assured in a society governed according to the general will. But what is the general will? Historically, there have been two main interpretive tracks: either the general will is understood as the collective decision of the corporate body (a democratic reading) or as a standard to which that decision must conform (a realist reading). Both of these interpretations face formidable textual obstacles.

The general will is not just a property of the state as a whole but also a property of each individual citizen within it. Each of us naturally pursues our own good via our individual will. Insofar as we identify as citizens of the state we have, as a component of that individual will, a general will looking to the common good of citizens generally. Is it in my best interests to subordinate my individual will to the general will?

4 The general will and individual freedom

To be as solution to the “fundamental problem” the general will has to leave each person as free as they were before. But since the individual's pursuit of their good will be constrained by the general will in the form of law, this looks implausible. In one notorious passage, Rousseau argues:

In order then that the social compact may not be an empty formula, it tacitly includes the undertaking, which alone can give force to the rest, that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free ... (SC 1.7)

But the continuation of the passage gives a clue to Rousseau's answer: "... for this is the condition which, by giving each citizen to his country, secures him against all personal dependence."

Rousseau's thought is that the subjection of the individual to laws which he himself has willed is *under conditions of civil association* the best environment for individuals to pursue their goals. Yes, freedom is limited, but for the sake of freedom. One way of thinking about the relationship between the general will and the will of individuals is to look at our old friend the prisoners' dilemma: where we have to interact, the selfish pursuit of individual advantage leaves us worse off than if we can agree to (and stick to) rules of co-operation.

5 Why the general will is non-oppressive (according to Rousseau)

Why is it that the general will is always in the right, and that all continually will the happiness of each one, unless it is because there is not a man who does not think of "each" as meaning him, and consider himself in voting for all? This proves that equality of rights and the idea of justice which such equality creates originate in the preference each man gives to himself, and accordingly in the very nature of man. (SC 2.4)

6 Do the people always will the general will?

Unfortunately not! Famously, in SC 2.3 Rousseau distinguished between the "will of all" and the general will and tells us that the people don't always decide in a way that coincides with the common good. Rousseau attributes such failures mainly to factors such as faction (social inequality), and a low sense of collective membership. The lawgiver, by designing good social institutions and instilling a sense of collective purpose and virtue is meant to help overcome this.

7 What about minorities?

Rousseau's claim that individuals legislating and being governed according to the general will thereby retain their freedom is in tension with the fact of majorities and minorities in the assembly. Aren't those who are outvoted constrained by a will that is not their own? Not according to Rousseau! Everyone wills the general will (whatever it is) but can be mistaken about its content. Minorities in following the majority decision are thereby getting what they (really) want!

8 Impact and influence

The tensions in Rousseau's account mean that he has been both vaunted as a defender of freedom and democracy and attacked as a precursor of totalitarianism and terror. His philosophical influence, though, can be seen in Kant's categorical imperative and in Rawls's theory of justice to which we turn next week.

Reading

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, books 1 and 2.

Christopher Bertram, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and The Social Contract*, chs. 5 and 6.

Sreenivasan, Gopal, "What is the General Will?", *Philosophical Review* 109:4 (2000).

Neuhouser, Frederick, "Freedom, Dependence and the General Will", *Philosophical Review* 102:3 (1993).

Andrew Levine, *Engaging Political Philosophy*, ch. 2