

Rousseau, the Social Contract and the General Will

“Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains. There are some who may believe themselves masters of others and are no less enslaved than they. How has this change come about? I do not know. How can it be made legitimate? That is the question which I believe I can resolve.” *The Social Contract, Book 1.*

The Fundamental Problem

The problem is to find a form of association which will defend and protect, with the whole of its joint strength, the person and property of each associate, and under which each of them, uniting himself with all, will obey himself alone, and remain as free as before. (P54-55)

No. 1 This passage from the state of nature to the civil state produces in man a very remarkable change, replacing instinct by justice in his behaviour, and conferring on his actions the moral quality that they had lacked before. It is only now, as the voice of duty succeeds to physical impulse and right to appetite, that man, who had previously thought of nothing but himself, is compelled to act on other principles, and to consult his reason before he attends to his inclinations. (P59)

No. 2 What man loses by the social contract is his natural freedom and an unlimited right to anything by which he is tempted and can obtain; what he gains is civil freedom and the right of property over everything that he possesses. (P59)

No. 3 Nothing is truly renounced by private individuals under the social contract; but instead their situation becomes preferable . . . to what it was before. Instead of abandoning anything they have simply made a beneficial transfer, exchanging an uncertain and precarious mode of existence for a better and more secure one, natural independence for liberty, the power of hurting others for their own safety, and reliance on their own strength, which others might overcome, for a position of right that social unity makes invincible. (P70)

No. 4 . . . the act of association involves a reciprocal commitment between public and private persons; each individual enters on a contract with himself, so to speak, and becomes bound in a double capacity, namely, towards other individuals inasmuch as he is a member of the sovereign, and towards the sovereign inasmuch as he is a member of the state. (P56-57)

No. 5 . . . each individual can have, as a man, a personal will that is contrary or dissimilar to the general will that he has as a citizen. His personal interest can speak to him quite differently from the common interest: his mode of existence, absolute and independent, can make him regard what he owes to the common cause as a gratuitous contribution, the loss of which will be less onerous to others than its payment is for him. (P58)

No. 6 ... the social pact . . . contains an implicit obligation which alone can give force to the others, that if anyone refuses to obey the general will he will be compelled to do so by the whole body; which means nothing else than that he will be forced to be free; for such is the condition which, giving each citizen to his country; guarantees that he will not depend on any person. (P58)

No. 7 [Moral liberty is] the only thing that makes man truly master of himself; for to be driven by our appetites alone is slavery, while to obey a law that we have imposed on ourselves is freedom. (P59)

No. 8 There is often a difference between the will of everyone and the general will; the latter is concerned only with the common interest, while the former is concerned with private interests and is the sum total of individual wants; but if you take away from these desires their excesses and insufficiencies, the common element remaining from the different desires is the general will. (P66)

No. 9 If, when properly informed, the people were to come to its decisions without any communication between its members, the general will would always emerge from the large number of small differences, and the decision would always be good. (P66)

No. 10 . . . from public enlightenment comes the union of understanding and will in the social body; the parts are then in precise concordance, which results in the greater strength of the whole. (P75)

No. 11 Why is it that the general will is always in the right, and why is the happiness of each the constant wish of all, unless it is because there is no one who does not apply the word *each* to himself, and is not thinking of himself when he votes for all? (P68)

These quotations were selected by Lorraine Willmott
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Legislative power and forms of administration

No. 12 . . . legislative power belongs to the people, and can belong to it alone. It is easy to see, on the other hand, . . . that executive power cannot belong to the generality of the citizens in their legislative or sovereign capacity, because this power consists only in particular decisions, which fall outside the domain of law, and in consequence outside that of the sovereign, every act of which can only be a law. (P91)

No. 13 Government . . . is only a function or employment, in which the agents of the sovereign exercise the power which it has deposited with them, and which it may limit, modify, or take back when it pleases . . . (P92)

No. 14 Under an ideal legislation, the individual or particular will should count for nothing, the corporate will pertaining to the government for very little, and consequently the general or sovereign will should always dominate, and be the rule that uniquely determines the others. (P97)

No. 15 . . . when each citizen is nothing and can do nothing except through the others, and when the strength given by the whole is equal or superior to the natural strength of all the individuals together, it may be said that legislation has reached the nearest point to perfection that it can. (P77)

No. 16 If the term is taken in its strict sense, true democracy has never existed and never will. It is against the natural order that the majority should govern and the minority be governed. It is impossible to imagine the people permanently in session in order to deal with public affairs, and it is easy to see that it could not set up commissions for the purpose without the form of administration being altered. (P101)

No. 17 In a word, the best and most natural order of things is that the wisest should govern the multitude, so long as it is certain that they will govern it for its advantage and not for theirs. (P103)

No. 18 Sovereignty cannot be represented, for the same reason that it cannot be transferred; it consists essentially in the general will, and the will cannot be represented; it is itself or it is something else; there is no other possibility. . . . Any law that the people in person has not ratified is void; it is not the law. (P127)

No. 19 The people of England believes itself to be free; it is quite wrong; it is free only during the elections of Members of Parliament. Once they are elected, the people is enslaved, it is nothing. Seeing the use it makes of liberty during its brief moments of possession, it deserves to lose it. (P127)

Voting and the General Will

No. 20 . . . a majority vote is always binding on all the others; that is a direct consequence of the contract. But the question is how a man can be free and forced to conform to the will of others than himself. How can those who are in opposition be free and subject to laws to which they have not consented? (P137)

No. 21 My reply is that the question is wrongly put. The citizen consents to every law, even those that are passed against his opposition, and even those which punish him when he dares to violate one of them. The constant will of all the citizens of the state is the general will: it is through the general will that they are citizens and have freedom. (P137-8)

No. 22 When a law is proposed in the assembly of the people, what they are asked is not precisely whether they accept or reject the proposal, but whether it is or is not in conformity with the general will, which is their will; everyone, by voting, gives his opinion on the question; and counting the votes makes the general will manifest. (P138)

No. 23 When an opinion contrary to mine prevails, therefore, it proves only that I had been mistaken, and that the general will was not what I had believed it to be. If my particular will had prevailed, I should have done otherwise than I wished; and then I should not have been free. (P138)

Page number references relate to

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The Social Contract

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