

In Defence of Rousseau's 'General Will'

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Abstract

Rousseau's theory of general will has been confronted with a lot of criticism from different political ideals such as feminism, scientific socialism of Marx and utilitarianism, etc. The idea of general will has also been a subject of disapproval for advocating only a theoretical edifice. These onslaught interpretations nevertheless provide an opportunity to elucidate what general will is not. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to understand the idea of the general will and more importantly in what possible sense, it must not be understood.

Keywords

Will of all, natural right, totalitarian democracy and moral significance of general will

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Introduction

Rousseau's political progeny was as varied as his political ancestry. His Contract Philosophy, particularly his theory of general will, provides nourishment at once for absolutism, democracy and socialism. Rousseau has been a distinguished contract philosopher than his predecessors, Hobbes and Locke. Hobbesian account of contract justifies all forms of government e.g. monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy, it is because at the time of contract individuals surrender their rights to one man or one assembly or an organism. However, Locke's contract implies the rule of the majority. This is because, he makes 'consent' the basis of government and authority. And that consent means the consent of the majority. Thus, the majority has the right to act for the whole community. In relation to both of them, Rousseau's model of contract is to a great extent democratic than his predecessors. His theory of general will removes the dangers inherent in the idea of consent. General Will provides for continual consent of the individual and removes the danger of majority tyranny. Besides the fact that his theory of general will leads to a form of direct democracy, it is also true that his theory has often been decried as too abstract and metaphysical. However, the present study moves forward with Rousseau's contract philosophy in general and the theory of general will in particular.

The theory of 'General will' by Rousseau is considered to be the heart of his whole political philosophy. The significance of the idea lies in the very basis of democracy which is neither the force of majority nor even passive consent but active and selfless will. In his attempt to demonstrate all these, Rousseau has become the subject of both appreciation and disapproval in modern days. There are many different perspectives, which are directly or indirectly clustered with his concept of the general will. Political philosophers after the eighteenth century have been focusing on the idea from many angles. For instance, some of them claim that the theory of general will of Rousseau tends to be a collectivist theory that emphasizes the collective rights of a state and demeans individual rights. However, this chapter attempts to illustrate the theory of general will from some of the modern thinkers' elucidation on the overall idea of the general will.

The concept of the general will is believed to be a new political design of Rousseau that was rarely used before him. However, it is worth noting to claim that Rousseau is the first person who coined this idea with a much elaboration in the form of moral and political shape. Hence the history of the concept is not the very first to be used in political philosophy by Rousseau. Thus, the concept may be secondary to him but the meaning is no doubt amended. Patrick Riley considers the idea as having theological significance that which was used before Rousseau. Therefore, he says,

“In fact, the notion of general will was a theological one and referred to the kind of will that God (supposedly) had in deciding who would be granted grace sufficient for salvation and who would be consigned to hell”. (Patrick Riley: 1978, p.486) So, the will of the divine was taken to be universal which decides human beings' fortune. There may be many interpretations on the idea of general will at that time which were dominated by Christian philosophy. However, it is unambiguous that Rousseau's idea is very much distinct to them because of the later claims about the civility of a state.

The problem which was conveyed earlier by Rousseau that a corrupt society is neither desirable nor politically right is possibly solved by the civil order system in general. And that political society centers around the theory of general will in particular. By the free act of those who enter into the pact, all their powers and rights are resigned to the community and their respective wills are superseded by the general will. The central idea is no doubt against natural right tradition. However, the concept is being appraised in many different meanings which are sometimes considered as metaphysical because of its abstract nature, sometimes as mere psychological. Before attempting to interpret all these, it is necessary to discern the idea and what it signifies.

General Will vs. Will of All

It is commonly believed that the term 'general' here identifies with 'all'. The incomprehension between these two terms creates the problem. However, Rousseau clearly distinguishes the general will from the will of all. Therefore Rousseau says, “There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will, the latter considers only the common interest, while the former takes private interest into account, and is no more than a sum of particular wills, but take away from these same wills the pluses and minuses that cancel one another and the general will remains as the sum of the differences”. (D.R. Bhandari: 1970, p.373) Thus, the will of all is the aggregate of all the wills of the individuals of the community about their private interest, wills which partly clash and partly coincide mutually. But the general will represents the aggregate of sum of these wills as common to all individuals e.g. those wills which concern interests common to all and therefore coincide with one another. In fact, it is not an aggregation of wills rather it is an association of individuals.

The general will is the organized social will of the community whereas the will of all was a mass of unorganized particular wills which may be selfish or even perverse. The will of all is the sum total, in physical sense, of individual wills whereas the general will was the will of the moral person. They are considered to be moral because rationally they accept civil laws. Another major difference between the

general will and the will of all is about their purpose of being together. The will of all represents the momentary good of individuals, whereas the general will aims at enduring good and integrates the present with the future. The essential difference between the will of all and the general will is one of motivation e.g. service of self or the service of the community. It is not that the general will has a higher reality than the will of all but it has a higher morality because of its higher motivation of service of the community.

The general will is the intention to promote the common interest however, the will of all may have a common interest among themselves but the latter can't be static. The problem with the will of all is that the interest of all may not favor all the time to all. But in the case of the general will, it is because it has a rational desire behind that interest. The will of the association is expressed as a political decision arrived at by the members when they are concerned with any problem that affects them as an association. And these problems and their attempted solutions are held to be in the public or common interest. That interest of all or the common interest followed by the general will is an abstraction, in that there is no one who wants only what is in the interest of all. Because any particular interest of an association may not be the same as the common interest. The primacy of fixing up the common interest is not to watch out for every particular interest but to notice the rationale and political rightness of that interest at the end which will be good for all. However, the public interest or some of the particular interests of the will of all is in no way observed all these.

The will of all is otherwise known as particular wills or an aggregation of wills and the distinction between general and particular wills is very much distinct. Moreover, the very idea of common interest of general will needs more niceties to grasp it properly. It is because there can't be literally any interest of any individual which will be subject to everybody. Each individual's wish or desire can't be at a time same to one purpose. Therefore, building up this common interest is not effortless. There arise many conflicts regarding the desires of individual will. It is natural to human beings to pose their personal interest as public interest if everybody is given chance to formulate that common interest. Yet aspiring at a common interest which is good for all had been possible from Rousseau's point of view. Everyone should be ready to sacrifice their personal interest and in turn, it is common interest that will be enjoyed. This is a loss of individual freedom which did not come to effect in a pre-political state. Since we are settling ourselves into a legitimate political society, we all have to cooperate with it. John C. Hall argues that if we all are agreed to do so then we are in no way losing our freedom. Therefore, he says, "In a legitimate society we

all pursue the common interest because we want to, because it is an interest, we all share. In this sense general will comes from all, to obey it is, therefore, no loss of freedom, since we are only obeying ourselves".(John C. Hall: 1973, p.75-6) So, the theory of general will is based on a mutual agreement that opts for a common interest. The essence of individual freedom does not mess up with the general will because individuals consciously and positively are consented to the contract.

Natural Right Tradition and General Will

Natural right tradition is being defined as rights that are not a craft of man. It is Aristotle who believes that a man is by nature a political animal and for him, human beings are by nature forced to live in a state which is again natural. He finds the origin of the state in the innate desire of an individual to satisfy his economic needs and racial instinct. For the realization of this desire, the male and female on the one hand and the master and slave on the other live together. The difference between male and female and master and slave was natural for Aristotle. However, Rousseau never finds this difference as natural. For him, the common interest of the general will is for everyone as long as he or she is considered to be a citizen e.g. he or she has to be promised to that contract. Thus, his whole contract philosophy is the opposite of that natural right tradition. According to him, man is not sociable by nature.

The difference between natural right which was accessible in a state of nature and civil right is no way to go together. Natural law theorists believe that man is fitted by nature to live in communities and no further explanation is needed. Thus, Hall says,

"There is an important practical difference here. The natural law theorists could accept as reasonable a social system in which the private interests of whole classes of the population were sacrificed for the good of the community as a whole. If, for example, the prosperity of the state required that there should be a slave class, then the individual slaves would be fulfilling their own natures in carrying out their duties as slaves, however little share they had personally in the resulting prosperity. Rousseau can't accept this. According to him, it can never be right to submit to slavery. The only common interest that one ought to promote is the one that is common in that it includes one's own, and the prosperity of the community is of no interest to the slave".(John C. Hall: 1973, p.76)

The above slavery example explains the Aristotelian model of natural law theory which holds a collectivist approach at least than Rousseau because he is often being called as a collectivist due to his contract theory. And the same thing happens to the idea of individual freedom, one who concurs to be a slave with regard to the welfare of the community he or she belongs is repulsive.

The traditional interpretation of the idea differs radically from Rousseau's. This difference is due largely to his conception of man as a being who gradually develops from his primitive origins to a fully conscious and mature participation in social and political life. Rousseau agrees that the natural right is not abandoned in political society however it is given a new and more profound meaning. Thus, it has got a new shape in the name of civil rights. At the primitive level, there is no doubt that nature in the absolute sense has a perfect right to do everything in its power. So, in a state of nature man's natural right is not based on sound reason but on his desire and power. However, Rousseau saw the establishment of a civil association as a decisive step in human history, because it made man capable of understanding morality and justice. There is a transformation of natural independence to moral freedom.

There can be a question of natural right that does political society destroy it. Rousseau solves this question as Ronald Grimsley views that, "It is certainly true that Rousseau often insists that outside society man has no right, but this means legal right, that is, a right supported by the common force of the general will; it does not necessarily follow that natural right as such is thereby abolished". (Ronald Grimsley: 1972, p.64) Rousseau believes that there is a continuity of natural rights which has been a reflection of the civil right. Grimsley here compares Rousseau's view with Locke for whom property is a natural right. To illustrate the above quotation that natural right as such is not thereby abolished, Rousseau takes Locke's stand on the property as a natural right but slightly in a different way. It is believed that properties are given naturally to human beings. However, civil society does not change this situation, but merely adds security to the possession of what man can already claim to possess by natural right. The difference between Locke and Rousseau on the natural right as property is that Rousseau claims that the right of property comes into existence with the social contract. It is true that every man has a natural right to all that is necessary to him but there are certain things which have to go through agreement. To make this explicate Grimsley gives an example that is, "in authorizing the possession of a plot of land the community will observe certain conditions e.g. it must not already be occupied by someone else." (Ronald Grimsley: 1972, p.64) It may be the case that there are some other conditions which have to be fulfilled. The point here is a general will or the civil laws take the responsibility of providing security to that natural right as property. Therefore, it can be assumed that there is a continuity of that natural right tradition, in some sense that is when it is taken property as a natural right, and civil right. Of course, that property as a natural right in a strict sense stays no more natural when it is parasitized by civil laws in a political state because civil laws are not themselves natural. Thus, natural right is not abolished rather it is transformed from a primitive state to a civil state.

Thus, the theory of natural law holds a metaphysical stand having a relationship between human nature and God. Rousseau is somewhere between the natural law tradition and political society; it is because he neither refutes natural law nor accepts it in a complete sense. He rejects Aristotelian acceptance of slavery as being taken as natural and accepts property as a natural right though in a modified shape. More or less, Rousseau's theory of political society in general and general will, in particular, is not devoid of that metaphysical avowed. The theory of general will is often being named as metaphysical for some other reason too that is for the idealist and the totalitarian nature of it.

Totalitarian Democracy and General Will

The contract philosophy of Rousseau has been clustered into many different schools of thought; totalitarianism is one of them. The main idea holds a democratic model of a state that which gives less participation to the citizens in the decision-making process of the government. (Jacob L. Talmon) The general will theory of Rousseau has made many rooms for modern intellectuals to portray it in their own ways. That is perhaps because the form of the general will is made in such a way that it tends to follow other disciplines of thought. Rousseau's intention might not be the way that theory of general will has been evaluated by others. However, the present discussion claims that his theory of general will leads to totalitarianism.

The idea of totalitarianism has been inflicted into the theory of general will by viewing out two realms that are a political society or general will on one hand and individuals on other hand. The assumption is if individuals are coerced to follow the general will and the general will is given the absolute power to decide all the political issues then individuals are ultimately sufferers. The autocracy of general will however leads to totalitarian democracy. Rousseau no way refers to general will in to this mechanism. But his explanation makes the room for some to claim him as a totalitarian. Thus, Talmon has rightly pointed out the fall of individualism in Rousseau's political society. His argument basically shows the demeaning nature of individuals. Therefore, he says,

“It was vital importance to Rousseau to save the ideal of liberty, while insisting on discipline. He was very proud and had a keen sense of the heroic. Rousseau's thinking is thus dominated by a highly fruitful but dangerous ambiguity. On the one hand, the individual is said to obey nothing but his own will; on the other, he is urged to conform to some objective criterion. The contradiction is resolved by the claim that this external criterion is his better, higher, or real self, man's inner voice, as Rousseau calls it. Hence, even if constrained to obey the external standard, man can't complain of being coerced, for in fact he is merely

being made to obey his own true self. He is thus still free; indeed freer than before. For freedom is the triumph of the spirit over natural elemental instinct. It is the acceptance of moral obligation and the disciplining of irrational and selfish urges by reason and duty. The acceptance of the obligation laid down in the Social Contract marks the birth of man's personality and his ignition into freedom. Every exercise of the general will constitutes a reaffirmation of man's freedom." (Subrat Mukherjee and Sushila Ramaswamy: 1998, p.519-20)

This paragraph shows the inner conflict between the general will and individual will. Individuals are considered to be the means for political purposes. They lose their personal freedom in the name of sacrifice for the state as if they are made to do the welfare of the state. The problem with general will is that it was attempted to reconcile between, as Talmon says "individual ethics and political legitimacy". On one hand, the general will is assured as the sole judge for the political legitimacy and on other hand, the particular will of individual is always suspect. He further claims,

"Ultimately the general will is to Rousseau something like a mathematical truth or a platonic ideal. It has an objective existence of its own, whether perceived or not. It has nevertheless to be discovered by the human mind. But having discovered it, the human mind simply can't honestly refuse to accept it. In this way, the general will is at the same time outside us and within us. Man is not invited to express his personal preferences. He is not asked for his approval. He is asked whether the given proposal is or is not in conformity with the general will". (Subrat Mukherjee and Sushila Ramaswamy: 1998, p.520)

Thus, the mechanism of the theory in a way dominates individual rights. There is no scope for the individuals to enhance what their true self wants, this is because in principle Rousseau never opened the door for individuals to enjoy their egoism. Given the idealist status to the general will, Rousseau himself has been considered as an idealist thinker.

Talmon attacks Rousseau's notion of sovereignty, according to him, "Rousseau's sovereignty is the externalized general will, and, as has been said before, stands for essentially the same as the natural harmonious order. Taking this concept with the principle of popular sovereignty, and popular self-expression, Rousseau gave rise to totalitarian democracy". His primacy is body of the sovereignty which is the exercise of the general will. The importance of collective force as giving all the power to the general will confirms that the individuals are in no way given importance. Rousseau is primarily concerned about the whole political state as such which could be a reason for claiming him as a collectivist. Moreover, the idea that the general will is all in all or given the absolute authority makes a path to a different political trend called totalitarianism.

However, Talmon's criticism of Rousseau is contrasted. The theory of general will does not lead to totalitarianism but it leads to liberal philosophy as claimed by John W. Chapman. Thus, he says, "Failure to appreciate its dynamic quality mars J.L. Talmon's account of Rousseau's general will, and enables him to argue that it is the conceptual basis for modern totalitarian democracy". It is misconstrued by Talmon that the individual ethics is being dominated by the political legitimacy.

On the one hand, it is an individual's dignity and freedom and on the other, it is popular sovereignty which by principle goes against each other if at all we are asserting primacy to both of them. If the state holds that sovereignty in which Rousseau believes then it leads to totalitarianism. However, Chapman is very sharp in analyzing both of them and he has been able to give the argument that Rousseau's descriptions of the general will theory do not lead to totalitarianism. His argument moves forward with the claim that Rousseau was unable to distinguish individuals' moral and political freedom. Thus, his account of individual freedom has been taken by Talmon as merely political. However, the moral freedom which was believed to be suppressed because of Rousseau's presupposition that individuals will have authority and power over each other which will make them vain and prideful. It is clear that Rousseau's intention of suppressing an individual's moral freedom is not to give absolute authority to general will but to keep individuals harmless.

Chapman believes that the theory of general will has a dynamic aspect but it is unfortunate that the theory is claimed as an autocracy model. It is primarily because Rousseau's intention is misunderstood. Taking the stand of individuality in contract theory Chapman says,

"Neglect of the dynamic aspects of Rousseau's general will distorts the nature of the consensus which he thinks men ought to aim at and can achieve. It is not a consensus that may be imposed, which can be described in terms of conformity, or which represents the subordination of individuals to society. Rather it is a dynamic consensus, the validity of which depends on individual autonomy". (Chapman: 1998, p.535)

Therefore, the individual liberty is in no way given up or lost to the general will. But it does not mean that the explanation of the theory of general will as stated by Rousseau is totally free from the claim of autocracy. Chapman assumes that Rousseau might have given the ideal status to the general will because of the social sentiment or for patriotic feeling.

Thus, the general will theory has been given the supremacy for the welfare of the state. All these are the means for the responsive government and Rousseau's sentiment is added to make that general will as ideal. However, the general will react

as a general principle of the state which again makes an issue to discuss. The idea of general principle is mingled with something like the Kantian maxim.

General Will and Kant's Universal Law

Rousseau's concept of general will has exercised very considerable influence on many idealist thinkers. Kant's moral philosophy centers on the idea of universal principles or what he calls it as maxims. According to Kant, an action is considered to be morally right if it follows the universal principle. Kant believed that the general will is the source of law and thus his idea of moral freedom was akin to Rousseau's real will. His moral philosophy coincides with Rousseau's political idea that the citizen should put himself under the supreme direction of the general will. Thus C. H. Hall says, "Both Kant and Rousseau are insisting that when a man engages in reasoning about what to do he must generalize the particular situation he is in, and consider what it would be right for anyone to do in circumstances relevantly like his; only when he has done this will he be able to deduce what it would be right for him to do in these circumstances". (John C. Hall: 1973, p.81) They both owe to an ideal general, for one it is for political purpose and for other, moral purpose. However, Kant has been very direct and explicit towards his moral philosophy, in the sense he directly suggests that one ought to follow the maxims. On the other hand, Rousseau stands in between individuality and collectivity. So, his notion of general will can't be claimed as consistent as Kant's maxim.

Rousseau in making a political society aims at individuals to surrender their self-interest. However, Kant seems to be very straightforward in his principle, thus he claims every moral action has to follow the universal principle and the duty of a man has to be done for the shake of duty only. Hall views another difference between these two theories that the universal laws of Kant's theory are truly universal that which is applicable to anyone and anywhere. But Rousseau's general will is always relative to a particular association of people. The general will is only concerned with a definite political state. General will aim at common interest however, Kant's maxim doesn't go in that way, and it is like an absolute or universal truth.

The objection to the theory of the general will is that it posits common interest which is difficult to define or determine. Common interests grow out of organic relations between members of a group or community and are hardly possible in multinational states of today with their ideals and interests. Besides the fact that Rousseau's theory of general will has been criticized in modern days in many aspects starting from totalitarian claim to idealist approach, there is something very substantial in his theory that is still coherent in present days. The theory of general will emphasizes the corporate character of society in which an isolated selfish individual is a loner. It also integrates the individual with the state or society because the real will of the

individual goes into the making of the general will which seeks the good of the individual in the context of the good of the society. Thus, Rousseau's general will transforms political obligation from a legal into an ethical obligation.

However, the much-critiqued concept, general will, is a manifestation of mutual contract. In other words, the chaos of the state of nature is assumed to be rooted out by privileging general will through social contract. The line of argument which Rousseau makes, starting from the state of nature to a civil state with the general will, constitutes the basis of his Theory of Social Contract.

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