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Understanding the General Will

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FEW CONCEPTS in the history of political thought have proved so troublesome as Rousseau's notion of the general will. Rousseau must bear much of the blame for this, of course, for the discussion of the general will in his *Social Contract* is uncharacteristically terse and abstract. Troublesome as it has been, though, there is reason to believe that we are now approaching an adequate understanding of the general will. I say this because there seems to be growing agreement among Rousseau's commentators that the general will not only can be understood, but that it can best be understood in rationalistic terms. Indeed, where explications once were couched in terms of "real" and "higher" wills, one is now more likely to find the general will explained in terms of the prisoners' dilemma and Pareto-optimality.

While I do not accept all of these rationalistic readings of the general will, I do share the general conviction that we can make sense of Rousseau's concept, and his argument, without resorting to metaphysics or psychology. What I shall offer here, accordingly, is in some respects only a variation on a theme now well known to students of Rousseau's political philosophy. It is an important variation nonetheless, for it enables us to reconcile passages in the *Social Contract* which otherwise appear to be contradictory. That, at least, is what I shall argue in this essay.

I proceed in the following manner. First I set out a general account of what Rousseau means by "the general will" — an account which resembles in its main lines, if not all its details, Brian Barry's analysis of the general will. This account is defended in the second part of the essay, where I show how it helps us to understand two of the more controversial aspects of Rousseau's argument in the *Social Contract*. In part three I extend this account (and provide the variation mentioned in the last paragraph) by drawing a distinction, implicit and almost unmarked in Rousseau's writings, between the general will and a general will. With the aid of this distinction, I argue, we can make sense of Rousseau's baffling and apparently contradictory remarks about voting. Once this is demonstrated, I conclude by raising some questions about the utility of the concept of the general will.

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The idea of the general will rests on a fundamental distinction between two aspects of a person. Everyone, in Rousseau's view, may be thought of as both a man — an actual, identifiable person — and a citizen. Insofar as we are men, we are each unique; each of us, that is, has his own particular identity and set of interests. Insofar as we are citizens, however, we are alike in that we are members of the public; and as members of the public we share a common interest in the welfare of the body politic. Everyone, consequently, has both a particular interest as a man and a general interest as a citizen.

From the distinction between man and citizen Rousseau moves to a corresponding distinction between the particular or private will and the general will. The private will aims at the fulfillment of the particular interest of a man, an actual individual, while the general will seeks to further the interest of the citizen. Since the interests of all citizens are the same, the object of the general will may be said to be the common good or public interest — that is, the interest we all share as members of the public. Rousseau distinguishes the private from the general will in this manner: "the private will tends by its nature toward preferences, and the general will toward equality." (II,1:59.) As men with private wills, we naturally tend to grant precedence to our own interests and desires. The private will is partial both because it is the will of an identifiable individual, one who is only part of the body politic, and because it is biased: it places a higher value on the interests of the self than on the interests of others. The general will, in contrast, tends to equality because it necessarily grants equal consideration to everyone's interests; or, at least, to everyone within the body politic. Because it focuses on the common interest we share as citizens, the general will is impartial: it considers only the interests of the abstract person Rousseau calls the citizen. Since we are all the same qua citizen, the general will is devoted equally to all.

An example may help to clarify this distinction. Consider the case of someone who has the ability to be an unusually adept burglar. Such a person may well find it in his interest, as a man, to put his skills to use. His private will may then be to steal from others in order to satisfy his own desires. The general will, however, directs our potential burglar to obey the law. Since it is the will of the citizen, the general will requires us to ignore at times our particular interests and personal attributes — our possessions, our position in society, our abilities — and to think of ourselves only as members of the public. Laws against burglary are in the interests of all citizens, if not all men; and if our potential burglar thinks of himself only as a citizen, he will recognize that he ought to respect the law.

As I understand it, then, the general will performs much the same function as John Rawls's "veil of ignorance." Rawls argues that a hypothetical social contract will produce generally acceptable principles of justice if the parties to that hypothetical contract choose these principles from a properly defined "initial situation." The main feature of this situation is the "veil of ignorance," which deprives the parties to the contract of most information about their personal identities. More precisely, the parties do not know what their socioeconomic positions are, what abilities or disabilities they have, or...
even what their particular aspirations happen to be. Thus Rawls asks the individual to blind himself to his private interests and to assume an abstract identity so that the principles he chooses for all will be acceptable to all. Behind the veil of ignorance, Rawls points out, “No one knows his situation in society nor his natural assets, and therefore no one is in a position to tailor principles to his advantage.” In this way the veil of ignorance forces the parties to the contract to adopt a common viewpoint; or, to put it in Rousseau’s terms, the veil of ignorance leads the parties to promote their common interest as citizens rather than their private interests as men. The terms are different, but the point is much the same.

There is also a moral dimension to the general will, just as there is to the veil of ignorance. Rousseau does not invoke the general will simply as a counterweight to selfish interests. This would be futile, for one’s interest as a man may well outweigh one’s interest as a citizen. An industrialist may find, for instance, that when all things are considered it is not in his interest to install pollution-inhibiting devices in his smokestacks, even though it is in his interest as a citizen to reduce air pollution. Rousseau’s claim, however, is that in some cases we ought to consider only our interests as citizens. The purpose of the general will, therefore, is to provide a principle which will lead to just public policy. If we consider the interests of the citizen and not those of men, Rousseau maintains, we will reach decisions which establish laws and policies in accordance with the common interest. This is possible because from the standpoint of the citizen — as members of the public — we share the same interests. Considered abstractly, as citizens, the burglar and his victim share a common interest in the enforcement of a law against burglary, just as the industrialist and the person who lives near his factory share a common interest in eliminating air pollution. What Rousseau suggests, in sum, is that only the general will of the citizen, and not the private will of the man, is relevant to public policy decisions.

When Rousseau uses the notion of the general will, then, he singles out a certain perspective — a moral perspective — and claims that this is the only perspective we ought to consider in reaching public decisions. In this sense the general will is a moral imperative or principle, and its purpose is to guarantee that the claims of no particular individuals are given preference. Everyone receives equal consideration because public decisions take into account only the viewpoint of the citizen. Any other perspective is at best morally irrelevant. Here we see the emphasis on equality which is such a marked characteristic of Rousseau’s political philosophy. Thus Rousseau writes that

the social compact established an equality between the citizens such that they all engage themselves under the same conditions and should all benefit from the same rights. Thus by the very nature of the compact, every act of sovereignty, which is to say every authentic act of the general will, obligates or favors all citizens equally, so that the sovereign knows only the nation as a body and makes no distinctions between any of those who compose it. (II, 4:63; emphasis added.)

A further implication is that laws established in accordance with the general will do more than grant equal consideration to everyone: they actually are in everyone’s interest. For a law sanctioned by the general will promotes everyone’s interest qua citizen. Such a law may not be the first choice of many individuals, but it is acceptable to all because it makes some con-

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6Ibid., §24, p. 139.
tribution to everyone's well-being. It is, as Barry has said, "a sort of highest common factor of agreement."\(^7\)

There is also a close connection between the general will and Rousseau's conception of moral freedom. If the people are furnished with adequate information, Rousseau says, and are allowed no communication when they deliberate (to prevent logrolling), the outcome of their vote will conform to the general will. Everyone can vote for and obey laws which are in his interest as a citizen (although everyone might prefer to vote for and obey laws which are in his interest as a man), and this satisfies Rousseau's definition of moral freedom as "obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself. . . ." (I.8:56.)

Two other points should be noted before I take up the defense of this interpretation. This way of understanding the general will is consistent, in the first place, with what Rousseau has to say about groups within the body politic. There is a sense in which each of these groups, or "partial associations," has its own general will, for the individuals who compose each group share a common interest in their capacities as members of that association. These groups, in other words, may be considered publics. When we regard them from the perspective of the body politic, however, it is clear that the will of each association is a private will — a will which may be antagonistic to the general will of the state. Rousseau disapproves of these associations, consequently, because he fears that they will divide and divert the loyalty of the people; men will come to think of themselves as merchants and farmers, Catholics and Protestants, rather than citizens. When this happens, Rousseau warns, the private wills of these groups will prevent the general will from prevailing when the people vote.

Understanding the general will as a principle meant to guide public decisions is also consistent, secondly, with Rousseau's remarks on the limits of the general will. According to Rousseau, the general will applies to laws, but not to decrees. A law is a general policy, a rule which governs the conduct of every member of the body politic, while a decree is an act which refers to particular, identifiable individuals. The general will "loses its natural rectitude when it is directed toward any individual, determinate object. Because then, judging what is foreign to us, we have no true principle of equity to guide us." (II,4:62.)\(^8\) There is no true principle of equity in these cases because men are involved, not citizens. Instead of appealing to the general will, then, we must decide on the merits of the particular case — and these decisions are best left to executives and judges, not to the people as a whole.

II

The foregoing account of the general will is little more than a sketch of what I take to be the most plausible interpretation. What I want to do in this section is to elaborate and defend this account by presenting two kinds of evidence for it.

There is, to begin with, the evidence to be found in the way Rousseau talks about the general will. The fact that Rousseau distinguishes the general will from the will of all is evidence enough that the general will is not merely whatever the people, or most of them, may want at any particular time. This does not lead immediately to the conclusion that the general will should be understood as a principle, of course, since it leaves open the possibility that

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\(^7\) Barry, "The Public Interest," p. 120.

\(^8\) See also the chapter on "Law" (II.6).
the general will is some sort of metaphysical entity, such as a "higher will." But it is difficult, at best, to square this metaphysical view with Rousseau's reference in Political Economy to "the maxims of the general will. . . ." For while maxims may be derived from principles, they can not be derived from metaphysical entities.

Other evidence of this sort provides more direct support for the claim that the general will is best understood as the principle to be followed in matters of public policy. In another passage in Political Economy, Rousseau describes the general will as "the first principle of public economy and the fundamental rule of government. . . ." And in the Social Contract, Book II, Rousseau proclaims that

what generalizes the will is not so much the number of votes as the common interest that unites them, because in this institution everyone necessarily subjects himself to the conditions he imposes on others, an admirable agreement between interest and justice which confers on common deliberations a quality of equity that vanishes in the discussion of private matters, for want of a common interest that unites and identifies the rule of the judge with that of the party.

However one traces the principle, one always reaches the same conclusion, namely that the social compact established an equality between the citizens such that they all engage themselves under the same conditions and should all benefit from the same rights. (II,4:63; emphasis added.)

In reaching public decisions, that is, the sovereign should consider the interests of the citizens, and not the men, who compose it; for it is this concern for "the common interest that unites them" that generalizes the will. We generalize the will, therefore, when we act on Rousseau's principle: vote as a citizen, not as a man.

If these passages do not absolutely prove that the general will is best understood as a principle or imperative, they certainly provide strong support for that interpretation. Further support can be found, moreover, in evidence of a second kind. This consists in showing that the interpretation I have set out enables us to make sense of some of the more controversial and perplexing aspects of the Social Contract. Here I shall consider the following questions: (1) What does Rousseau mean when he says that one may be "forced to be free"? and (2) What is the difference between the general will and the will of all?

(1) The claim that someone may be "forced to be free," found in Book I, chapter seven of the Social Contract, strikes many readers as self-contradictory. How can one be forced to be free, it is asked, when freedom is the very absence of coercion? Much depends on what one means by "freedom," of course, and this objection holds only if the word is understood in this narrow, "negative" sense. Rousseau himself conceives of three orders of freedom — natural, civil, and moral — and he defines moral freedom, as we have seen, as "obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself." When he says that one may be forced to be free, then, he means that one may be compelled to obey a law to which he has given his consent.

This does not meet all objections, however. For why should one have to be forced to obey a law to which one has consented? Isn't this contradictory? Given

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10Ibid., p. 213; emphasis in original.
11Note also the following passage from the Geneva Manuscript: "If the common interest is the object of the association, it is clear that the general will should be the rule of the social body's actions. This is the fundamental principle I have tried to establish." On the Social Contract, ed. Masters, p. 174.
Rousseau's distinction between private wills and the general will, it clearly is not. The private will of one who cheats on his taxes, for instance, is in conflict with his general will as a citizen. The cheater may “view what he owes the common cause as a free contribution, the loss of which will harm others less than its payment burdens him” and consequently “wish to enjoy the rights of the citizen without wanting to fulfill the duties of a subject . . . .” (I,7:55.) These two wills are in conflict because the cheater wants to enjoy the benefits of the social order — “the rights of the citizen” — without contributing his share to the maintenance of that order — “the duties of a subject.” If he follows his private will, he acts against “the general will he has as a citizen.” (I,7:55.) The spread of this kind of injustice, Rousseau observes, would cause the ruin of the body politic.

Therefore, in order for the social compact not to be an ineffectual formula, it tacitly includes the following engagement, which alone can give force to the others: that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the entire body; which means only that he will be forced to be free. For this is the condition that, by giving each citizen to the homeland, guarantees him against all personal dependence . . . and alone gives legitimacy to civil engagements which without it would be absurd, tyrannical, and subject to the most enormous abuses. (I,7:55.)

The state, according to the view set out here, is a cooperative enterprise, and the citizens are all pledged to share its burdens. Only those who try to evade this contractual duty — those who “wish to enjoy the rights of the citizen without wanting to fulfill the duties of a subject” — must be “forced to be free.” These individuals are nowadays called “free riders.” The tax cheater mentioned earlier is a free rider, for example, because he wishes to receive the benefits of social cooperation without contributing his fair share, whatever it may be, toward the provision of those benefits. If the number of free riders is relatively small, then the benefits of social cooperation will still be provided; but when their numbers go beyond a threshold, they may well render social cooperation impossible. In large groups the temptation to ride free is especially strong, and Rousseau recognizes that some means must be found to encourage men to honor their commitments. Otherwise, he says, the sovereign “would have no guarantee of the subjects' engagements if it did not find ways to be assured of their fidelity.” (I,7:55.)

One may still wonder what all this has to do with freedom. Why not simply say that members of the body politic will not be allowed to take unfair advantage of one another? The answer is that Rousseau speaks of freedom here because he considers the state — or at least the de jure state he sketches in the Social Contract — to be the realm of freedom. The just state grants equal rights and protection to all, thereby helping to secure everyone from personal dependence. Anyone who accepts and follows social rules whenever they favor him, yet breaks them when it serves his purposes, is contributing to the destruction of that realm. Such a person is a parasite whose actions threaten his own freedom as well as that of others. And this is why Rousseau says that the free rider must be “forced to be free”: forced, that is, to act in accordance with his own will as a citizen.

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13 Cf. Brian Barry's explanation in Political Argument (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 198: “Rousseau does not deny that it may be in your interest to break a law which benefits you qua member of the community; all he says is that it is certainly in your
(2) Understanding the general will as a principle also helps to make sense of Rousseau's distinction between the general will and the will of all. This distinction is set out in the following paragraph:

There is often a great difference between the will of all and the general will. The latter considers only 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. (II,3:61.)

The object of this paragraph ostensibly is to elucidate, but many readers have found that it has the opposite effect. John Plamenatz, for instance, has charged that this quasi-mathematical account of the general will is, if taken literally, "sheer nonsense." According to Plamenatz, the "pluses" and "minuses" of private wills must be that which is peculiar to each of them, and the mathematical explanation is then:

Let John's be $x+a$, Richard's $x+b$, and Thomas's $x+c$; $x$ being what is common to them all, and $a$, $b$, and $c$, what is peculiar to each. If the general will is what remains after the "pluses" and "minuses" have cancelled each other out, it is $x$; but if it is the sum of the differences, it is $a+b+c$. Whichever it is, it cannot be both; and the second alternative is too absurd to be considered. Beware of political philosophers who use mathematics, no matter how simple, to illustrate their meanings!\(^4\)

Here the problem arises from Rousseau's equation of the general will with the "sum of the differences." If this phrase is taken literally, then Plamenatz's complaint is probably justified. But the surrounding passages indicate that what Rousseau means by the "sum of the differences" is what Plamenatz designates $x$, not $a+b+c$. In a footnote to the passage in question Rousseau says that "the agreement of all interests in formed in opposition to the interest of each. If there were no different interests, the common interest, which would never encounter any obstacle, would scarcely be felt." (II,3:61.) In the succeeding paragraph of the text he goes on to claim that, "If, when an adequately informed people deliberates, the citizens were to have no communication among themselves, the general will would always result from the large number of small differences, and the deliberations would always be good." (II,3:61.)\(^5\) Furthermore, one of the reasons for Rousseau's quarrel with "partial associations" is that, "The differences become less numerous and produce a result that is less general." (II, 3:61.)

The point of these passages may be put this way: the general will is the "sum of the differences" because Rousseau believes that the more small differences there are in society, the more likely people are to recognize and pursue the common interest. When there is a clash between the interests of a few large groups, the members of each group will tend to see only their interests qua members of the group or faction. But when there are a "large number" of differences in the particular interests of individuals, the indi- 

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viduals are better able to see their common interest *qua* citizens. Each sees that he can seldom, if ever, get all that he wants, and he soon perceives the need for some sort of rule for allocating the benefits and burdens of social cooperation. The most reasonable rule, Rousseau suggests, is that which regards us all as abstractions — as citizens — for in this way all are treated equally. The will of all — the “sum of private wills” — will not produce an outcome acceptable to all because, when the “pluses” and “minuses” are tallied, it will favor the interests of some at the expense of others. The general will, however, is the “sum of the differences” because it represents the common ground which all can accept despite their differences.

With the aid of the interpretation of the general will set out in section one of this paper, then, we are able to present coherent accounts of Rousseau’s distinction between the general will and the will of all and of his claim that upon occasion someone may be “forced to be free.” This, together with the evidence from Rousseau’s statements about the general will, suggests that the general will is indeed best understood as a principle to guide decisions on public matters. Yet this does not resolve all the problems surrounding Rousseau’s use of “the general will.” Rousseau’s mysterious remarks about the relationship between voting and the general will — and especially his apparently inconsistent claims about whether the individual should look to his personal interest or the public interest when voting — have still to be explained. To provide this explanation, we shall have to extend the interpretation offered so far by introducing a distinction between the general will and a general will.

III

For the most part Rousseau uses “the general will” in the sense of an imperative or principle; but he sometimes also speaks of a particular decision as an expression of the general will (e.g., II,3:61). If the people reach a decision whose outcome actually promotes the common interest they share as citizens, Rousseau tends to say that the people have expressed or declared the general will. But here, plainly, we have two different uses of “the general will,” for decisions neither express nor declare principles: they follow or conform to them. These different uses, which are never clearly sorted out by Rousseau, are conveniently marked by the distinction between the general will — the principle that all public decisions must take into account only the interests of the citizen — and a general will — a specific decision which is in accordance with this principle.

This distinction, strange as it may first appear, is analogous to a more readily apparent distinction which is drawn in discussions of the public interest.16 For however one may define it, the public interest is certainly different from a policy which (one believes) is in the public interest. A tax cut may be in the public interest, for example, but it is not itself *the* public interest. And if a tax cut is in the public interest, it is only because it somehow promotes the public interest. In just this way a policy which conforms to the general will is not itself the general will: it is, instead, a general will.

Rousseau never explicitly draws this distinction, though, and his failure to do so obscures important parts of his argument. This is especially true of his remarks about voting. If we attend to the distinction between the and a general will, however, we may shed some light on these remarks.

16Clarke Cochran develops a similar distinction between “*x* is a means to the common good,” “*x* is a common good,” and “*x* is the common good” in “Yves R. Simon and ‘The Common Good’: A Note on the Concept,” *Ethics* 88 (April 1978): 237.
Rousseau's comments on voting actually present two related problems. The first of these concerns the connection between the general will and majority-rule; the second involves the apparent contradiction in Rousseau's statements about how the individual should vote. In the first case the distinction between the and a general will proves helpful; in the second it is essential.

Rousseau's brief discussion of majority-rule begins with the acknowledgement that the social contract requires unanimous consent: "Since every man is born free and master of himself, no one . . . can subject him without his consent." (IV,2:110.) But he soon goes on to say that, "Except for this primitive contract, the vote of the majority always obligates all the others." (IV,2:110.) This poses an obvious problem — "How can the opponents be free yet subject to laws to which they have not consented?" — and Rousseau offers this resolution:

When a law is proposed in the assembly of the people, what they are being asked is not precisely whether they approve or reject the proposal, but whether it does or does not conform to the general will that is theirs. Each one expresses his opinion on this by voting, and the declaration of the general will is drawn from the counting of the votes.

In these two sentences we have a good example of the unmarked distinction between the and a general will. The proposal is to be approved, on the one hand, if it conforms to the general will (principle); but a general will (specific policy which satisfies this principle) is discovered, on the other hand, only by counting votes. Votes are irrelevant to the general will, for principles are not discovered by voting, but a general will often cannot be ascertained without them.17 Were it not for the difference between the general will qua principle and policies which conform to that principle, Rousseau would not even need to discuss voting.

The point of immediate importance, however, is brought out in the remainder of the paragraph.

Therefore when the opinion contrary to mine prevails, that proves nothing except that I was mistaken, and what I thought to be the general will was not. If my private will had prevailed, I would have done something other than what I wanted. It is then that I would not have been free. (IV,2:110-111.)

While this explanation is complicated and paradoxical, it is not simply metaphysical nonsense. Since Rousseau admits that even the people as a whole may fail to discern the policy which accords with the general will (II,6:67),18 the question here is, why is the majority opinion less likely to be mistaken than that of the minority, or of a solitary individual? It is certainly possible for one person to be right while everyone else is wrong. But if we make certain assumptions, as Barry has shown, then the opinion of the majority is more likely to be correct than the minority's.19 This occurs when we assume, as Rousseau seems to do, that: (a) there is a uniquely right

17 I say "often" because Rousseau allows that "the commands of leaders" can "pass for expressions of the general will, as long as the sovereign, being free to oppose them, does not do so." (II,1:59). See also Political Economy, p. 216. And see note 26, infra, for a comment on the translation of this passage from the Social Contract.

18 Cf. Political Economy, p. 216: "Must the whole nation be assembled at each unforeseen event? Such an assembly is all the less necessary because it is not sure its decision would be the expression of the general will. . . ."

answer, a specific policy in conformity with the general will, to be found; (b) everyone has an equal, better-than-even chance of discerning the right answer; and (c) everyone wants the right answer to prevail. It may be difficult to accept all, or even any, of these assumptions, but this does indicate how one might be glad that his own point of view was not victorious. Rousseau's point is not that whatever the majority wants is _eo ipso_ the general will, but that the majority is simply more likely than the minority to have discovered the policy which conforms to the general will.

One may wonder again what this has to do with freedom. How could a person possibly be less free if his opinion had carried the day? The answer here, as in the case of the "forced to be free" passage, follows from Rousseau's conception of the just state as the realm of freedom. Rousseau assumes that in _this state_ all the voters want the policy which best satisfies the general will to prevail. If the majority is more likely to perceive that policy, then a person whose opinion is in the minority may be said to have voted against his will _qua_ citizen: his will was to promote the common interest, but his opinion as to what policy would do so was mistaken. "The constant will of all the members of the state is the general will, which makes them citizens and free." (IV,2:110.) If one sees, therefore, that the policy he favored actually (or ostensibly) is not in the common interest, he then recognizes that his particular opinion was divergent from his constant will. Since the realm of freedom is preserved only through observance of the general will, freedom is diminished whenever a policy contrary to the general will is pursued. Anyone who had supported such a policy — along with everyone else — would then be less free than he would be if his opinion had not won.

The second problem with Rousseau's remarks on voting concerns the aims of the individual voter. In the first chapters of Book IV, Rousseau clearly requires individuals to vote according to their perceptions of what the general will demands; private interests are not to be considered. He also provides a vivid description of what happens when the people vote as men rather than citizens. "Finally," he says, "... when the social bond is broken in all hearts; when the basest interest brazenly adopts the sacred name of the public good, then the general will becomes mute; all — guided by secret motives — are no more citizens in offering their opinions than if the State had never existed, and iniquitous decrees whose only goal is the private interest are falsely passed under the name of laws." (IV,1:108-109.) Yet earlier in the _Social Contract_ Rousseau seems to take precisely the opposite position when he asks,

> Why is the general will always right and why do all constantly want the happiness of each, if not because there is no one who does not apply this word _each_ to himself, and does not think of himself as he votes for all? Which proves that the equality of right, and the concept of justice it produces, are derived from each man's preference for himself and consequently from the nature of man... (II,4:62; emphasis in the original.)

Certainly there seems to be a contradiction between these passages. If we attend to the distinction between _the_ general will and _a_ general will, however, we can reconcile Rousseau's remarks. This is because Rousseau's reference in Book II is to _the_ general will, while in Book IV he is concerned with _a_ general will. In the passage cited from Book II, in other words, Rousseau's purpose is to justify _the_ general will: the principle that requires all public decisions to take only the common interest of the citizen into account. His argument is that this particular imperative supplies a just basis for a political association because it is acceptable to everyone, for everyone can see that he is not subjecting himself to arbitrary rule when he agrees to the social
compact. All individuals are treated equally by the general will, and "each man's preference for himself" leads to "equality of right" under the general will. Indeed, the general will *qua* principle is at the heart of Rousseau's attempt to reconcile "what right permits with what interest prescribes, so that justice and utility are not at variance." (I, preface:46.)

In Book IV, Rousseau's purpose is different. When he says that voters must try to decide whether a proposition is in conformity with the general will rather than their private wills, he is concerned with determining what specific policies or laws are in conformity with the general will. Thus when he declares that the voters are to state their opinions on the question, Is policy *x* in conformity with the general will?, and not to follow their particular interests when they vote, he is specifying how a general will, or general wills, in accordance with the general will can be found. These remarks about the aims of the voter pertain to two different aspects of the general will, in sum, and they are not contradictory.

What we find, then, is that drawing the distinction between the general will enables us to clarify the first and to solve the second of these problems generated by Rousseau's remarks on voting. This provides powerful evidence for the validity of the distinction. But it also leads to a difficult question: is this distinction indeed implicit in the *Social Contract*, as I have stated, or am I simply reading a helpful distinction into Rousseau's work? I doubt that this question can be answered conclusively; yet there are passages in Rousseau's writings which indicate that he did have in mind something very much like the distinction I have drawn.

This is suggested in the discourse on *Political Economy*, for instance, when Rousseau states that taxes ought to be levied "through a general will, by majority vote, and based on proportional rates that leave no room for an arbitrary assessment of taxes." Although Rousseau does not call attention to his use of "a general will" here, it is clear that he is referring to specific policies and decisions, not to the principle that public policy should ignore the interests of men. So also is the distinction suggested by a passage in the *Geneva Manuscript*, where Rousseau proclaims that, "Today's law should not be an act of yesterday's general will, but of today's..." Insofar as the general will is a principle, of course, it cannot vary from day to day; but how we can and should act on that principle may easily vary as circumstances change. When we alter and amend our laws, then, we are not changing the general will; we are doing what we can to keep our laws — our general wills — in agreement with it.

References to "general wills" in *Emile* and the *Social Contract* also support my position, for there is no reason for Rousseau to use the plural when referring to the general will as a principle. In one passage from *Emile* Rousseau states that, "Dependence on men... engenders all the vices, and by it, master and slave are mutually corrupted. If there is any means of remedying this ill in society, it is to substitute law for man and to arm the general wills with a real strength superior to the action of every particular will." The use of "the general wills" here is clearly consistent with my account of the distinction between the general will; yet it may also be interpreted in a


21 *Political Economy*, p. 230; emphasis added.


quite different way. Consider what Roger Masters has to say about the use of the plural here: "when speaking of all mankind, Rousseau thereby makes clear the inevitable division of the human species into different societies, each of which has its own general will." Masters' reading of this passage is not implausible. But it neither explains nor fits another passage from *Emile* where Rousseau uses the plural: "according to the social pact the sovereign is able to act only by the common and general wills and that therefore its acts ought similarly to have only general and common objects." Here it seems clear that what Rousseau is talking about are specific decisions and policies which are in accordance with the general will. This is true also of a passage in the *Social Contract* where Rousseau says, "This does not mean that the commands of the rulers cannot pass for general wills, so long as the Sovereign, being free to oppose them, offers no opposition." In at least two of these three passages, then, we have further evidence for my claim that the distinction between the and a general will is implicit in Rousseau's theory.

There is, in short, sufficient reason to believe that Rousseau did indeed perceive, though perhaps only dimly, the importance of this distinction. Nor should this be surprising. For if the general will is best understood as a principle requiring us to act in public matters as citizens rather than men, then the distinction I have drawn seems to inhere in the logic of the general will.

IV

We can understand the general will. But this is not to say that Rousseau's notion is free from difficulties or that no further questions need be asked. Even if the general will is properly understood, one may still want to question some of Rousseau's assumptions and conclusions. This is not the place to attempt a full assessment of Rousseau's political philosophy, certainly, but I should like to conclude by raising some questions for further consideration.

First, there is the question of how the general will — the principle for deciding matters of public policy — is to be applied. What does it mean to say, in other words, that public policy must attend to the common interest of citizens and ignore the private interests of men? One problem is that the viewpoint of the citizen is not always readily apparent. Consider the case of a city (or any other political unit) which is dominated by one large industry. Cities of this sort often find themselves caught on the horns of a dilemma. There may be reliable evidence that pollution from the industry is hazardous to the health of those in the community; but eliminating that hazard may involve the loss of the industry with all the money and jobs it directly and indirectly provides. Everyone in the community will suffer if the hazard is not eliminated; yet it is also conceivable that everyone will suffer if the industry leaves. In this case is there a single viewpoint which is distinctly the citizen's? What would the general will have those in this predicament do?

By altering the example slightly, we can produce yet another problem for Rousseau. Suppose that in this city there are many who will suffer severe...

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25 *Émile*, p. 461; emphasis added.
26 Here I follow Cole's translation of the *Social Contract*, p. 24, with emphasis added. In the Masters' edition the passage is translated, "This is not to say that the commands of leaders cannot pass for expressions of the general will, as long as the sovereign, being free to oppose them, does not do so." (II,1:59; emphasis added.) Cf. *Du Contrat Social*, ed. Grimsley, p. 125: "Ce n'est point à dire que les ordres des chefs ne puissent passer pour des volontés générales, tant que le souverain, libre de s'y opposer, ne le fait pas."
economic hardship if the industry leaves and a few who, for one reason or another, will not suffer at all. In this case all the members of the community would share an interest in eliminating the hazard, but all would not share an interest in keeping the industry in town. The general will, presumably, would require the elimination of the hazard because that would be in the interest of the citizens, even though it might spell disaster for most of the men in the community. Given possibilities of this kind, is it clear that we should always ignore the private interests of men when deciding matters of public policy?

A second set of difficulties arises in connection with Rousseau’s remarks on the majoritarian decision-rule. If we grant the three assumptions mentioned earlier — that (a) political questions have uniquely right answers; (b) everyone has an equal, better-than-even chance of discovering these answers; and (c) everyone wants the right answers to prevail — then the majority is more likely than the minority to hit upon the right answer. But these are strong assumptions, and it is not at all obvious that we ought to accept them. If these three conditions are not met, moreover, then one who voted with the minority may actually be less free when and if he acquiesces to the will of the majority.

Now it is true that Rousseau is talking about the de jure state when he argues that those in the minority are mistaken about what the general will requires, and perhaps in the de jure state everyone will want the right answers to prevail. Even if we grant this and the other assumptions, however, the problem of civil disobedience is still with us. Should one go along with the majority on a matter of conscience simply because he knows that they are more likely to be right than he is? Are matters changed if we add, with Rousseau, that “the more important and serious the deliberations, the closer the winning opinion should be to unanimity”? (IV,2:111.) The size of the vote against him will give the conscientious individual pause, no doubt; but so long as there is a possibility that the winning side has failed to discover a general will which conforms to the general will, there is a case to be made for civil disobedience. Rousseau fails to make this case. Should he have done so?

To answer these questions we shall have to go beyond Rousseau. We may find it necessary to refine his analysis and concepts, or even to abandon some of them. But the simple fact that it leads to such potentially rewarding exploration may well be the most fitting testimony to the richness of Rousseau’s political philosophy — and to the importance of understanding the general will.