

Complexities in the Determination of the General Will: A Critical Appraisal of Jean-Jacques Rousseau

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Abstract

The General Will is one of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's original contributions to the district of political philosophy. The intellectual burden and herculean task of this inquiry consist of reconciling the General Will with the sanctity of individual freedom, which Rousseau also purports to protect. Through the method of philosophical and textual analysis, this paper examines the inherent absurdities, complexities, and obscurities associated with the determination and realization of the General Will, which lie at the heart of, and are the nucleus of, the political philosophy of Rousseau. It further x-rays the acclaimed infallibility and veracity of this political theory vis-à-vis its claim as a moral norm—an authentic will that is ultimately right in its normative credentials. It adopts a qualitative research method, in which case, it is basically descriptive and highly analytical. It is significant as it provides a blueprint and a veritable guide for policymakers at all governance or social engineering levels. In conclusion, a case is made that, notwithstanding its manifold discontents and gross inadequacies, it is indeed a standard for enhancing distributive justice and the common good. It recommends that the doctrine of the General Will be made a guiding ideology and national philosophy and be incorporated into the federal character principle to address the lingering and looming challenges of Nigerian federalism against the backdrop of its fragile state structure. It also suggests that it be used as a criterion for establishing or gauging essential aims and guiding principles of state policy in the Nigerian political system.

Keywords: Complexities, Determination, General, Will, Critical, Appraisal, Jean-Jacques, Rousseau.

INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts an exposition of salient themes and topical issues bordering on his doctrine of the General Will, such as popular sovereignty; social equality; freedom and liberty of the individual; and representative government. All these formed the bedrock of Rousseau's social and political philosophy.

Rousseau's conception of the General Will, which is the centrality or hub of his social and political philosophy, derives and stems from his idea of the social contract, a doctrine upon which

his philosophical enterprise is anchored or hinged. The concept of the General Will, no doubt, occupies the center stage and constitutes the crux or main thrust of Rousseau's moral and political philosophy. Thus, his notion of the General Will as an ethical and political theory is essentially couched in and hinged on the background or foundation of the social contract theory, which Nathan Jaja (2007) aptly describes as "a political doctrine of the modern age" (p. 78). The social contract perceives civil society as a product of a *contract* or an agreement. By logical implication, those who rule do so with the consent of the citizenry, whether such an agreement is formal or not, whether they entered into such a contract or not. Furthermore, a social contract is implied when an organised group of people agrees to live under an established social order and obey its laws. In this way, the social contract becomes a legitimising ideology for exercising political power in a truly democratic setting.

Furthermore, Rousseau's preoccupation is manifest in the following baffling questions: Are the wishes of individual people a wise and secure basis on which to establish government and law? Are freedom and civil society compatible? (Thompson, 2008). These, in effect, are the striking questions that lurk behind understanding his social philosophy. In short, Rousseau considered that if you are enslaved by a particular interest, desire, or passion, you are not truly free, even if you are allowed to follow it.

What is the General Will?

The concept of General Will is central to the enterprise of Rousseau's social and political philosophy. The General Will, as a political theory, is Rousseau's landmark contribution to the district of social philosophy. As has been stated earlier, the General Will is predicated on the background of the social contract. Thus, the government of the civil state that is established as a product of the *contract* is to function according to the canons or core values of the General Will as a directive principle. This will, according to Rousseau, always be right and tend towards the public good. It is not a particular will or the will of all. It is not also the will of the majority. Rousseau's definition of the general will is as follows:

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 (Rousseau 1974, p. 3).

The import of the above conception of the General Will is that it is an aggregation of the particular will of a single individual and the collective will of all members of society. It avoids the extremes of both particular and collective will. It is the sum of the aggregation or harmonisation of all conflicting wills or opposing paradigms in the civil order. Rousseau further adds that, "Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole" (Rousseau 1974, p. 20). The General Will is the composite aggregate of the reconciliation between a particular will, on the one hand, and collective wills, on the other. It tends to maintain a balance between these two extremes or variables regarding interest articulation and interest aggregation, especially as it concerns matters of public importance.

Furthermore, it is of paramount importance to note that Rousseau's obsession or preoccupation with the theory of general will consists of his attempt or determination to protect the sanctity of individual freedom as an absolute value or ideal moral vis-à-vis the common good, Volume 21 Number 1 (2022) 53

which finds expression in the collective will. This explains why he surmises that the General Will is an absolute norm; always right and acting for the public good of all members of society. Thus, it is collectivistic, holistic, integrative, and holistic. It, therefore, abhors atomistic and possessive individualism. Hence, it is not particularistic by its very nature. Rousseau writes that:

In fact, each individual, as a man, may have a particular will contrary or dissimilar to the general will which he has as a citizen. His particular interest may speak to him quite differently from the common interest: his absolute and naturally independent existence may make him look upon what he owes to the common cause as a gratuitous contribution, the loss of which will do less harm to others than the payment of it is burdensome to himself; and, regarding the moral person which constitutes the state as a *persona ficta*, because not a man, he may wish to enjoy the rights of citizenship without being ready to fulfill the duties of a subject. The continuance of such an injustice would not but prove the undoing of the body politic (Rousseau 1974, p. 6).

The General Will is not synonymous with the will of the majority in a society. It should not also be equated with, or mistaken for, the opinion of the dominant or privileged class in a social setting. Rather, it represents the difference between the sum of judgements about the common good and the mere aggregate of personal fancies or individual desires. Its overall aim is to promote the general interests of all members of society. It maximizes the positive interests of members of society.

METHOD

Through the method of philosophical and textual analysis, this paper examines the inherent absurdities, complexities, and obscurities associated with the determination and realization of the General Will, which lie at the heart of, and are the nucleus of, the political philosophy of Rousseau. It further x-rays the acclaimed infallibility and veracity of this political theory vis-à-vis its claim as a moral norm—an authentic will that is ultimately right in its normative credentials. It adopts a qualitative research method, in which case, it is basically descriptive and highly analytical. It is significant as it provides a blueprint and a veritable guide for policymakers at all governance or social engineering levels.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The General Will and Individual Liberty

The supreme good or ideal which Rousseau's General Will is intended to preserve or protect is liberty of the individual member of a society. His deep commitment to the realization of this absolute value echoes in his *Social Contract* and *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1985). The kind of society envisioned by Rousseau is such that would enhance freedom. This becomes a necessity as there is nothing more dear or precious to a man than liberty. Here is Rousseau in full:

To renounce liberty is to renounce being a man, to surrender the rights of humanity and even its duties. For him who renounces everything no indemnity is possible. Such a renunciation is incomparable with man's nature; to remove all liberty from his will is to remove all morality from his acts (Rousseau 1974, p. 8).

Rousseau regards liberty as central to his philosophical construct. For him, the fundamental objective of a contract is to reconcile liberty with authority. “Liberty connotes in practice an amalgam of free enterprise, freedom to engage in any activity...” (Abia et al., 2021). Liberty is essential, so is authority, for one cannot function meaningfully without the other. The idea civil order would be a polity that would aim for the general, rather than the particular, interests of its members (Okin, 2022). His firm belief in the reality of liberty or freedom informed his landmark statement or dictum, “Man is born free and is everywhere in chains” (Rousseau 1974, p. 1). Individual freedom is possible under the right kind of society governed by the General Will. From Rousseau’s point of view, society and the individual are complementary. He posits thus:

I mean to inquire if, in the civil order, there can be any sure and legitimate rule of administration, men being taken as they are and law as they might be. In this inquiry, I shall endeavor always to unite what right sanctions with what is prescribed by interests, in order that justice and utility may in no case be divided (Rousseau 1974, p. 3).

The social contract, in Rousseau’s perspective, produces not just a civil order but a moral foundation of liberty. Liberty, for him, is an essential good. It means the highest good for the individual and, of course, all members of the society. He conceives liberty as active participation and popular sovereignty. It is noteworthy to stress that the sovereign, for Rousseau, is not an impersonal third party to the contract as in Hobbes and Locke. It is not equivalent to the Hobbesian *Leviathan* or Lockean *Representative*. On the contrary, the sovereign is the totality of all members of the civil society. Liberty consists in acting according to one’s will and the dictates of right reason. It does not imply total absence of restraints or some kind of regulatory mechanisms or legitimate check on the actions or behavior of an individual (Rothbard, 2002).

To be sure, ideal freedom is realized by acting within the limit or legitimate bound of the General Will. That is why Rousseau insists that whoever does not want to be free must be coerced or forced to be free by complying with the General Will that is always right and infallible. Freedom or liberty, for him, is far from being in a state of perpetual servitude or being subservient to the domineering tendency of the ruling class. In Rousseau’s parlance, “Anyone who is a master over others is not himself free” (Rousseau 1985, p. 2). He considers liberty and equality as being mutually symbiotic, and argues that unless people are truly *equal* they cannot be genuinely *free*. This underscores his central understanding of the General Will vis-à-vis individual freedom. He posits that:

The Sovereign cannot impose on the subjects any fetters that are of no use to the community. It cannot even will to do so, for under the law of reason nothing takes place without a cause.... The commitments that bind us to the body politic are obligatory only because they are mutual, and their nature is such that in fulfilling them one cannot work for someone else without also working for himself. Why is the general will always right, and why do all constantly want the happiness of each of them, if not because everyone applies the same word *each* to himself and thinks of himself as he votes for all (Rousseau 1974, p. 168).

For Rousseau, liberty is a moral absolute which nature, i.e., reason, has bestowed or conferred on man. Thus, this moral value-liberty can only be secured in an association in which not only is the whole community defended and protected but also the individual as a moral agent. In brief, liberty entails individual moral autonomy. It is the freedom from following the caprices of others. The nagging question that confronts Rousseau is: do the duties and civil obligations imposed on the

citizen by the sovereign not mean a derogation of the liberty of the individual? Rousseau's response, however, is that the sovereign cannot impose fetters that are excessive or antithetical to individual freedom on the citizenry. For him, the sovereign here refers to the body politic, which comprises all the citizens and not the government as an institution of the state or agency or machinery through which the will of the state is formulated, expressed, and attained. It is difficult for people to commit evil against themselves (Holsti, 2004). Thus, the contract enables the citizens to be authentically free. Hence, the general will serves to promote individual freedom instead of undermining it. After all, liberty, for Rousseau, is a matter of moral self-determination, or the ability of the individual to exercise his moral autonomy.

To this end, Rousseau recommends that we trade our natural, negative liberty for the kind of positive liberty that exists in his envisioned civil society. In Rousseau's estimation, true liberty is a form of positive liberty—a civil liberty we gain when we allow ourselves to be governed not by our individual wills but by the general will.

The General Will as a Moral Theory

It is an incontrovertible fact that socio-political philosophy is a strand or variant of applied ethics. Put differently, political philosophy is an extension of moral philosophy. This explains why Appadorai (2004) emphatically opines that "what is morally wrong can never be politically right" (pp. 9-10). It is, therefore, important to note that politics is essentially and profoundly conditioned by ethics. The great question for politics is to discover not what governments prescribe, but what they *ought* to prescribe. Both modes of philosophical inquiry are inextricably bound together. There is a common nexus, or web of relationships, existing between both streams of consciousness. Thus, the connection between ethics and politics is clear. The bottom line is that on every political issue, the question may be raised as to whether such a political action or behaviour is morally right or wrong. It is unfortunate that "in Nigeria, corrupt officials are praised and celebrated as heroes and illustrious sons and daughters of their own people and communities" (Ezedike and Ariche, 2017, p. 464). Emina and Ikegbu (2020) argued "that the emergence of liberal democracy as the main political ideology in the international system calls for the re-evaluation of the military mission" (p. 186).

Rousseau's theory of the general will has its moral dimension. He intends it to function as a regulatory mechanism to the extent that it ensures a balance or harmony between collective interests and particular (individual) interests. It is against this background that AlubaBari Nbeta's attempt to depict or paint a vivid picture and properly situate ethics in its right perspective is very apt and germane. His keen conception of ethics is that, "Perhaps the most central concern in ethics is the question of why human beings should be moral instead of everyone pursuing their own interests" (Nbeta 2014, p. 30). The ethical foundation of Rousseau's doctrine of the General Will is couched or embedded in the foregoing explanation of the business of moral philosophy. Nbeta (2014) further adds that "it (ethics) is concerned with the principles of the good life" (p. 30). It follows that efforts to bring about or realise the good life, which is the primal goal of every organised society, must be predicated on the foundation of a standard ethical theory as a directive principle. There is, therefore, no gainsaying that moral values are essential for establishing social order. Attempting to put the moral content of Rousseau's General Will into its proper perspective, Mel Thompson (2008) succinctly writes that it is indeed "a moral and political obligation" (p. 53) for individuals as moral agents to align their particular or private wills with the General Will, which is supposedly a moral force. Ikegbu and Maduka (2019), exposing the position of Rousseau, Volume 21 Number 1 (2022) 56

have it that "the pursuit and craze for fame, knowledge, honor, and wealth in the state of civil society yields concomitant evil, immorality, degeneration, and obvious contradiction from the approved style of existence in the state of nature" (p. 19).

Rousseau expresses his deep concern for the indispensability of the General Will as a spectrum of social ethics in his Social Contract when he states unequivocally that:

In order then that that 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; for this is the condition which, by giving each citizen to his country. Secures him against all personal dependence. In this lies the key to the working of the political machine; this alone legitimizes civil undertakings, which, without it, would be absurd, tyrannical, and liable to the most frightful abuses (p. 6).

The General Will, according to Rousseau, is always right. As an authentic will, it is an absolute norm. This is obviously a point of fact because the General Will stands for the social good, which is itself the standard of right. In his own estimation, what is not right is not, and cannot conduce to the General Will. All the same, his theory of the General Will is a form or version of social ethics that is based on the principle of self-directive moral principle.

Commenting further on the moral value of the General Will, George Sabine and Thomas Thorson (1973) brilliantly write that:

The organic analogy for a social group, the doctrine that the general will of the corporate self sets the moral standards valid for its members, and the implied reduction of government to a mere agent of the general will... the body politic, therefore, is also a moral being possessed of a will; and this general will, which tends always to the preservation and welfare of the whole and of every part, and is the source of the laws, constitutes for all the members of the state, in their relations to one another and to it, the rule of what is just or unjust (pp. 537 – 538).

Thus, Rousseau seeks to reconcile freedom and authority. He argues that one is obliged to obey the state because it represents the General Will, not just the will of the majority, but what everyone would really want, from a moral point of view if they consider the situation rationally and take into consideration the genuine interests of all. The General Will is, in the main, a moral force because it derives from all, applies to all and seeks the welfare of all (Law 273). Thus, it imbues the struggle for equality with a moral quality. The moral liberty makes man master of himself because, according to Rousseau, "Obedience to a law which we prescribed ourselves is liberty" (Rousseau 1974, p. 74). The people cannot, therefore, transfer their ultimate right to self-government, of deciding their own destiny to any person or group. Each individual is, however, obliged to will and cultivate the general good. It is very apparent and crystal clear that the political import of Rousseau's General Will is inseparably bound with its moral deposits. His affirmation of the sovereignty of the General Will is being characteristically inalienable, indivisible, and of course, infallible underscores its moral fibre or fabric as an ethical theory by logical extension.

On the infallibility of the General Will as a moral cum political theory, Rousseau submits thus:

It follows... that the general will is always right and tends to the public advantage; but it does not follow that the deliberations of the people are always equally correct. Our will is always for our own good, but we do not always see what that is; the people is never corrupted, but it is often deceived, and on such occasions only does it seem to will what is bad (52).

The above excerpt insinuates that the General Will, as an ethical framework, is the corporate will which is to override the private will of a particular individual. It also connotes that there is nothing wrong with it; it is consistent with true liberty. It holds tenaciously that individual interests must not take precedence over and above the interests of the generality. In its moral perspective, Rousseau's theory of the General Will tends towards altruism and abhors egoism.

Discussion

Rousseau's outstanding and significant contribution to the domain of social philosophy lies in his attempt to articulate an ideal ethnical and political ideology, namely, the General Will. It can be stated for free, without prejudice, that he is widely recognized as a major democratic theorist of the state. His notion of the General Will is a rational attempt to synthesize the principles of good governance and, of course, the common good. It is also an incontrovertible fact that the political doctrine of General Will is unarguably Rousseau's original contribution to the province of socio-political philosophy. Thus, this socio-political theory, i.e., the General Will, underscores his creative ingenuity, novelty, and originality in the realm of philosophical inquiry. It is, however, important to note that Rousseau's idea of General Will is conspicuously laden with, and shrouded in, some kind of logical absurdity, semantical obscurity, and hermeneutic complexity. In point of fact, his general understanding of what constitutes the authentic and collective will of all raises quite a few philosophical problems.

There is no getting around that there exist a good number of complexities and contradictions which place a question mark on the infallibility or plausibility of determining the common good using the calculus or matrix of Rousseau's General Will. A major paradox which Rousseau's analysis and understanding of the General Will evokes in the minds of many is the fact that he could not persuade himself to give up trying to prove that men individually gain more by being members of society than they would by remaining isolated. This obviously runs counter to the major assumptions or ideals of liberalism or individualism that are characteristic of Western democracies. In our candid opinion, Rousseau is a harbinger of political absolutism or totalitarianism. He pays very little or no attention to the place of individual liberty in his scheme-General Will. Hence, be highly conservative. Put differently, his conception of the General Will is notoriously open to totalitarian interpretation, which breeds despotism in some western democracies. What is more, his theory of the General Will ultimately lacks moral significance except insofar as the calculations of self-interest may coincide with those of the public interest.

Furthermore, Rousseau's insistence that true freedom or liberty consists in conformity to the general will poses quite some problems in properly understanding his central message of safeguarding individual freedom in contradistinction to the sovereignty of the collective will in the aggregate or sum total of all particular wills. Another paradox or problem that confronts one in properly appreciating Rousseau's idea of the General Will is the moral implication of forcing an individual to be free by compelling him to comply with the precepts or tenets of the General Will. This, in the main, portends authoritarianism or totalitarianism of a sort. In our opinion, any attempt

to force chains of a collective will on an individual is tantamount to dictatorship or tyranny in the true sense of the word. Forcing a man to be free is a euphemism for making him blindly obedient to the mass or the strongest party. The assertion that *our will is the general will* is problematic and seriously lacking in welfarist credentials or criteria.

CONCLUSION

Rousseau's social philosophy raises, amongst others, the fundamental questions of liberty, equality, and social justice. As a theoretical construct, it serves as a basis for social engineering. The General Will is indeed a guarantee of social equality. He articulates the theory of general will as the intellectual basis of legitimate power and authority. He attempts to reconcile individual freedom with civil authority. It is, therefore, our conclusion that private individual will or egoistic interest should be subordinated to the superintendence of the collective will. A case is, therefore, made that the General Will is a suitable option in the management of state affairs, particularly in the art and science of decision-making, which underline or underpin government as an institution of the state, process, or art of governing.

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