

Rousseau and the Paradox of Democracy

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Rousseau on the General Will and Moral Freedom

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau addresses the following question:

Question: "With men as they are and with laws as they could be, can there be in the civil order any sure and legitimate rule of administration?" [*The Social Contract*, Book 1]

In other words, can the **freedom of individuals** be reconciled with the **authority of the state**?

1. **The General Will.** According to Rousseau, freedom and the authority of the state can be reconciled.

GENERAL WILL: Collectively held intention to promote the common good.

The General Will is collective in two ways: (1) It is willed by each and every citizen.* (Each citizen has an *individual will* and the *General Will*); (2) It is the will of the collective in that it represents the common interest.

2. **Moral Freedom.** The General Will is the source of the law. By its nature, the General Will is willed by each and every citizen.

MORAL FREEDOM: You follow those laws that you have legislated for yourself.

By following laws that are given by the General Will, you follow laws that you have legislated for yourself. Therefore: *so long as society is governed according to the General Will, your individual freedom will not be compromised.*

3. **Problem: Even When Your Individual Interests Conflict with the General Will?** Rousseau answers: *Yes.*

- (a) "The citizen gives his consent to all the laws, including ones that are passed against his opposition, and even laws that punish him when he dares to break any law." [Book 4, Section 2]
- (b) "When a law is proposed to the assembled people, what they are being asked is not (1) *Do you approve or reject this proposal?* but rather (2) *Is this proposal in conformity with the general will?* — the general will being *their will.*" [Ibid.]
- (c) "When therefore the opinion that is contrary to my own prevails, this proves neither more nor less than that I was mistaken,

"The problem is to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before." [*The Social Contract*, Book 1, Section 6.]

There are two different ways to understand the General Will.

- (1) *Democratic Conception:* the General Will is given by whatever the citizens of the state have decided together, democratically.
- (2) *Transcendental Conception:* the General Will is given by the citizens' common interest that exists (some-what?) independently of what any of them actually wants.

* The General Will is *not* willed by the collective, considered as a unified, single thing. Rather, it is willed by every individual the makes up the collective, individually.

THE ROUSSEAUIAN PICTURE OF VOTING:

- There is a common good.
- When we vote, we express our judgment about what will promote the common good.

Voting is a reliable (but fallible) procedure for figuring out what is for the common good.

(See THE CONDORCET JURY THEOREM: *If every voter's judgments about p are independent, and each voter's chance of judging correctly > 1/2, then as the number of voters goes to infinity, the probability that the majority opinion on p is correct approaches 1.*)

and that what I thought to be the general will was not so."
[Ibid.]

Paradox of Democracy

Suppose we are voting on which of two policies to implement: *Policy A* or *Policy B*. You support the legitimacy of the democratic process. You vote for *Policy A*, but the democratic process selects *Policy B* instead.

And suppose that Rousseau is correct that when you vote for *X* over *Y*, you are *not* expressing that (1) you prefer *X* to *Y*. Rather, you are expressing that (2) you *believe* *X* ought to be enacted over *Y*.

THE PARADOX

1. By voting for *Policy A* over *Policy B*, you believe that *Policy A* ought to be enacted.
2. By supporting the legitimacy of democracy (plus the fact that the democratic process has selected *Policy B*), you believe that *Policy B* ought to be enacted.
3. But you do not believe that *both* policies should be enacted! (That's not even possible).

In other words, you seem to be committed to believing the following two things:

- We ought to enact *Policy A*.
- We ought to enact *Policy B*.

But *Policy A* and *Policy B* are incompatible.

Three Solutions: (1) Give up your belief that *Policy A* ought to be enacted. (2) Give up your commitment to democracy. (3) Insist that these two beliefs are not incompatible.

Is this a problem for Rousseau?

(R1) "I believe that *Policy A* conforms to the General Will."

(R2) "I will that the policy with a majority of votes be enacted."

Can these two be resolved? What is it to believe that something conforms to the General Will?