

An Infallible Process

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In *The Social Contract* Rousseau writes “the Sovereign, since it is formed entirely of the individuals who make it up, has not and cannot have any interests contrary to theirs ... The Sovereign, by the mere fact that it is, is always everything it ought to be.” (*The Social Contract*, I, 7, 5) This seems to be a rather strong claim, since it seems to say that individuals who are parts of the sovereign will never have interests that are counter to the general will—not a likely claim, since later Rousseau explicitly states that individuals can have a private will that is contrary to the general will. (*SC*, I, 7, 7) In this paper I intend to show how Rousseau can justify his claims about the sovereign while maintaining that individuals can have private interests.

The sovereign is described as a body made up of each of the individuals who will be a part of the social contract. The general will is the will of this body, formed by the entire “sufficiently informed populace,” after the removal of desires that are not shared by everyone—people are to remove themselves from their own interests and think of everyone as a whole. Rousseau also stipulates that people should not gather into factions since that would remove their individual reasoning and make for large groups of people with private interests. (*SC*, II, 3, 3) Following these guidelines results in the sovereign having a will that is formed of interests that are shared by everyone. Since no body aims to hurt itself, the interests reflected in the general will must be for the good of the sovereign and thus for the good of the people who make up the sovereign.

All the individual people who make up the sovereign are then benefited by its creation. These individuals will have thrown their interests into the creation of

the general will, and thus they will receive the same rights and respects as others in the social contract. They will not have any extra demands placed on them or have any less benefits accorded them. They will not have to fear treatment from the sovereign that is not aligned with the general will—treatment that is not also accorded to other people. Since the general will is made up by removing those interests that are not shared by everyone, however, some people could have interests that are not addressed by the general will, and some could have interests that are directly counter to those addressed by the general will.

These countering interests, however, are not desirable to Rousseau since they are the type that he considers enslaving. The people who would follow their countering interests over those of the general will are enslaved by their natural desires. The rest of the people who make up the sovereign are permitted to force those people to follow the general will, since then they would be “forced to be free.” (*SC*, I, 7, 8) The individuals can have their private interests, but they will not be allowed to act on those interests that are counter to the general will. This argument shows how and why people who have countering interests will be required to follow the general will, but it fails to explain how the sovereign cannot have interests contrary to those of the individuals who make it up—since those people who are forced to be free obviously have countering interests.

To address this issue I will return to the initial quotation. One could interpret “...cannot have any interests contrary to theirs” as saying that the sovereign could not have any interests contrary to the interests of each person who makes it up *as a whole*. If the sovereign cannot want to hurt all of its members it means that the sovereign cannot have interests contrary to the interests of the members as a whole. As a whole, the members form the general will, which then becomes the will of the sovereign. From the definition of sovereign, then, it cannot have any interests

contrary to the people as a whole since that is where its will comes from.

The second part of the quotation seems to support this interpretation. The definition of the sovereign is a body formed of the people and governed by the general will they have selected when thinking of themselves as a whole. If the sovereign “is everything it ought to be,” (*SC*, I, 7, 5) when Rousseau claims that the sovereign cannot have any interests counter to those of the people who make it up, all he is saying is that when the people think of everyone together as a body that which they come up with will be the general will, and that is the will followed by the sovereign. By definition the sovereign cannot have any interests counter to those of the general will, those of the population.

What we have, then, is a sovereign who has interests that are not counter to those of the population as a whole. Individuals who have countering interests are forced to be free so that they can receive the benefits of living as part of the sovereign. This is not a problem since Rousseau is not interested in those interests that are not shared by all the people—his sovereign’s interests could be contrary to individual interests, but not to those of the entire population.