

What Makes the Will General:  
Possible Interpretations of *The Social Contract*  
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In *The Social Contract* Rousseau proposes a procedure by which the members of a state decide what legislation they should adopt. This procedure involves every member of the state gathering together in a large assembly and voting on the proposed laws as a “sufficiently informed” populace with “no communication between them.” (SC II, 3, 3) Rousseau is very careful to rule out the actions of factions or cabals in the voting process, wishing every person to speak for her or himself.

In another passage, however, Rousseau claims that “what generalizes the will is not so much the number of voices, as it is the common interest which unites them: for in this institution, everyone necessarily submits to the conditions which he imposes on others.” (SC II, 4, 7) This statement seems to undermine the previous claim that every individual should be a member of the assembly. It could directly contradict the idea that factions and cabals and special interest groups should not be permitted in the assembly. This passage seems to say that it wouldn't matter if these groups existed so long as the general will was still based on the common interest of all the people. In this paper I intend to give two interpretations of this passage, first explaining the contradictions the passage brings up when read with the current proposed interpretation, and then examining another possible interpretation that seems to clear up the initial contradictions.

What Rousseau seems to be saying in the quotation from book II, chapter 4 is that it isn't so important that everyone votes or goes to the assemblies where the legislation will be decided. It seems to say that what is actually important is that what is decided at those meetings (if indeed

meetings still exist—it seems that we could interpret the passage to say that the assembly itself is no longer necessary) is based on the common interest. Rather than everyone's voice being heard and acknowledged, the important fact of the general will is instead that the will is indeed general, that it would not burden anyone unreasonably or give anyone a burden that no one else under the same circumstances would be required to bear.

What this would mean is that factions, delegations, and representatives, those things that Rousseau stands so staunchly against in other passages, would be perfectly acceptable in the assembly or in the making of the sovereign just so long as the common interest remained intact. If the common interest were the one thing that generalized the will, a will that was discovered through the casting of bones could be general as long as it came up with legislature that did not place an undue burden on any individual, or burden any individual more than another in her same place would be burdened.

In his manuscript *A Free Community of Equals*, Joshua Cohen examines the passage in question and comes up with his own interpretation that seems to leave the procedure of the assembly out. The common good, he says, “is to be understood in terms of interests shared by the members of society, and as requiring attention to the interests of each member.” (FCE, 84) Cohen continues, placing emphasis on the consideration given to each member of society and on their agreement to have a shared commitment to every other person in the society. In this interpretation as well the importance of the general will—that which generalizes it—is that equal consideration is given to each member of the community and that no member is burdened unreasonably or singled out for a burden that no other in the same situation would bear. These requirements seem to be true of both of the interpretations I have examined. In this light, then,

let us examine some of the passages where Rousseau condemns the formation of factions and repeats the necessity of assemblies.

Earlier in book II, Rousseau writes that “it is therefore of the utmost importance for obtaining the expression of the general will, that no partial society should be formed in the State, and that every citizen should speak his opinion entirely from himself.” (SC II, 3, 4) This seems to mean exactly what it says--that no groups should be formed when obtaining the expression of the general will, no societies or cabals should create an attachment between members of a society so as to remove their one voice and place them in a faction with other voices. How can we reconcile this with the above interpretation that says that these factions will not matter so long as the common interest is still preserved? It doesn't seem that we can, unless we make the claim that by being a member of a faction that is heard at the assembly, they people themselves are heard individually. Even this does not seem to make proper sense, since Rousseau condemned any partial society, even one that guarantees its members a voice at the assembly. Rousseau, then, has written both that there must not be factions (in this passage) and that it doesn't matter if there are factions or not so long as the will is properly generalized.

In the third book of *The Social Contract*, Rousseau argues that “the Sovereign can never act but when the people are assembled.” (SC III, 12, 1) Once again, this seems to be strong evidence that the assemblies are in fact necessary in order for the state to function. If the sovereign can not act, then there can be no new legislation decided upon, in fact, there can be no old legislation either if there has never been an assembly. Without assemblies, then, there could be no state, since there could never have been any sovereign to act and legislate. This seems to reinforce the idea that there must be assemblies, but says nothing about the formation of factions and cabals. In light of the above interpretation of book II, chapter 4, all this would mean is that

there must be assemblies at which the people can speak. Factions are still permitted by this passage, since all it does is argue for the feasibility of the assemblies. While this passage doesn't directly contradict the above interpretation, it does make the claim that assemblies are necessary for the running of the state, indeed for the existence of the state itself—a claim that the passage in question leaves out entirely.

In the fifteenth chapter of book three, Rousseau argues against the existence of delegates or representatives. He says that “Sovereignty cannot be represented for the same reason that it cannot be alienated; its essence is the general will, and that will must speak for itself, or it does not exist: it is either itself or not itself: there is no intermediate possibility.” (SC III, 15, 5) What I glean from this is that it *is* important that every person has a say in the assemblies. If the will does not speak for itself, if every person does not speak for him or herself, then the general will does not exist. If representation does exist, or if not everyone is present at the assemblies, the assembly can not properly formulate the general will, since it cannot accurately depict the common interest. If the assembly cannot formulate the general will, then the sovereign does not exist. This is in direct contradiction with the interpretation that the content of the general will is what is important and not the participation of the people. The meetings themselves are allowed by our working interpretation, but representation, an occurrence that is completely acceptable under this interpretation, is directly denied by this new information. It would seem that either our initial interpretation of Rousseau is wrong or he has contradicted himself several times. In order to be appropriately charitable to his work, I will attempt to reinterpret the initial passage that has been causing us so much trouble so that it can reconcile with the claims that Rousseau has made at other points in his text.

“What generalizes the will is not so much the number of voices, as it is the common interest which unites them: for in this institution, everyone necessarily submits to the conditions which he imposes on others.” (SC II, 4, 7) How can we interpret this to fit with the further passages from *The Social Contract*, that is, how can we interpret this passage to mean that assemblies are required and that delegations and factions are not permitted, to mean that having every citizen accounted for at the assembly in order to find the common interest is important?

One possible interpretation is that Rousseau is not making a claim about what should be done in order to find the general will. Instead, he is making a claim about why the general will is in fact general. And this seems to be an appropriate interpretation—the general will is general not because it is the compilation of everyone’s interests, that is what Rousseau calls the will of all. The general will is general because in formulating the general will everyone is to consider themselves as part of a whole, to consider whether anyone would be adversely effected by the legislation their general will would require. No individual should be burdened by the state in a way that no one else in the same situation is burdened. The content of the passage is thus drastically changed, for it is no longer making a claim about the assembly—instead it is making a claim about why the general will is in fact general.

This interpretation allows for assemblies to be required—although it does not call for them outright, it definitely does not abandon them in the manner that our former interpretation did. Under this interpretation the fact of the assembly can still be a major point. It is just that the assembly is not so important as the idea that when the general will is finally formed it is formed in the correct way—that is, it is formed so that everyone is given equal consideration under the law and that no one is unduly burdened. This interpretation meshes well with the passage declaring that the sovereign cannot act without the people assembled. That passage requires an

assembly, and under our new interpretation the weight that assembly is given is not removed. Nor is it able to split into factions, as I will now show.

Our new interpretation restricts the actions in the assembly to those of individual people. Indeed, had we examined the passage more closely before we may have found the same evidence. When speaking of the common interest of a state, Rousseau is not speaking of the grouping of the interests of several factions or special interest groups. He is speaking of the common interest of the people as individuals, speaking for themselves and joining their wills in the sovereign. If those individual interests are masked by a faction or cabal, there will be no will of all from which to glean the outstanding interests and come up with the general will, since the factions will make it seem as though there are many people with the *exact same interests*, each speaking the exact same words to their community of individuals (or other factions, in this hypothetical case). Although it is possible for there to be many people with the same interests, the possibility that a cabal will have members that are all identical in their interests is slim. In addition, the interests of a cabal are those of its group, not those of the entire state. In order to find the interests of the entire state and not the interests of the largest group within the state, cabals and factions must not be permitted to voice group opinions in the assembly. It would appear, then, that the new interpretation as well as the old are harsh in their dealings with cabals and factions.

Once again, then, our new interpretation of “what generalizes the will is not so much the number of voices, as it is the common interest which unites them: for in this institution, everyone necessarily submits to the conditions which he imposes on others” (SC II, 4, 7) is that the will is general because it results from the common interests of the people. It is not general because all of the people have taken part in voicing their individual interests, it is general because it applies

equally to everyone. The assembly is still required along with everyone's individual voices (unrepresented, unaffiliated with factions or partial societies, and thinking of the whole while voting as an individual), but what truly makes the will general is its equal and even application to each citizen. This seems to be very similar to Cohen's interpretation, and is not problematic when held alongside other claims from *The Social Contract*.

## Works Cited

Cohen, Joshua. *A Free Community of Equals*. Manuscript. (FCE)

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract*. New York City: Hafner Press, 1975. (SC)