

General Will as the Basis of Popular Sovereignty in Rousseau's Philosophy

Dr. M. R. Rajalakshmi

Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Religion and Culture
Poompuhar College (Autonomous), Melaiyur.
Tamilnadu.

Abstract:

The concept of general will is the most fertile idea in the political writings of Rousseau. Rousseau is very vague about the theory of general will. To understand the theory of general will we must make a distinction between the terms "actual will" and "real will". The actual will of the individual is his impulsive and irrational will. Individual actions become unreasonable and senseless when they are done under the impact of actual will. It is based on self-interest. It does not concern itself with the general welfare of the society. It thinks only of the present. The actual will is narrow and self-conflicting.

The general will is sovereign. As it is the best will of all every one ought to follow the general will. The general will can legitimately command the obedience of every individual. By following the general will, the individual finds not only fulfilment but also true freedom. Rousseau writes: "Whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body." In other words, "This means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free." Rousseau feels that the state embodying the General Will must have absolute power over the members of the community.

Rousseau's theory of general will is not applicable in modern democracies. This is because Rousseau's general will is unrepresentable. It rules out indirect democracy. Although it is applicable to small states, it will promote only a weak government as the powers of such governments at any time may be modified or withdrawn by the sovereign community.

Keywords: General will, Sovereignty, Society, Government

1. Introduction

Jean Jacques Rousseau was born in the democratic Canton of Geneva in Switzerland on June 28, 1712 in a middle class family. He was interested in liberating man from the shackles of oppression, who although born free was found everywhere in chains. Rousseau wanted to reconstruct state and society in a way which would liberate man and restore to him his natural Liberty. This essay deals about General will as the basis of popular Sovereignty in Rousseau.

2. General Will

The General Will refers to the collective will of the people aimed at the common good. It's not just what most people want at a given moment, but what is best for society as a whole. In his practical philosophy, he emphasized the priority of the "general will" over the will of the individual. He maintained that the state came into existence through an agreement among men upon conditions of living together. In the condition of nature all men are equal, but through the in-fluences of society and civilization they become unequal. He advocated the revision of educational methods to make them in closer accord with "nature."

2.1. Rousseau's Conception of General Will

Distinction Between Actual and Real Will

The concept of general will is the most fertile idea in the political writings of Rousseau. Rousseau is very vague about the theory of general will. To understand the theory of general will we must make a distinction between the terms "actual will" and "real will". The actual will of the individual is his impulsive and irrational will. Individual actions become unreasonable and senseless when they are done under the impact of actual will. It is based on self-interest. It does not concern itself with the general welfare of the society. It thinks only of the present. The actual will is narrow and self-conflicting.

The real will is diametrically opposite to actual will. It is rational and hence promotes the general welfare of society. It is concerned with the common good of the community. It expresses the inner freedom of the individual. It resides permanently in the individual. It also promotes harmony between the individual and the society. It is pure and perfect leading to general welfare. The real will takes into consideration the permanent interest of the individual. Rousseau says that a man has both actual and real will

The general will is the sum-total or the synthesis of the real wills of the individuals in society. He says that on any particular issue, the general will will be generated as follows: First the actual wills of the individuals will appear. These wills will be based on the points of view of individuals. There will be selfishness in these wills. After this, the real will must come into existence. This is the result of a conflict between the selfish interests of the individuals and the general interests of the community. The actual wills thus get transformed into real wills. The general will however is not a compromise between the actual wills and the real will. It represents a higher type of the will of society. It represents "the common consciousness of the common good" after discussion and deliberation. Rousseau feels that it is very difficult to realise the general will.

Rousseau goes further and says that "My will which wills the best interests of the state is my best will, and is, indeed, more real than my will which wills my private interests.." The general will is morally superior to any other will. Rousseau observes that the general will is also an attribute of the state itself. The body politic is also a moral being being possessed of a will. To Rousseau the general will is something like a Group Mind as well as the compound of the best will of all citizens willing the best interests of the state. State.

Rousseau's theory of general will gives us an organic theory of state. It leads to a totalitarian state. This is in contrast to Hobbes and Locke who thought that the state is a machine or a device meant to promote the common good. Rousseau also identifies the general will as sovereignty.

The general will corresponds to the common interests of all members of the community. The will of each individual is merged into a general will. It is the expression of the common interest of the community. It is arrived at by asking each member to vote for what he believes to be the common good."

Rousseau makes a clear distinction between the general will and the will of all. The general will takes into consideration only the common interests. The will of all takes private interest into account. It is no more than a totality of particular wills or actual wills. The will of all, thus, is the sum-total of all the wills of the individuals of the community about their selfish interests. "The general will represents the synthesis of the wills common to all. It represents the totality of the real wills. The will of all represents the momentary good of individuals. The general will stands for the permanent good of the society, both for the present and the future. The difference between the will of all and the general will is based on their respective motivations i.e., service of self or the service of community.

3. Merits of the Theory of General Will

The theory of general will also contains certain merits. Firstly, his theory demonstrates that ultimately it is the people who are sovereign. It leads to the principle: “Will, not force is the basis of the State.” (Green) The true basis of democracy is not the force of the majority but the active and selfless will. This theory also gives importance to the principle of general good as against individual good. Rousseau wants to transform the state into a moral organism in which alone man can realise complete moral fulfilment.

The theory of general will emphasises the corporate character of society. Rousseau is the first modern writer to attempt to synthesise good government (of Hobbes) and self-government (of Locke) in the key concept of the general will. The realisation of what is best for the community is not enough. Rousseau also makes it clear that a healthy society should be based on the “common consciousness of a common end.”

4. General Will is Sovereign

Sovereignty

“Sovereignty according to Rousseau is the supreme and indivisible authority of the people expressed through the General Will.” In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau says that sovereignty belongs not to a king or ruler, but to the people collectively. This sovereign power is expressed through the General Will.

The general will is sovereign. As it is the best will of all every one ought to follow the general will. The general will can legitimately command the obedience of every individual. By following the general will, the individual finds not only fulfilment but also true freedom. Rousseau writes: “Whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body.” In other words, “This means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free.” Rousseau feels that the state embodying the General Will must have absolute power over the members of the community.

4.1. First Loyalty to General Will

The general will can also deal with the private interests of man. It alone can judge as to what constitutes public or private interests. No association can compete for the loyalty of citizens with the state. Rousseau transforms the general will into a jealous God representing a new civic religion, demanding strict obedience. He goes to the extent of saying that disobedience to the general will may be visited by the extreme penalty of death.

4.2. General Will Inalienable

The general will is inalienable and indivisible. It cannot be represented in parliamentary institutions. Rousseau observed, “As soon as a nation appoints representatives it is no longer free, it no longer exists.” He declared that England was only free during elections after which it is “enslaved and counts for nothing.” He advocated direct democracy by the people and rejected the representative form of democracy as untenable.

4.3. No Delegation of General Will

The general will cannot be delegated to any person, in any way. On this point he observed, “The moment there is a master, there is no longer a sovereign.” The general will can only be willed when people have assembled together. Rousseau expressed that the voice of the people is “the voice of God.”

4.4. General Will is Infallible

The general will is also infallible. In other words, “The general will is always right and tends to the public advantage.” This however does not imply that the state is always right—normally the deliberations of the people should promote the public good as our will is always for our own good. Rousseau says that the people may not be “corrupted”, but are often “deceived”. Although Rousseau feels that the powers of the



state are unlimited; it cannot act in a dictatorial manner. “If the state acts immorally, it is denying itself and is no true state.”

Rousseau does not like the existence of associations like church, trade unions, professional associations, etc. To him these will come in the way of realisation of the general will. Modern society, as we know, is plural in character. There is more diversity in the modern society. Rousseau’s theory of general will is not applicable to the modern society consisting of members of powerful associations representing conflicting interests.

Rousseau’s theory of general will is not applicable in modern democracies. This is because Rousseau’s general will is unrepresentable. It rules out indirect democracy. Although it is applicable to small states, it will promote only a weak government as the powers of such governments at any time may be modified or withdrawn by the sovereign community be forced to obey the state in the name of freedom. The state can never be unjust and the individuals can never protest against the state.

5. Conclusion

Therefore, Rousseau does not like the existence of associations like church, trade unions, professional associations, etc. To him these will come in the way of realisation of the general will. Modern society, as we know, is plural in character. There is more diversity in the modern society. Rousseau’s theory of general will is not applicable to the modern society consisting of members of powerful associations representing conflicting interests. Rousseau’s theory of general will is not applicable in modern democracies. This is because Rousseau’s general will is unrepresentable. It rules out indirect democracy. Although it is applicable to small states, it will promote only a weak government as the powers of such governments at any time may be modified or withdrawn by the sovereign community.

REFERENCES:

1. Avey, A.E. (1958). **Handbook in the history of Philosophy**. Barnes and noble Inc. New York.
2. Riley, P. (1986). **Rousseau and the General Will**. Princeton University Press.
3. Vaughan, C. E. (1915). **The Political Writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau**. Cambridge University Press.
4. Vijayaraghavan, S & Jayaram, R (1990). **The Political Thought**. Sterling publishers private limited.
5. Wokler, R. (2001). **Rousseau: A Very Short Introduction**. Oxford University Press.