

Part 4: Book 2, Chapters 1-3

Book 2, Ch. 1: That Sovereignty Is Inalienable

The general will alone directs the State toward the common good

Since the general will and common good are both phantoms, maybe this is actually true?!

Rousseau has already gone to the trouble of noting that all moral authority comes from the State. Under such circumstances, there is nothing the State could do that it cannot also call the “common good.” He has already shown the “general will” to be a hypothetical will of a non-existent person composed of some ethereal part of the people’s wills, but not necessarily contingent on any of them or any number of them agreeing with what the State decides to do.

As we press forward into the deeper parts of Rousseau’s work, as he becomes more and more sure that he’s “got us,” we need to be ever aware that there is nothing that tells anyone what the “general will” is other than what the State decides to do. It is a circular argument regardless of what you wreath it in.

The common good, in the same way, is what the State says it is, and need bear no resemblance to what a majority of the people believe is the common good.

“...if the clashing of particular interests made the establishment of societies necessary, the agreement of these very interests made it possible.”

The agreement of some interests makes some contracts possible. Rousseau’s Social Contract is a totalitarian nightmare in sheep’s clothing, until he proves otherwise. There is no reason to conclude that certain small agreements between men in a certain group requires them to give up all power to an unaccountable State apparatus. Solutions short of this could suffice, and Rousseau has not shown how they are insufficient.

Sovereignty is precisely the exercise of the general will, and therefore can never be alienated, and can only be represented by the Sovereign himself. Power may be transmitted, but not will.

This is just definitional hocus-pocus designed to hide when a group of oligarchs decides to take the State power and use it for their own benefit. Since there is no objective way to measure the general will, the exercise of Power can easily be twisted into a position of the general will.

All agreement between wills is transient.

Which is precisely why sensible men would not go from the State of Nature directly to unlimited and permanent State power over themselves.

“If then the people promises simply to obey, by that very act it dissolves itself and loses what makes it a people; the moment a master exists, there is no longer a Sovereign...”

The people are required to submit, but if they promise to obey, the Social Contract dissolves. If Rousseau is going to come out with some very clear and detailed limitations to the power of the State, he should have done so before saying that the State holds unlimited power over the people.

“This does not mean that the commands of the rulers cannot pass for general wills, so long as the Sovereign, being free to oppose them, offers no opposition. In such a case, universal silence is taken to imply the consent of the people. This will be explained later on.”

Again, Rousseau will explain later after he’s muddled your thinking more. What does it mean for the Sovereign to be free to oppose the commands of rulers, when Rousseau has already stated that all individuals must submit to the State? In what case can we expect true “universal silence?” Rousseau is papering over small protests in an attempt to later paper over larger ones, and interpreting a people cowed by the overwhelming military might of the State as being free to oppose but voicing no opposition.

Book 2, Ch. 2: That Sovereignty Is Indivisible

Indivisible for the same reason inalienable

This is nonsensical. States combine and separate all the time. The notion that one State cannot split into two is unrealistic and silly. Note also that inalienability doesn’t necessarily imply indivisibility, when the inalienable thing is vested in multiple entities. Of course such a thing can be divided, even if it cannot be alienated.

General will becomes law when declared; an “act of Sovereignty”

Rousseau seems to be making a press for a bizarre definition of law—neither Natural Law nor Law of Reason nor simple positive statute—the phantom Sovereign declares laws, even though a nonexistent man cannot speak.

Will of part of the people an “act of magistracy” at best—“a decree”

Rousseau is trying to separate “valid” acts of the State from usurpations, but Locke did a much better job in his chapters [On Usurpation and On Tyranny](#).

What practical method shall an individual use to separate “law” from “decree?” What methods will he use to argue that any given act by the State apparatus is one, rather than the other? What court can he fall back to in order to seek a redress of grievances? In Rousseau’s system, all of these shall be decided by the State functionaries, who can very easily conspire to rob him of his property and his freedom.

Political theorists wrong to divide Sovereignty into multiple arms; extended metaphor about body parts

The classical liberal desire to divide Sovereignty into multiple parts was an attempt to help reduce the tendency of State officials to band together in order to harm the people. The massive centralization Rousseau is demanding here is absolutely unnecessary, for the same reason that you might, in a voluntary society, interact with multiple different arbitration companies, multiple different security firms, multiple different insurance companies, etc. Rousseau makes this assertion with no argument except for a bizarre retreat into metaphor. It makes some kind of vague sense that if Rousseau is going to consider the Sovereign as a phantom person, that he doesn’t want to divide its powers, but practically there is no reason for this requirement other than his personal preference for a totalitarian State.

Acts of declaring war/peace not actually acts of Sovereignty but applications of law

There might be something interesting here in this idea, but he doesn't flesh it out here, or give clear definitions to make the distinction he's trying to make.

“...whenever Sovereignty seems to be divided, there is an illusion: the rights which are taken as being part of Sovereignty are really all subordinate, and always imply supreme wills of which they only sanction the execution.”

Rousseau is pretending to be “exact” here when he is failing to actually describe anything in detail. He has already made vast, sweeping statements about the power of the State, and he has already described this phantom thing called the Sovereign, but he is basically throwing out some gibberish here intended to sound intelligent while providing no actual insight.

Book 2, Ch. 3: Whether the General Will Is Fallible

The general will is always right, but the “deliberations of the people” are not.

There is no way to ascertain the general will, as we shall see below...

The will of all is frequently very different from the general will. The general will “considers only the common interest,” whereas individual wills take “private interest into account.”

There is no way to ascertain “common interest” but by communication between people. Since individual value scales cannot be compared except by voluntary trade, there is no way to dissociate private interest from the common interest, except by deception.

Take away from a collection of individual wills the “pluses and minuses that cancel one another, and the general will remains as the sum of the differences.”

There is no clear way to ascertain these differences outside of human interaction, but let's think about this a bit...

Imagine three people in a “society.” Each wants the other two's stuff, but those pluses and minuses cancel out, which is what I think Rousseau was trying to get at here. Imagine that two want to build a road, but one is opposed. Do those cancel out?

Imagine that two want to build a road, but one is indifferent—is that “general will?”

Now imagine that only one wants to build a road, but others are indifferent—is that still “general will?”

This seems sensible at first glance, but breaks down when you consider that we've basically reduced things to a voluntary society, one with no Social Contract. Because for the others to actually be indifferent is not actually possible if building the road will be done partially at their expense; they either agree to whatever costs will be required to make the road, or they dissent and therefore the road is not built.

Clearly, Rousseau is not trying to visualize a voluntary system here. He has been clear about the necessity of citizens to submit to the authority of the State. So what the hell is he trying to pull? Again, he creeps up on the Iron Law of Oligarchy, and seems to be just whistling past that graveyard.

“If, when the people, being furnished with adequate information, held its deliberations, the citizens had no communication one with another, the grand total of the small differences would always give the general will, and the decision would always be good.”

There is no source of information on the broad situation of society but the reports of other people. This is an impossible requirement.

Factions conglomerate individual wills into groupings which confound attempts to express the general will. The number of votes is reduced to the number of associations, rather than the number of citizens.

When one faction grows large enough to outvote the rest, the resulting policies are “no longer a sum of small differences, but a single difference; in this case there is no longer a general will...”

This is fundamentally inconsistent. If one faction growing is destruction of the general will, then what happens if that faction grows to encompass everyone, or everyone minus one? This is as close to voluntary full agreement as you can get, yet every step along the path makes things worse, according to Rousseau.

Therefore, there can be no partial societies within the State, and “each citizen should think only his own thoughts.” If partial societies are unavoidable, there should be as many as possible, and all as small as possible.

The result of this would be no widespread agreement on anything, therefore dissolving the State. There must be some threshold for determining the general will based on the actions of the citizenry, or there is no “there” there. Another major self-contradiction leading to all kinds of deliberately muddled weirdness.