

Part 9: Book 3, Chapter 1: Government in General

Rousseau begins by warning us we must read this chapter carefully.

Because he hasn't already demonstrated his inability to remain consistent and make sense. But let's play along, just for the hell of it.

First, he posits that any action is the combination of two causes: the first he calls "moral" and is best imagined as the will behind the action. The second is physical, and is the actual motive force behind the action. Rousseau's example is a man choosing to walk across the room. His will is the "moral" cause and his feet the physical. A paralyzed man lacks the physical cause and an unmotivated man lacks the "moral" cause.

This doesn't seem particularly objectionable yet. Again, Rousseau starts off his chapter sounding vaguely reasonable. Is it another trap?

Rousseau then claims "the legislative power belongs to the people, and can belong to it alone." The executive power, in contrast, can only consist of specific acts (decrees and enforcement?) which fall outside the scope of the Sovereign, "whose acts must always be laws."

The main problem here is that realistic systems generally have the people delegate the legislative power to a body of legislators, as well. Rousseau has even talked about legislators, and he's also suggested [it's a good idea for legislators to use subterfuge and propaganda to undermine the morals and customs of a people](#) (Book 2, Ch. 12), should that legislators perspective of the general will approve of that undermining. It's worth remembering that the natural will is still something that cannot be measured.

The general will is the "moral" cause behind actions of the State, but it needs a physical cause to implement any of its desires. This necessitates the existence of an intermediate body which Rousseau calls "government."

Okay, now we have a problem because we're attributing a real will to a fictional person. Again, this is something that can never be measured, so the intermediate is necessarily going to either be operating off of guesses or personal preference. Guess which one is most likely as time goes on...

He then rather confusingly calls the members of the government "kings" or "governors," and the body as a whole is called the "prince."

Rousseau tries to justify this in the text, but it seems to me like another set of unnecessarily confusing terms that have new definitions that conflict with their usual meanings. This, of course, muddies discourse, making it harder to nail down any of Rousseau's arguments.

The people employ a prince in order to physically enact the desires of the general will.

This is similar to the Lockean perspective (or maybe post-Lockean) that the government is an agent/servant of the people, to which powers are delegated in order to achieve certain ends.

The problem with Rousseau's conception here is that the general will is unknowable, the power of the government is unlimited, and the ends are uncertain.

“I call then *government*, or supreme administration, the legitimate exercise of the executive power, and prince or magistrate the man or the body entrusted with that administration.”

Rousseau keeps using this “supreme” language when he also argues that failure of the government to aim at certain ends (that cannot be measured) also dissolves its authority. The problem is that no group of citizens can ever prove that the “general will” is not being served, and the government has already rendered all of its citizens into [helpless, dependent serfs](#) (Book 2, Ch. 7).

Orders flow from the Sovereign to the government, to the individual people.

Conversion of law to decree to action. This makes logical sense, except that the starting point is a nebulous non-entity and all of Rousseau’s arguments about it aren’t making it any more clear.

If any of these three: Sovereign, magistrate, or subjects, try to usurp the positions of the others, “the State is dissolved and falls into despotism or anarchy.”

By this criterion, States dissolve all the time. Practically instantly. Locke relented into allowing taxation, prerogative, dominion, conscription, etc. because he feared that otherwise States would rapidly dissipate, even relatively good ones. Rousseau, on the other hand, has created a standard that cannot be measured but which any deviation from results in the immediate dissolution of the State.

Quite ephemeral an entity for something that Rousseau claims is indivisible, all-powerful, and permanent.

“...as there is only one mean proportional between each relation, there is also only one good government possible for a State. But, as countless events may change the relations of a people, not only may different governments be good for different peoples, but also for the same people at different times.”

Pleas for “good government” without any actual advice or limitations. Useless.

Rousseau then discusses the effect of larger populations on the State. He notes that a citizen in a State of 10k people has only 1/10,000th part of influence, and proportionally a citizen in a State of 100k people has only 1/100,000th part of influence. Therefore, the larger the State, the less the liberty.

This seems rational but it leads to the conclusion that larger states are worse, in general. It’s also not true if your aim is for a strictly limited State (whether that ideal can be achieved or not). It also reeks of totalitarian thinking, as if the State is going to micromanage every action of every citizen, which is morally repugnant and economically suicidal.

He spends a little time using mathematical jargon but soon notes that these things to which he’s giving mathematical jargon can’t be measured to the necessary accuracy, and therefore the math language is effectively a metaphor, and attempts to ridicule his system by picking at the math language are invalid.

Pro Tip: Don’t start a metaphor if you’re just going to abandon it. Even more important, don’t use a metaphor and then claim no implications or extensions of that metaphor can be valid criticisms.

Rousseau states that, as population increases, particular wills are more likely to differ from the general will in larger ways, and thus “the more should the repressive force be increased. The government, then, to be good, should be proportionately stronger as the people is more numerous.”

There is an element of truth here. Larger groups of people tend to incorporate more disagreements. However, the solution is not to progressively tighten the noose on everyone but rather to expand the sphere of actions that people can take without government interference, up to the point where aggression, fraud, etc. are forbidden.

The whole point of the classical liberal movement is that more differentiated groups of people can live under the same government, if that government does not play favorites on issues where those groups have differences.

As the force with which the government is endowed to keep the people under control grows, so should the force of the Sovereign “for keeping the government in hand.”

Since the Sovereign is a fictitious person with no real existence, there is no way to increase the force it wields. All that can be done is to increase the power of the government, which inevitably leads to certain groups within the body politic becoming permanent minorities with all the problems that entails. Civil unrest, rebellion, assassination, etc.

“The government is on a small scale what the body politic which includes it is on a great one. It is a moral person endowed with certain faculties, active like the Sovereign and passive like the State, and capable of being resolved into other similar relations.”

This adds yet another fictitious “moral person” to the mix. Also worth noting that Rousseau’s definitions for Sovereign and State from [Book 1, Ch. 6](#) are in conflict with this new metaphor. From that earlier chapter: “[the Republic or body politic] is called by its members State when passive, Sovereign when active, and Power when compared with others like itself...”

To summarize, “let us rest content with regarding government as a new body within the State, distinct from the people and the Sovereign, and intermediate between them.”

Intermediate between something which does not exist and cannot be measured, and a group of helpless and dependent husks with no power or wealth. Even if the general will could be measured, what stops such a body from becoming a pack of usurpers?

What objective criterion could a group of people use to determine whether the government is acting as a pack of usurpers or not?

The government only exists through the Sovereign, as an executor of its general will. “Thus the dominant will of the prince is, or should be, nothing but the general will or the law; his force is only the public force concentrated in his hands, and as soon as he tries to base any absolute and independent act on his own authority, the tie that binds the whole together begins to be loosened. If finally the prince should come to have a particular will more active than the will of the Sovereign, and should employ the public force in his hands in obedience to this particular will, there would be, so to speak, two Sovereigns, one rightful and the other actual, the social union would evaporate instantly, and the body politic would be dissolved.”

Government should be good and do only good things! If not, society is dissolved. By these criteria, no government in history was legitimate, but if that were the case Rousseau should have simply said so and called it a day. Instead, he says that perfect or ideal governments indeed have very much power and may very long persist, and all of his bases for judgment are not something anyone can measure or prove.

The government must have “a true existence,” “a particular personality,” “a sensibility common to its members,” “and a force of will of its own.” Rousseau claims that this calls for the existence of groups and privileges which subdivides the government and gives offices honors in proportion to their difficulty.

At this point, the institution of divisions and fiefdoms within the government might help to direct its malice at other parts of the government some of the time. A brief respite for the people.

The government should always be ready to sacrifice itself for the people and never the people to the government.

And how many government agents should be able to dance on the head of a pin?

Look, the systems of separation of powers, written constitutions, checks and balances, etc. proposed by the classical liberals are not perfect. If I thought they were, I would be a classical liberal and not an anarchist. However, they are a far sight better than this nebulous pile of utopian gibberish. Nobody needs a writer to tell them that governments ought to be good. Even the monarchists believe that. The question is, how to deal with the special moral status that governments typically enjoy, and how to distinguish when that moral status has been nullified by egregious actions of the government.

Rousseau is providing none of this. He has created artificial persons based on some vague combination of a bunch of individuals, assigned that non-existent fiction a will, and vested unlimited power into a body to enact that hypothetical will. He posits that the Sovereign is always right, but there is no way to actually measure what this phantom actually wants. Therefore, the people can have no way to demonstrate that the actual, real agents of this State have violated its will.

He basically creates a totalitarian state and says “It ought to do good,” and leaves the people no strength to resist it. Unless he turns something around really soon, it appears to be a garbage ideology designed to twist the ideals of limited government back into absolute control.

The government, despite being an artificial body that’s the work of another artificial body, still has vigor and “more or less robust health.”

Because adding on yet more vague descriptive criteria will help at this point?

The “various relations” between the State, government, and body politic can result in a good or pernicious government depending on how those relations stand at any given time.

Yet bad governments instantly dissolve the body politic? Obviously Rousseau’s assertion that the body politic dissolves under such conditions is not something he genuinely believes.