

## **Part 16: Book 4, Chapters 1-3**

### Book 4, Chapter 1: That the General Will Is Indestructible

**“As long as several men in assembly regard themselves as a single body, they have only a single will which is concerned with their common preservation and general well-being. ...[T]he common good is everywhere clearly apparent, and only good sense is needed to perceive it.”**

The idea that a group of men in assembly have some “single will” is something that is impossible to prove and common sense seems to suggest it is false. Rousseau is falsely collectivizing their wills and circumstances to hypothesize that there’s something they can do for common preservation and general well-being, and that this hypothetical will corresponds to *that*.

The problem is that the common good is frequently very much not apparent. That’s why there are so many arguments for economic interventionism, and why it took so long to “crack the code” on [marginal value theory](#). There are an unlimited number of things to do, and whether any specific thing is good or not is usually not obvious, and there are an unlimited number of trade-offs to consider, as well as the effects of some policy at various points in time.

**“Men who are upright and simple are difficult to deceive”**

This is not necessarily true. It’s an ironic generalization taken to an unrealistic extreme.

**“When, among the happiest people in the world, bands of peasants are seen regulating affairs of State under an oak, and always acting wisely, can we help scorning the ingenious methods of other nations, which make themselves illustrious and wretched with so much art and mystery?”**

First off, the fact that they remain peasants suggests that they might not be acting wisely. I heard this somewhere but I can’t remember who said it: We cannot assume that our early culture was like that of primitive cultures now. Obviously there must have been some difference to explain why we advanced and they did not.

**“A State so governed needs very few laws; and, as it becomes necessary to issue new ones, the necessity is universally seen.”**

The problem here is that Rousseau associates unanimity or near-unanimity with correctness. This is not the case. Think of any sort of mass-hysteria fueled crime against an innocent, and you’ll understand what I mean. We have to recognize that this sort of thing can happen at any scale.

**“But when the social bond begins to be relaxed and the State to grow weak, when particular interests begin to make themselves felt ... the common interest changes and finds opponents: opinion is no longer unanimous; the general will ceases to be the will of all; contradictory views and debates arise; and the best advice is not taken without question.”**

Division of labor and the accumulation of capital goods allows people to distinguish themselves over time. For this reason, one expects any successful society to gradually end up with more groups over time, and for those groups to become more differentiated. Having a limited State (assuming such a thing is possible) allows it to represent a wide variety of groups with different interests, because it does not take sides in any place where they vehemently disagree.

Therefore, Rousseau's totalitarian framework inevitably leads to this sort of conflict, when a more voluntary system would have less such conflict.

Furthermore, Rousseau's implication that "the best advice" ought to be "taken without question" is fundamentally nonsensical. How are we to determine "the best advice?" Why must there actually *be* one thing that is "the best advice," and not a variety of things that have varying utility?

**When the State is dying, private interests call themselves the "public good" and are passed under the name of laws.**

This is one of the drawbacks of Rousseau's "false person" idea for the State. He has cornered himself into saying that [all men should try to help the State live as long as possible](#), since "life" is obviously good, rather than observing that some associations may be naturally limited in time, and that people should let such associations lapse and make new ones which still serve them.

Instead, we end up with a stubborn class of tyrants hell-bent on keeping the State "alive" when its "death" is really no loss to anyone not using it as a front for parasitic activity.

**Even when this happens, the general will is intact, but subordinated to other wills. The question posed to any prospective law changes from "Is this to the advantage of the State?" to "Is this to the advantage of some person/group?"**

Of course, it is impossible to prove whether any individual is thinking one question or the other, incentives lean toward the latter, and Rousseau presumes that the "advantage of the State" is good by definition, especially after he has complained so much about States becoming bad.

Book 4, Chapter 2: Voting

**The approach to unanimity is a way to measure the approach to the general will.**

Rather, it makes more sense to say, "Only that which is unanimous is the general will." Of course, people who have already decided that a coercive State must overpower the people will refuse the alternative.

**The existence of multiple castes can lead to a condition where there are "two States in one," as in Rome's patricians and plebeians. But even when these two groups quarrel, Rousseau says it is still common to have plebiscites proceed smoothly, when government bodies do not interfere with them.**

If there are "two States in one," then each group is ["forced, but not bound, to obey"](#) (Book 3, Ch. 10). This whole thing is a nightmare plunder war of all against all, to paraphrase Bastiat.

It's not clear that all plebiscites proceeded smoothly, and one possible reason that they may have been perceived to run smoothly is precisely the system of majority vote. Such a system makes all simple votes seem clear and smooth in retrospect, regardless of whether those majorities were gained by persuasion or veiled threats.

**However, unanimity also occurs when the citizens, “having fallen into servitude, have lost both liberty and will. ... [D]eliberation ceases, and only worship or malediction is left.” Example of Roman Senate under Otho cursing Vitellus while making noise to ensure nobody is liable should Vitellus gain power.**

Rousseau says arguments are evidence of either a weak State or a tyrannical one. Therefore, if there are arguments, there is no legitimacy?

How to objectively differentiate between “true” deliberation and mere argument? How to differentiate between people convinced by logic, by evidence, by rhetoric?

Rousseau offers no answers.

**The social compact requires unanimous consent. “[C]ivil association is the most voluntary of all acts.”**

“Voluntary” is not really a sliding scale. In a voluntary transaction, you can differentiate between complaint and dissent, because dissenters withdraw.

To use my beloved Netflix example, when Netflix decides to raise its price from \$13/month to \$15/month, there will be those who approve, thinking they will get better content, those who complain but continue to pay, and those who genuinely dissent and end their subscriptions.

Since one cannot end his subscription to the State, the line between complaint and dissent is blurred.

**Opponents to the social compact cannot be included into it by force, but “are foreigners among citizens” until the State is instituted, at which point “residence constitutes consent.”**

So they’re foreigners for the five minutes it takes to create a Rousseauian government, and then their consent is implied.

**Footnote 1: The above applies “to a free State,” since various circumstances “may detain a man in a country against his will.”**

Rousseau, of course, makes it impossible to draw a clear line between a “free” State and an “unfree” one.

**Majority vote binds the rest. They have agreed as part of the compact to all laws passed by the Sovereign, even to be punished for breaking those laws.**

This is where limited government (if possible), could step in. Perhaps they have only agreed to obey certain types of laws. Why not? Rousseau is silent.

**The proposing and passing of laws happens under the question, “Does this conform with the general will?” Each man gives his opinion, and the majority represents the general will.**

Unless the majority is deceived, or parasitic, or...

**“This presupposes, indeed, that all the qualities of the general will still reside in the majority: when they cease to do so, whatever side a man may take, liberty is no longer possible.”**

There is literally no objective way to show this. It is rare for a government to acknowledge that it has lost the support of the will of the people, and even rarer for it to actually take responsibility and dissolve and abdicate.

Therefore, Rousseau’s idea that the Sovereign laws are only valid when “all the qualities of the general will still reside in the majority” is an impossible and unverifiable standard that practically no State will abide.

Furthermore, Rousseau has [already said \(Book 2, Ch. 7\)](#) that the State needs to confiscate the lion’s share of the people’s wealth, making them destitute and defenseless.

**It may not be that some questions require a simple majority. “First, the more grave and important the questions discussed, the nearer should the opinion that is to prevail approach unanimity. Secondly, the more the matter in hand calls for speed, the smaller the prescribed difference in the numbers of votes may be allowed to become.”**

This is the first time Rousseau has suggested that simple majorities don’t simply carry the day. There’s something interesting here to be explored, but Rousseau just ends the chapter.

Book 4, Chapter 3: Elections

**Two possible methods: Choice and Lot.**

False dilemma?

**Montesquieu says the lot “is democratic in nature” and “is a way of making choice that is unfair to nobody; it leaves each citizen a reasonable hope of serving his country.” Rousseau: “These are not reasons.”**

There are obvious reasons put just below the surface. Rousseau is clearly using an unfairly dense reading of Montesquieu, to the point where he basically just made himself look like he has IQ trouble.

I can make use of the same fallacy, too: What does that say about the rest of his argumentation?

**“In every real democracy, magistracy is not an advantage, but a burdensome charge which cannot justly be imposed on one individual rather than another.” The law lays the charge to magistracy.**

Everyone who has ever seen a government anywhere knows this is almost never, if not never true.

**In aristocracy, “the prince chooses the prince” and “voting is rightly ordered.”**

Some might call this logic circular. I assume Rousseau would prefer we say it has no loose ends. (Dilbert)

**Extended comparison between Geneva and Venice.**

Rousseau has already cautioned us that things that work in certain places might not work in others. These extended historical/regional examples and comparisons don't really help.

And in this case, Rousseau takes a bunch of different things that share *some* similarities and says they are exactly equivalent, which is a stretch at best and more likely deceptive.

**“[I]n a real democracy... equality would everywhere exist in morals and talents as well as in principles and fortunes.”**

Comme gobbledygook. Equality in morals is unmeasurable. Equality in talents destroys the division of labor. Equality in principles is deliberately confusing. Equality in fortunes is poverty and bare subsistence.

Equality in principles is perhaps the closest to non-disastrous in that list, but “principles” is something Rousseau hasn't really talked about or defined. Then we can remember [Book 2, Ch. 12](#) when Rousseau said that things like culture and convention are part of the laws, and his divisions in that chapter. Maybe “principles” are part of that confused stack of ideas, but Rousseau isn't clear.

**Lot and vote have no place in monarchy. To add them in where they weren't before is “to change the form of government.”**

And if Rousseau didn't place such an absurd emphasis on man's duty [“to prolong as much as possible the life of the State” \(Book 3, Ch. 11\)](#), and if he didn't say that [“the established government should never be touched except when it comes to be incompatible with the public good” \(Book 3, Ch. 18\)](#), this wouldn't be so scary to him. It's a cage of his own making.

**Next up is “an account of ... the Roman constitution” and how it gave and counted opinions when the people were assembled.**

Next chapter is extremely long and will likely be the topic of a full video.