# ROUSSEAU'S GENERAL WILL AND THE PROBLEM OF RECOGNITION

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While its interpretive career is a long and storied one, the meaning of Rousseau's general will remains unsettled. As one commentator put it, there are as many interpretations of the general will as there are interpreters of Rousseau.[1] It is sometimes argued that it should be understood as a higher will, meaning that it gains its legitimacy by according with an absolute immutable notion of justice. Alternatively, it is sometimes argued that it should be understood as an aggregate of individual wills, gaining its legitimacy from contractual consent. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive alternatives. It can be argued that both are required for there to be a general will and that it only exists where individuals consent to be governed by desires and actions that are in accordance with an absolute conception of justice. I believe that such interpretations are ultimately misguided. The main problem with them is that they neglect Rousseau's treatment of the problem of recognition, or, *amour-propre,* and the central role that it plays in his theory of the general will. The general will in its broadest sense is the will that an individual possesses while driven to obtain recognition as a worthy community member in the eyes of his fellows. In a political context, it is the character of one's will when one is driven to be recognized as a citizen.

A seemingly straightforward reading of the general will suggests that it is an accumulation of individual wills bound together by the consent given at the formation of the social contract. Leo Strauss offers this type of interpretation. With regard to natural law, Strauss claims that Rousseau rejects any transcendent notion of justice. He writes, "The source of the positive law, and nothing but the positive law, is the general will; a will inherent or immanent in properly constituted society takes the place of the transcendental natural law."[2] Rousseau's writings lend themselves to this conclusion. In his *Geneva Manuscript*, he offers a critique of natural law, which is often taken as a response to Diderot's notion of a general will. One of Rousseau's main points is that there is no absolute immutable standard of justice that can be accessed by, agreed to, and obliging on human beings in the state of nature. Natural man does not yet posses

a level of understanding sophisticated enough to know the elements of transcendent morality if they do in fact exist. He claims that, "the laws of justice and equality mean nothing to those who live both in the freedom of the state of nature and are not subject to the needs of the social state."[3] On Rousseau's view, the dictates of morality must first grow from the needs that drive an originally ignorant and peaceful human species.

In the same work, Rousseau also claims "law comes before justice and not justice before the law."[4] For Rousseau, this would seem to mean that the general will serves as the determinant factor for law, and law serves as the basis for justice. This suggests that whatever the general will is, it is not constrained by something above or outside of itself. Yet, this only excludes the possibility of referencing something that transcends human convention when considering matters of political legitimacy. It does not necessarily exclude the possibility that human nature can serve as the standard for justice.

On Strauss' reading, however, Rousseau also dismisses nature itself as a possible foundation for political morality. The reason for this is that Rousseau has divorced his conception of human nature from natural teleology. According to Strauss, Rousseau has radicalized the theory of a state of human nature, and drawn the conclusion that human nature is devoid of any standards that can guide human beings towards perfection. For Rousseau, the only possible natural standard has been reduced to mere perfectibility, which is only a capacity for humanity to perfect or to corrupt itself. Strauss writes, "Rousseau's natural man…is not the rational animal but the animal which is a free agent or, more precisely, which possesses an almost unlimited perfectibility or malleability."[5]

Strauss concludes that for Rousseau the historical process must produce moral standards, because there is no basis for them in a transcendent source or in human nature. Strauss understands Rousseau's enigmatic claim that the general will cannot err in this light. The general will itself produces moral standards, and by "merely being is what it ought to be."[6] The law determines justice. When we inquire into the legitimacy of the law, it is grounded in respect for the capacity of human beings to perfect or corrupt themselves, i.e., perfectibility. With regard to the social contract, this means that the true foundation for legitimacy is found in the consent that the people have given to live in a Rousseauean republic in which their ability to formulate and live by the laws that they have taken part in creating is secured.

All of this leads to what I have called a straightforward reading of the general will. The general will is not a will in relation to a transcendent moral principle like justice. It is not a will in reference to a teleological conception of human nature. The general will is simply an aggregation of various individual wills bound together by the consent given at the foundation of the republic. It cannot err because it serves as the foundation for what is right and what is wrong. The general will's purpose is to secure the ability for a given group of individuals to forge their interdependent destiny for better or worse.

One of the consequences of the straightforward reading of the general will is that it would seem to make political morality arbitrary. As Strauss puts it, "cannibalism is as just as its opposite."[7] Put differently, morality becomes dependent upon politics, and politics gains its legitimacy from a bundle of individual preferences. However, for

various reasons, when one reads Rousseau, it is difficult to maintain this conclusion. In particular, his moral philosophy and political philosophy seem inextricably linked, but it is not exactly clear which one takes precedence in his thought.

David Lay Williams has recently advanced the argument that Rousseau does hold that there are transcendent moral absolutes. In contrast to the Straussian reading, he argues that the general will is constrained by Rousseau's conception of justice. Williams' intention is not to displace the fundamental importance of the general will in Rousseau's political thought. Instead, he attempts to draw attention to the importance of understanding Rousseau's conception of justice in relation to the general will. He writes, "The question in understanding [Rousseau's] work is which of these two principles—the General Will or Justice—is primary or fundamental."[8] Against Strauss, Williams claims that justice has the prominent place in Rousseau's political program.

This does not necessarily mean that Strauss' emphasis on individual freedom and consent is misguided. Williams draws a distinction between two different kinds of consent. One can understand consent as entirely opened. In this case, one can consent to anything at all. Or, one can consent to certain conditions, and this may be called constrained consent. On Williams' reading, Rousseau's intention is to secure consent to a just political society. This does not mean that it is simply just to live in a state in which the general will is sovereign and that the formulation of the general will then becomes the standard for justice from that point forward. Instead, it means that the general will is only the general will insofar as it is formulated in relation to justice. Put differently, the concept of justice constrains and even characterizes the general will to some degree.

Williams' interpretation can be called the "ideal construction of the general will."[9] With regard to the consequences of such a view, he writes, "The idea of justice, according to Rousseau, is universal, completely beyond human alteration. People cannot make something just by willing it to be so. Rousseau can only hope that their will can somehow be brought to see the idea of justice."[10] Insofar as this can be achieved, the will gains moral rectitude. It can never err, because if it is indeed the general will, it is always formulated in relation to and constrained by justice.

Williams' interpretation depends upon the ability to demonstrate that Rousseau accepts transcendent moral absolutes and applies them to his political philosophy. It is at least clear that Rousseau holds that an aspect of morality is transcendent. He writes, "Whatever is good and in accordance with order is so by the nature of things, independently of human conventions."[11] With regard to justice, he writes, "There is without doubt a universal justice emanating from reason alone."[12] However, it is not as easy to demonstrate that Rousseau intends to apply a transcendent conception of justice to his theory of the general will. One issue that does speak in Williams' favor is that Rousseau claims that there is often a difference between the will of all and the general will.[13] However, Rousseau is unclear about what the difference between the two actually is.

The straightforward reading and the ideal construction of the general will make certain assumptions with regard to the problem that Rousseau's political theory sets out to resolve. The first assumes that Rousseau is primarily concerned with the issue of dependence on the wills of others. The result is that the problem that Rousseau ad-

dresses becomes truncated to an exclusively legal and political problem. The resolution is to create a political society in which justice becomes the product and obligation of all alike, which allows all to become equally free due to the fact that they partake in giving the law to themselves. The second reading assumes that Rousseau addresses the problem of injustice. In this case, the problem becomes something akin to an epistemological problem. The resolution consists in the cultivation of moral knowledge against which human desires and actions can be guided or constrained.

All of this overlooks the fact that Rousseau deals with a fundamentally social problem, the problem of recognition. While his main work that diagnoses the problematic that he works with, the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, can be read as a narrative that details the growth of dependence on others and the political institution of injustice, it should primarily be viewed as what Frederick Neuhouser has called a theodicy of self-love.[14] Rousseau claims that *all* the harms human beings heap upon one another, not excluding relations of dependence and injustice, stem from *amour-propre*, which can be described as the drive for recognition in the eyes of others.[15] He writes, "*Amour-propre* is only a relative sentiment, artificial and born in society, which inclines each individual to have a greater esteem for himself than for anyone else, inspires in men all the harm they do to one another, and is the true source of honor."[16] A careful reading of the *Second Discourse* shows how this sentiment or passion, described by Rousseau as something like a fundamental drive, fuels relations of dependence and allows for the social psychology underlying an unjust political system to flourish.

It would seem that Rousseau takes *amour-propre* as a given psychological fact of social life. He contrasts it with *amour-de-soi*, a state of existence in which a particular human being is "the sole spectator to observe him, as the sole being in the universe to take an interest in him, and as the sole judge of his own merit."[17] *Amour-propre* is activated when identity becomes an issue due to the fact that a human being is confronted with a relationship with another and must find a form of standing in relation to them. In the midst of the human relationships that are integral to society, the security of identity for the individual is highly dependent on the evaluation and acceptance of others. *Amour-propre* is the drive whose end can only be meaningfully achieved through an exterior spectator who acts as a judge who affirms that identity. The problem that this engenders has to do with the fact that the drive for recognition might take any number of objects and this may have any given number of social consequences.[18] For example, the Second Discourse presents an example of the consequences of an inflamed *amour-propre* directed at the perfection of materialistic individualism. Ultimately, on Rousseau's account inflamed *amour-propre* aimed at individualism potentially creates and certainly underlies an illegitimate political society in which one or a group of individuals rule over the multitude, a state of affairs representing the exact antithesis of absolute popular sovereignty.

It would be a mistake to claim that Rousseau means *amour-propre* to be understood as exclusively negative.[19] He writes, "*Amour-propre* is a useful but dangerous instrument."[20] Again, the dangers of *amour-propre* are dependent upon its object. Rousseau's scorn is usually directed at the type of individuality that ultimately depends upon distinguishing the self by placing it above another, since this serves as

the root of relationships of dominance, cruelty, and other injustices. Rousseau understands *amour-propre* as something that is impossible to extinguish, but as a drive that is susceptible to manipulation. Examples of well-directed *amour-propre* abound in his work. He praises Socrates as a wise philosopher and Cato as a noble citizen. Both figures have managed to seek and find recognition in useful places. The first sought his identity as a benefactor of the human race and the second as a patriotic citizen.[21] The antithesis of these figures can be found in Rousseau's scathing descriptions of his philosophical contemporaries, whom he chastises in the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* as hypocrites who purport to seek individual fame and immortality for benefiting the human race, while ultimately overlooking the more practical goal of civic virtue.[22]

For Rousseau, education presents the best possibility to direct *amour-propre* towards a useful end.[23] While he distinguishes between domestic and public education, finding one's identity in citizenship is a product of the latter. Rousseau warns that "it is too late to change our natural inclinations when they have become entrenched, and habit has combined with *amour-propre*."[24] But, the combination of habit and *amour-propre* is an inevitable state of affairs, since habit solidifies around the core of our drive to be recognized as a given identity. This is why education must begin with the young. The main danger for a political body is when it becomes habitual to seek a form of individuality free from civic virtue.[25] Public education attempts to replace that destructive end of *amour-propre* with citizenship. Rousseau offers various possibilities to achieve the task. The key is to make one love their fatherland. That can be achieved by making the individual aware of the benefits that it confers upon them, the main benefit consisting of security in relation to others.[26] Besides this, the individual is to be brought to love the fatherland by measures aimed at encouraging him to understand himself as an inseparable part of the political body, tasks that philosophy and history may help to affect by broadening one's self-conception, ideas, and feelings.[27]

One of the more specific tasks of public education is to mold the character of the will by encouraging the appropriate ends for *amour-propre*. Rousseau claims that the drive to be a citizen, which is also the process of embodying civic-virtue, entails that one's "private will conforms on all matters with the general will."[28] The general will must align with one's particular will, which is to say, one's desires must be structured in such a way that they are harmonious with the ends of political community. The object of *amour-propre* must be individual identity as an inseparable part of the whole of the political community, the merging of the individual with the citizen.[29]

By making the general will sovereign, Rousseau suggests that legitimate authority must ultimately rest upon the character of one's will when actively driven to be a citizen. In fact, citizenship is characterized as the active participation in sovereign authority, which is also the exercise of the general will.[30] The social contract rests upon the agreement with others to exercise this will in tandem in all political matters. A particular will, by contrast, cannot forge a bond between one's interests and the political community because its object is linked with attaining individuality rather than citizenship. In the end, it is not the appropriate will for political community because it places individual identity outside of the whole rather than within it, and a citizen is a mere fraction of a unity by definition.[31]

When a law is proposed, one is asked "whether it does or does not conform to the general will that is theirs."[32] One who has not undergone a thorough public education cannot find the general will within their own interest, and will always understand it to be in opposition to their particular will. The reason is that such a person will not understand what it is to be a citizen and cannot be driven to be one, which leaves the possibility of a general will for such an individual impossible. Rousseau realizes that the general character of the will necessary for political community cannot be left to chance. The object of the drive for recognition at the heart of social interaction must be manipulated in order to affect the character of the will. In other words, public education must be aimed at making citizens, which in turn molds a general will necessary for the citizen to be sovereign politically.

In sum, interpretations that take the general will to be a resolution of the problem of dependence on the wills of others or injustice are at the very least incomplete and inadequate accounts of its nature. They tend to overlook the fact that Rousseau is dealing with a fundamentally social problem. Inflamed *amour-propre* directed at the wrong objects is dangerous for political community. Besides Rousseau's contention that it can lead to an illegitimate political system in which dependence and injustice are institutionalized, it can also make it impossible for an individual to will generally which means that it makes citizenship impossible. To miss this point is to occlude Rousseau's preoccupation with public education and its role in shaping the character of the general will through the careful guidance of *amour-propre*. The role of public education is to offer the ideal of citizenship—which entails recognition as a citizen from other citizens—as an end for *amour-propre* in order to shape and activate the will towards its general character.

## Notes

1. W.T. Jones, "Rousseau's General Will and the Problem of Consent," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987): 105.
2. Leo Strauss, *Introduction to Political Philosophy* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1989) 91.
3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract, Discourse on the Virtue Most Necessary for a Hero, Political Fragments, and Geneva Manuscript: The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. vol. 4. eds. Roger Masters and Christopher Kelly (Hanover: UP of New England, 1994), 81-82.
4. Rousseau 113.
5. Strauss, *Introduction to Political Philosophy* 90.
6. Strauss 91.
7. Strauss 53.
8. David Lay Williams, "Justice and the General Will: Affirming Rousseau's Ancient Orientation," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 66.3 (2005): 384.
9. David Lay Williams, *Rousseau's Platonic Enlightenment* (University Park: Pennsylvania State U, 2007), 115. This is Williams' own phrase used to characterize his view.
10. Williams 115.
11. Rousseau, *Social Contract* 152.
12. Rousseau 152.
13. Rousseau 147.
14. See Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008).

15. My reading of *amour-propre* follows Frederick Neuhouser's with a few points of emphasis of my own. Neuhouser writes: "The three conditions that on my reading, any instance of self-love must meet in order to be considered a form of *amour-propre* (and hence not a form of *amour-de-soi*) are: 1) that the good it seeks be esteem (or some other kind of judgment that one is worthy or valuable in some respect); 2) that the esteem or worth it desires be defined comparatively (in relation to the esteem or worth accorded to other individuals); and 3) that its goal be esteem or worth *in the eyes (judgments) of others"*(13). I would further point out that the identity that one seeks and perhaps secures for oneself is ultimately dependent upon the judgment of others and the esteem that follows from it. In that sense, *amour-propre* is entirely linked to issues of identity.

16. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality (Second Discourse), Polemics, and Political Economy: The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 3. eds. Roger Masters and Christopher Kelly (Hanover: UP of New England, 1992), 91.

17. Rousseau 91.

18. With regard to the connection between *amour-propre* and socio-political context, Rousseau writes: "But to decide whether among these passions the dominant ones in his character will be humane and gentle or cruel and malignant, whether they will be passions of beneficence and commiseration or of envy and covetousness, we must know the position he will feel he has among men, and what kinds of obstacles he may believe he has to overcome to reach the position he wants to occupy." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*. trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1979), 235.

19. N.J.H. Dent has skillfully argued that it is a neutral phenomenon that can take an inflamed form, but is not necessarily destined to do so. See N.J.H. Dent, *Rousseau: An Introduction to his Psychological, Social, and Political Theory* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

20. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* 244.

21. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* 151.

22. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts (First Discourse) and Polemics: The Collected Writings of Rousseau.,* vol. 2. eds. Roger Masters and Christopher Kelly (Hanover: UP of New England, 1992).

23. Rousseau writes, "The fatherland cannot subsist without freedom, nor freedom without virtue, nor virtue without citizens. You will have all of these if you form citizens; without doing so, you will have only wicked slaves, beginning with the leaders of the sate. Now, forming citizens is not accomplished in a day, and to have them as men they must be taught as children" (*Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* 154).

24. Rousseau 155.

25. Rousseau 155.

26. Rousseau 154-155.

27. Rousseau writes, "If, for example, they are trained early enough never to consider their persons except as part of the state's, they will eventually come to identify themselves in some way with this larger whole; to feel themselves to be members of the fatherland; to love it with that delicate feeling that any isolated man feels only for himself; to elevate their soul perpetually toward this great object; and thereby to transform into a sublime virtue this dangerous disposition from which all our vices arise" (155).

28. Rousseau 151.

29. It should be noted that Rousseau is skeptical about the possibility of modern European societies achieving this end. He draws most of his examples from the ancient world. For instance, he writes, "A citizen of Rome was neither Caius nor Lucius; he was a Roman. He even loved the country exclusive of himself. Regulus claimed that he was Carthaginian on the grounds that he had become the property of his masters. In his status of foreigner he refused to sit in the Roman senate; a Carthaginian had to order him to do so. He was indignant that they wanted to save his

life. He conquered and returned triumphant to die by torture. This has little relation, it seems to me, to the men we know" (*Emile* 40).

30. Rousseau, *Social Contract* 139.

31. Rousseau writes, "Civil man is only a fractional unity dependent on the denominator; his value is determined by his relation to the whole, which is the social body" (*Emile* 40).

32. Rousseau 201.