

Rousseau's general will

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Rousseau's General Will By Candi s FACULTY OF ART, DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY (This page intentionally left blank) Because Rousseau was centrally concerned with freedom, the concept of 'general will' became a core idea of his political philosophy. 1 Rousseau's political thought was concerned with enlightenment in an age in which he and his contemporaries, including Denis Diderot, D'Alembert, Baron de Montesquieu, Condillac and Voltaire as well as Immanuel Kant shared the optimism that it was possible to duplicate the advances made in science and philosophy in social, moral and political life. 2 The work of Sir Isaac Newton and John Locke had ushered a profound sense of optimism in an age of enlightenment that forced philosophers to contemplate about freedom from the dogma and oppression presented by the Church. Thus, it will be right to consider the age and the place in which Rousseau lived to understand better his thinking about the concept of 'general will'. Rousseau considered freedom as something that was precious and worthy of protection from tyrannical forces of government and other sources of oppression. In his work, *The Social Contract*, Rousseau laments that 'Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains'. 3 However, Rousseau presents an apology for merely inquiring into the civil order because, as he suggests in his work *The Social Contract*, if he were a prince or a legislator rather than the citizen of a free State, he would have done something about freedom or held his peace. Although Rousseau was born and raised a Protestant in Calvin's city Geneva, his deism, (or observation of the natural world with a belief that the Creator does not intervene in human affairs), had distanced him from the shackles presented by both the Protestants and Catholic thinking despite his Protestant cast. 4 Rousseau believed that both internal and external threats existed to freedom

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in a society, and these threats presented a need for protecting freedom. 5 Apart from the threats presented by a tyrannical government, man's needs for material want and due moral recognition presented a threat from subversive relations with others that could impinge negatively on autonomy. Thus, Rousseau argues for a society governed by the general will because solitude is a practical impossibility. Rousseau considered a social compact as necessary because men had reached the point where obstacles in the way of their preservation in the state of nature presented a requirement for greater resources than what was available to each individual. 6 Thus, Rousseau considered it necessary to have a union of will and understanding ' in a society to afford protection to all in a society. However, Rousseau considered it impossible to produce a general will by means of coercion, torture, compulsion or persuasion because the general will requires conviction. According to Rousseau, an act of association comprises a mutual undertaking between the public and the individuals in the form of a contract between the individual and other individuals as a member of a Sovereign and a contract between the individual and the Sovereign as a member of a State. 7 Thus, a ' general will' is an artificially produced will that is not natural, but such a will is necessary because man must exist in safety and freedom in society to achieve the maximum from life. Clearly, it will appear that Rousseau desires to generalise will of individuals in a collective group to protect freedom for the benefit of all. Perhaps Rousseau's reasons for using the general will in his philosophical works were ready-made for his purposes for the time in which he lived. 8 The ' general or the concept of generality in Rousseau's argument stands for the rule of law, for civic education that draws individuals in a society out of themselves and toward the general (or <https://assignbuster.com/rousseau-general-will/>

common) good that ought to benefit the collective, the citizen - virtues of the Republic in which everyone's will contributed. Thus, according to Rousseau's philosophy, only wilful self-love could not sustain organised societies that strived for the common good of everyone because without a social compact that afforded protection to all a society could not ensure growth or fairness for all. For Rousseau, the concept of 'will' impinged on civil association that remained the most voluntary but essential act in the world and in Rousseau's philosophy to deprive the will of individual of all freedom was to deprive actions of all morality. Without will, there is no freedom, no self-determination, no moral causality, and no obligation but without generality, the will of individuals becomes capricious, egoistic, self-obsessed and wilful to the detriment of the collective. However, in the real world perhaps it is difficult to make self-interested individuals in a society to comply with the 'general will'. (This page intentionally left blank)

Bibliography/ References Delaney, James J 2009, Starting with Rousseau, Continuum International Publishing Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 2008, The Social Contract, Cosimo Publishers