

Is general will
compatible with
individual freedom
politics essay



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Jean-Jacque Rousseau wrote at a time before great social and political change in Europe. His texts remain one of the classic concepts of political theory. His writings have been thought of by many as, the ' bible' for the French Revolution for his foresight and perhaps predictions for the violence and terror that followed. His text, *The Social Contract* (1762) is made up of 4 books. In Books 1 and 2 he aimed to address the problem of political morality and the theory of institutions in Books 3 and 4. Rousseau was a defender of democracy, an advocate for individual liberty and an egalitarian.

Rousseau begins with the famous opening lines, " Men are born free, yet everywhere are in chains" He starts by explaining the way in which men are bound to the " chains " of civil society which restrain the natural right of man to an objective independent freedom. He believed that civil society does not give man the freedom, liberty and equality that were promised to him when joining society. Rousseau believed that the only way to prevent these shackles from becoming uncomfortable would be by the collective creation of a body in society forming a single will, the general will. When answering the question it is important to understand the idea of the rule of the general will to see if it is compatible with the freedom of the individual. The general will is expressed by the sovereign (either an individual with a unified will or a collective body in society). The definition and purpose of this general will is to act in the needs and desires of the collective and to sustain the common good for all people. Rousseau explains, " The English people believed itself to be free. It is greatly mistaken; it is free only during the election of the members of Parliament. Once they are elected, the populace is enslaved; it is nothing" . To Rousseau the idea of the general will is one of free debate in

an assembly of individuals and equals of what is of common interest. In Chapter 15 of Book 3 he puts forward the idea that sovereignty cannot be represented, “ because it consists of the general will and the general will cannot be represented” . J. Plamenatz (1992) gives this reason for Rousseau’s argument for direct as apposed to representative democracy. Every citizen in Rousseau’s ideal society should make the laws themselves and not entrust this job in the places of others. This was Rousseau’s third principle. In essence general will gives every individual in the collective the freedom to vote how he pleases in the assembly and ultimately everyone has a say in the running of the society as the democracy is direct. However, Rousseau retains that general will should not be the desire of the individual will, but what will be beneficial for everyone.

Rousseau also believed that whoever went against obeying the general will ought to be enforced to do so by the whole body. “ This means nothing other than that he shall be forced to be free” . What Rousseau means by this is that by people having the obligation to adhere to the social contract and by having to receive the benefit of the general will, they’re gaining freedom. This is in contrast to Hobbes and Locke who believed laws were created to stop us wandering from the path of civil obedience and referred to as “ hedges”. Rousseau asserts that it is the process of law making that sets us free. His key argument was that if we are the authors of the law then we could manifest our own freedom and independence.

According to Rousseau we are all born free and have the capacity to be free but to achieve this Rousseau believed we have to build a social government that does not enslave us. It could be argued that Rousseau’s idea of the rule
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of the general will, is compatible with the freedom of the individual. This is because Rousseau described the notion of there being 2 different types of freedom. There is social freedom and a personal freedom. He also refers to personal freedom as the state of nature. Rousseau said that freedom was only reachable when the populace obeyed the laws it set itself. J. Plamenatz (1992) describes this by explaining ideally we would say, “ I alone have made the law that I obey” but that this is impossible and instead “ the most we can hope for is that each should say, ‘ I obey the law that we have made’ rather than ‘ I obey the law that they have made’. This ideal is that every citizen should identify himself with the community that makes the law” . Rousseau believed that the ability to follow these rules and laws would only be possible once one recognised themselves as a part and member of the community of lawmakers.

Rousseau had previously discussed the first explanatory problem of the origins of how we became unfree, when we are born naturally free in the state of nature. He wrote about this in Discourse on the Origin of Inequality (1755). It is in The Social Contract (1762) that he explained the second problem, the justificatory problem and suggested an answer. Rousseau asserted that power only becomes legitimate once the people consent to it and. He said, “ Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and in a body we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole”

In conclusion, Iain Hampsher-Monk writes in A History of Modern Political Thought that, part of the main, “ objective of the general will, therefore is its ‘ constant tendency to equality’ “. He says that the notion of obeying <https://assignbuster.com/is-general-will-compatible-with-individual-freedom-politics-essay/>

ourselves is a difficult one to understand, however he explains that in this way of setting and obeying our own rules, “ tyranny can be guarded against” . Whilst some scholars have regarded Rousseau’s political thought as pointing towards totalitarianism, (as he advocates complete subservience to the state) many others regard him as a firm liberal and a defender of freedom and equality. For this reason it is believed that Rousseau’s idea of the rule of the general will is compatible with the freedom of the individual, as in Rousseau’s state; the popular sovereignty effectively governs themselves by legitimising the “ chains” of society and reconciling sovereignty , freedom and authority.