Jean-Jacques Rousseau

On Tuesday, you've all engaged in a social experiment with the goal of creating a general will and preparing a first law for a future political community. In the original exercise, each of you was asked to name one vegetable you disliked. This feature was to be constitutive of your private will. We then established two communities, each brought together by their dislike of green or non-green vegetables, respectively. Each community was given the task to formulate a general will, specifically, by trying to formulate at least one law that would become the expression of your general will. You were allowed to refer to any vegetable, no vegetable, or a class of vegetables, in your formulation of laws.

Here is a simplified reconstruction of three approaches that emerged in the two class discussions (larks and owls): The fifth and seventh column from the left are my reconstructions of Rousseau’s possible comment on the procedure, with some chapter references. Please feel free to add more comments to the table. For all comments, please use the colour blue.

1. No-green-vegetables community

[Community originally brought together by their intense dislike of green vegetables]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of individual preferences (private wills)</th>
<th>Aggregate of individual preferences (from an assumed total of 10; dominant factions marked in red)</th>
<th>Sum of individual preferences</th>
<th>Provisional formulation of the general will (class on 2/11)</th>
<th>Rousseaus evaluation of column on the left (II.3)</th>
<th>Provisional law</th>
<th>Rousseaus evaluation of column on the left (II.6)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No cucumber</td>
<td>+--------</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>The gw is not the sum of the agreements of individuals, but the sum of the disagreements; in other words, while ignoring the disagreements was right (i.e. no prohibitions of cucumbers, artichokes, or asparagus are warranted), insisting on no Brussels sprouts is dangerous; it gives too much power to one faction. Instead, a new, common cause should be introduced to which all or most should subscribe.</td>
<td>- Consumption and import of B.s. should be expressed in the law as constitutive part of the gw</td>
<td>- No cucumber law; dislike of green-vegetable haters is to be expressed in the law (-)</td>
<td>Due to misunderstanding of gw, the provisional law is flawed; there can be no general will about a particular object. (II.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No artichoke</td>
<td>+--------</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>- No Brussels sprouts</td>
<td>- No murder, no violence - Dislike of green-vegetable haters to be expressed in the law - Instead of no cauliflower law, restrictions for cauliflower consumption in order to promote trade relations with green-vegetable haters</td>
<td>- No artichoke</td>
<td>Community is not ready for laws yet; threat of making a state prior to becoming one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Brussels sprouts</td>
<td>+--------</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>No Brussels sprouts</td>
<td>- No artichoke</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No asparagus</td>
<td>+ - ------</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>- No asparagus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not vegetable-related and public: n/a</td>
<td>+ + + + +</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td>- No asparagus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. No non-green vegetables community

[Community originally brought together by their dislike of vegetables that are not green.]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of individual preferences (private wills)</th>
<th>Aggregate of individual preferences (from an assumed total of 5; possible factions marked red)</th>
<th>Sum of individual preferences by topic</th>
<th>Provisional formulation of the general will (class on 2/11)</th>
<th>Rousseaus evaluation of column on the left (II.3)</th>
<th>Provisional formulation of the law</th>
<th>Rousseaus evaluation of column on the left (II.6)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No tomato</td>
<td>+++++</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>The gw is not the sum of the agreements of individuals, but the sum of the disagreements; in other words, while ignoring the disagreements was right (i.e. no prohibitions of tomatoes, aubergines, or celery are warranted), insisting on no cauliflower is dangerous. By contrast, going for no murder instead of no cauliflower+no murder would be better.</td>
<td>- No murder, no violence - Dislike of green-vegetable haters to be expressed in the law - Instead of no cauliflower law, restrictions for cauliflower consumption in order to promote trade relations with green-vegetable haters</td>
<td>- No murder, no violence - Dislike of green-vegetable haters to be expressed in the law</td>
<td>No murder is a good segment of the law; dislike of other communities and factionalism are a problem (communities should avoid entrenching deep-rooted customs) suggestions for relying on trade too much may be problematic; community should be self-sufficient. (II.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No aubergine</td>
<td>+ +</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>- No cauliflower</td>
<td>- No murder, no violence - Dislike of green-vegetable haters to be expressed in the law</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No cauliflower</td>
<td>+ -</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+ No cauliflower</td>
<td>- No murder, no violence - Dislike of green-vegetable haters to be expressed in the law</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No celery</td>
<td>+ -</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>- No murder, no violence - Dislike of green-vegetable haters to be expressed in the law</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not vegetable-related and public: No murder</td>
<td>+ + + + +</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+ No murder</td>
<td>- No murder, no violence - Dislike of green-vegetable haters to be expressed in the law</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dislike of other communities</td>
<td>+ + + + +</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+ No murder</td>
<td>- No murder, no violence - Dislike of green-vegetable haters to be expressed in the law</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Shared meal community [formerly no-green-vegetables community]

[Community originally brought together by their dislike of green vegetables]
Rousseau's evaluation of entities like factions. This effectively creates a spectrum of wills, with very particular wills at one end and the most general will of the state at the other.

If there only existed the two extremes, then only individuals and the state could occur, and not enough cohesion would be available to form intermediate wills or a particular type of general will? The distinction between general and particular wills creates difficulties, especially in determining what kind of will holds together a faction; is it a widely shared wish of a large, factionalized group?

What grounds does he give us for finding this majority? How do we know when the general will has been achieved? How can we distinguish this from the specific wills (whatever policies the Democrats or Republicans might propose based on those assumptions)?

1. How does the procedure of voting lead to the discovery of the general will?

Assuming that we've figured out what Rousseau means by the general will, the question is what practical procedure can make us as a community find what it is. Rousseau seems to be working with two types of sums: the sum of private wills, whose majority should be disregarded (Brussels sprouts or cauliflower); and the sum of public wills, whose majority is to be taken as the basis for the common good. This is outlined in Book IV, ch. 3 and ch.6.

Rousseau says that "what makes the will general is less the number of voters than the common interest uniting them" (II.IV). When trying to ban a certain vegetable like cauliflower, the group is not imposing the general will on their new society, rather it is expressing a particular or private will shared by the majority at the time of the formation of the social contract. The articles of the contract must favor all citizens equally which is what the general will does, but such a law creates factions of cauliflower eaters vs. non-cauliflower eaters, which is contrary to general will. Although on the surface this may seem justifiable, this is just another instance of tyranny by the majority.

The third group satisfy's Rousseau's definition of the general will because they created a framework in which all people are subjected to a particular behavior without granting preference for one faction over another. The obligation of shared meals addresses everybody and assumes the same role for everybody in respect to how to achieve the common good. However, if this group were to impose this ritual on only certain types of people or ban a substance used in the shared meals then the contract creates a zero-sum game, which is contrary to general will. ~Brendan Jordan

Here is my interpretation of the three projects above. Community 1 is the furthest away from Rousseau's model Republic, primarily in virtue of having given itself up to a majority of private tastes (dislike of Brussels sprouts). Their unwillingness to find a public good to agree on makes them unfit for legislation.

Community 2 has the advantage that it uses a combination of sums of private wills and public wills to inform its legislation. But, partly, due to their initially doubly negative constitutive character (i.e. the fact that they dislike vegetables that are not green, rather than disliking vegetables that are green), this community is too troubled by its opposition to another. It even uses that opposition to set up trade relations that make them dependent on the other community's demand by law. This breaks Rousseau's recommendation of self-sufficiency, as well as continuing the problem of factionalism.

Community 3 comes much closer to Rousseau's Republic. It ignores the factional majority in favour of a majority (or even consensus) around the question of shared meals. As a result, the law avoids being fixed to a particular object (i.e. a private will, or a sum of private wills).

Now, here are the questions arising from the above.

1. How does the procedure of voting lead to the discovery of the general will?

Assuming that we've figured out what Rousseau means by the general will, the question is what practical procedure can make us as a community find what it is. Rousseau seems to be working with two types of sums: the sum of private wills, whose majority should be disregarded (Brussels sprouts or cauliflower); and the sum of public wills, whose majority is to be taken as the basis for the common good. This is outlined in Book IV, ch. 3 and ch.6.

Rousseau says that "what makes the will general is less the number of voters than the common interest uniting them" (II.IV). When trying to ban a certain vegetable like cauliflower, the group is not imposing the general will on their new society, rather it is expressing a particular or private will shared by the majority at the time of the formation of the social contract. The articles of the contract must favor all citizens equally which is what the general will does, but such a law creates factions of cauliflower eaters vs. non-cauliflower eaters, which is contrary to general will. Although on the surface this may seem justifiable, this is just another instance of tyranny by the majority.

The third group satisfy's Rousseau's definition of the general will because they created a framework in which all people are subjected to a particular behavior without granting preference for one faction over another. The obligation of shared meals addresses everybody and assumes the same role for everybody in respect to how to achieve the common good. However, if this group were to impose this ritual on only certain types of people or ban a substance used in the shared meals then the contract creates a zero-sum game, which is contrary to general will. ~Brendan Jordan

I will here attempt to respond to the question, but at the same time provide a particular example. As I understand Rousseau's beliefs regarding elections, Rousseau seems to believe that the "general will" is something like a set of prerequisites or baseline beliefs. I'll give as an example that, for years, the Democratic and Republican parties have both answered questions and made policies based on the assumption that the government under the authority of the Constitution to do such things. Rousseau seems more interested, in this context, in setting up a society and mode of government based on the general will (the assumption that the government can do those things) rather than on specific wills (whatever policies the Democrats or Republicans might propose based on those assumptions). ~Billy Morgan

The will of all is simply the aggregate of all the individual wills with little to no regard of what is best for the group as a whole. The general will is the will of the group as a whole for what is best for the group. Voting is on the surface a means of determining the will of all, but if the pluses and minuses are canceled, what is left is the general will (for example, if all the people voting for purple are taken out, along with the same number of people voting against purple, then the will of the people are are left is the general will). I agree with Brendan; the third group was closest to forming a society based on the general will because it made laws blind to individual/factional interests. ~Lily Kubota

What grounds does he give us for finding this majority? How do we know when the general will has been achieved? How can we distinguish this from the wishes of a large, factionalized group?

Rousseau says that either the will is general or it is not; it is either the will of the body of the people, or that of only a part. I feel that to make such a distinction between general and particular wills creates difficulties, especially in determining what kind of will holds together a faction; is it a widely shared particular will or a particular type of general will?

Its tricky to distinguish the general will from that of a large, factionalized group, but one way to do it would be to say that a factions members are all united by a more particular general will, but a general will nonetheless. While this seems to taint the definitions of particular and general, it is necessary because if there only existed the two extremes, then only individuals and the state could occur, and not enough cohesion would be available to form intermediate entities like factions. This effectively creates a spectrum of wills, with very particular wills at one end and the most general will of the state at the other.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Individual preferences (private wills)</th>
<th>Aggregate of Individual preferences (from an assumed total of 10; possible factions marked red)</th>
<th>Sum of Individual preferences</th>
<th>Provisional formulation of the general will (class on 8/1/11)</th>
<th>Rousseau's evaluation of column on the left (II.3)</th>
<th>Provisional law</th>
<th>Provisional law on the column on the left</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No cucumber</td>
<td>++----</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Very good; community avoided giving preference to its strongest faction. Sought out other principles of common good.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>Good laws; gives rules of shared behaviour without granting privileges to specific factions. Suggests ways of overcoming deep-seated customs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No artichoke</td>
<td>+-----</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Brussels sprouts</td>
<td>+-----</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>No Brussels sprouts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No asparagus</td>
<td>+----</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not vegetable-related and public:</td>
<td>+++++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Seek sharing meals. Currently dislike of Brussels sprouts.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared meals</td>
<td>+++++</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of individual preferences (private wills)</td>
<td>Aggregate of Individual preferences (from an assumed total of 10; possible factions marked red)</td>
<td>Sum of Individual preferences</td>
<td>Provisional formulation of the general will (class on 8/1/11)</td>
<td>Rousseau's evaluation of column on the left (II.3)</td>
<td>Provisional law</td>
<td>provision column on the left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No cucumber</td>
<td>++----</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Very good; community avoided giving preference to its strongest faction. Sought out other principles of common good.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>Good laws; gives rules of shared behaviour without granting privileges to specific factions. Suggests ways of overcoming deep-seated customs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No artichoke</td>
<td>+-----</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Brussels sprouts</td>
<td>+-----</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>No Brussels sprouts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No asparagus</td>
<td>+----</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not vegetable-related and public:</td>
<td>+++++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Seek sharing meals. Currently dislike of Brussels sprouts.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared meals</td>
<td>+++++</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On this spectrum, the wills go from particular to general, with the most general wills being the strongest ones; like the cohesion between leaves and their twig, twigs and their branch, and branches and their trunk, there is a hierarchy of bonds that hold things together. In other words, the more people are united by this general will, the less particular it must be in order to sustain such a mass of people. Thus we know we've achieved the general will when we near the end of the spectrum, and when several men united consider themselves a single body, (and) have but a single will, which is concerned with their common preservation, and the general welfare (SC,121).

-Guy

P.S.

I read a quote on p.60 that cleared up my previous misunderstanding: "But when factions arise, small associations at the expense of the large association, the will of each one of these associations becomes general in relation to its members, and particular in relation to the state" (60). Then, the difference between the wishes of a large faction and the general will might have to be examined by people not belonging to that or any other faction, such that their opinion truly reflects the general will. However if the large faction "is so large that it prevails over all the rest, the result you have is no longer a sum of small differences, but one single difference; then there is no longer a general will, and the opinion that prevails is nothing but a private opinion (60)." Thus there would be a lack of general will, and replacing it would be a private opinion.

Book II, ch. IV offers a framework for answering this question with its distinction between private and public. Please use this chapter or another specific passage to discuss how to solve the riddle of the general will if what you start out with is a set of private wills.

2. Assuming that we've found the general will and even formed the government, what is the cardinal will that is going to determine the nature of the state?

(See Book III, chs. 1 and 2)

a. the sum of all individuals wills

"In a perfect act of legislation, the individual or particular will should be at zero" (III.ii). ~Brendan Jordan

b. the will of the people, i.e. the general will or the sovereign will

"The general or sovereign will should always predominate and should be the sole guide of all the rest" (III.ii). ~Brendan Jordan

c. the common will of all civil servants (i.e. all persons forming the body of the Government)

"The corporate will belonging to the government should occupy a very subordinate position" (III.ii). For those into math: 0=a<c<b ~Brendan Jordan

Not initially--Rousseau states that once a government grows smaller (because it is their tendency to), "the social pact is broken, and all ordinary citizens, restored by right to their natural freedom, are forced to obey but not obligated to do so." (Book III, Chp. 10, Sect. 6) Of course the result of not doing so could result in some kind of punishment. Perfect legislation would mean that this will would be dominant without diminishing or being usurped by a single tyrant.

Izzy Olive

The government gets smaller, but it can do so in different ways; in one method (explained in Book III, Chapter 1) is one whereby the government gets smaller in proportion to the growing number of people in it (or does fewer things in relation). This is considered "smaller" because the ratio, government: people, is smaller. The smallest government is one which does not include checks or balances, one which is ruled only by a Sovereign, and this is the "smaller" government mentioned above by Izzy (as I understand the Rousseau stuff). (See also Katrina's answer below on small-government being suited for democracy: note that Rousseau's ideas on size of government and not cut-and-dry as regards small government being "good" or "bad" in general.)--Billy

Naturally, "each member is first of all himself, and then Magistrate, and then citizen," although this is the opposite of what it should be, according to Rousseau. Ideally, the general will should rule supreme.

The more magistrates in the government, the weaker the government. The more people there are, the stronger the government needs to be. Thus, "the ratio of magistrates to Government should be the inverse of the ratio of subjects to Sovereign"--the more individuals in the group, the fewer individuals should be in government. --Lily

3. What does the answer above tell you about Rousseau's understanding of a contract? Is the contract signed

a. mutually between all individuals

b. between the individual and him- or herself

c. between the majority of individuals and the government
According to Rousseau, if a government was formed under such a contract, it would ultimately lead to despotism and the exploitation of the weak which Rousseau argues is not a legitimate government (Bk1, Ch3). Ceasing to be a real government catering to the general will, society would revert back into a degenerate state of nature. In short, a contract between the majority of individuals (private wills, and in particular not the general will) and government is despotic and illegitimate. ~~~ Jason Wang

d. between all individuals and the government

According to Rousseau, the contract is signed mutually between all individuals for sovereignty "lies essentially in the general will, and will does not admit of representation" (III.xv). Thus, people do not make contracts with their governments, rather government is a steward of the general will which is made through a contract between all individuals in a society. Rousseau also affirms that the effectiveness of government is highly dependent on how well it fulfills this function of promoting the general will and upholding the contract. ~ Brendan

To answer this, look at Book III, ch. 15

4. What kinds of societies does Rousseau say are suited to a democracy? Which of the following do not contribute: (Bk. 3; Ch. 4, 8, 15)

a. Small size

In Chapter 4, paragraph 5, Rousseau claims that a smaller population is better suited for democracy because the people are "easily assembled, and every citizen can easily know all the rest" (91)

Katrina Nygaard

b. Poor in natural resources

In Chapter 8, Rousseau acknowledges that different states are endowed with different resources. With this variance in wealth, come differences in governmental structure. This results in two different outcomes. Though people in a democracy are "least burdened", they are additionally, the poorest and smallest states. (101). However, Rousseau continues on to make a distinction between total lack of resources (ex: a desert or wasteland where no one should live) and an area that is functioning but is not as bountiful as another. A democracy is best suited for the latter of the two landscapes.

Katrina Nygaard

In Chapter 8, Rousseau states that "those where an abundant fertile soil yields much more produce in return for little labor lend themselves to be governed monarchical so that the Prince's luxury might consume the excess of the subjects' surplus; for it is better that excess be absorbed by the government than squandered by private individuals." Based on this statement, Katrina is right to point out Rousseau's disclaimers about the other two landscapes.

From what I've inferred from the text, Rousseau is making either one or two claims. One is that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for democracy to develop in what modern political experts would refer to as "rentier states." Namely, states that depend upon exports of one abundant natural resource for government revenues (i.e. Saudi Arabia with oil exports). For Rousseau, the reason why this is the case is that the government largely does not depend upon the labor of its' people for their revenue, so they have less motivation to take their opinions into consideration when making important political decisions.

Rousseau could also be claiming that agricultural states are less likely to become democracies than industrial states. According to Rousseau, the reason for this is that an agricultural state's economic well-being depends upon the health of the land and the natural environment. An industrial state's economy, on the other hand, depends upon the well-being of their people because it is only through the people's labor and innovation that the state can prosper. Thus, the state's leaders have more of an incentive to listen to their people and respond to their demands.

Based on the aforementioned explanations, Rousseau probably believes that a state built upon "organic solidarity" is better suited for democracy than one built upon "mechanical solidarity."

-Adam Chaikof

Rousseau also says that "harsher climates" are not conducive to democracy. People spend too much of their time struggling for survival to care about the "public square" and they "fear slavery less than...poverty." (Bk 3, ch. 15). --Lily Kubota

c. An equality of ranks
d. Simple customs
e. Elected representatives who stand in for the general will

"Sovereignty...consists essentially in the general will, and the will does not admit of being represented." Rousseau says that any law not explicitly ratified by the people is "null," and that people whose will is represented by others are slaves. (Bk. 3, Chapter 15) --Lily Kubota

Please explain your choice in a couple of words.

Katrina answered the first two parts but for c&d this passage in my opinion illustrates conditions for Rousseau's ideal democracy for it spells out what makes a democracy sustainable

Besides, how many conditions that are difficult to unite does such a government presuppose? First, a very small State, where the people can readily be got together and where each citizen can with ease know all the rest; secondly, great simplicity of manners, to prevent business from multiplying and raising thorny problems; next, a large measure of equality in rank and fortune, without which equality of rights and authority cannot long subsist; lastly, little or no luxury — for luxury either comes of riches or makes them necessary; it corrupts at once rich and poor, the rich by possession and the poor by covetousness; it sells the country to softness and vanity, and takes away from the State all its citizens, to make them slaves one to another, and one and all to public opinion.
As for part e, my previous answer conveys why representatives in a republic must be stewards of the general will, for if they are not they are in violation of the social contract. I must also add that Rousseau is not particularly fond of the term representative but rather steward of the general will. Since representatives of less people can better carry out the general will Rousseau prefers that democracies remain as small as possible. ~Brendan Jordan