

**Rousseau and the Ancients**  
**Rousseau et les Anciens**

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## **Rousseau's General Will: Anachronism, Contradiction, Tragedy**

At the time of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's entrance into the world of ideas, philosophical developments had established the notion of a naturally isolated, rights-bearing individual as the fundamental unit of political analysis. Rousseau was ambivalent about this development. Generally, he preferred the bonds of association he saw in ancient societies to the atomism of the modern world, a preference he makes obvious by repeatedly exalting the virtue of the ancients and bemoaning the absence of republican virtue in modern society. Rousseau was powerfully drawn to an image of Sparta, however accurate it was, in which the struggle between duty and inclination was resolved totally in favor of the former. Men were only men to the extent that they were citizens, to the extent that they emerged from and contributed to a political community. We may now be tempted to label Rousseau's preoccupation with the ancients anachronistic or nostalgic. Indeed, Rousseau undoubtedly numbered himself among the few moderns who had "ancient souls."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, while Rousseau may have had an ancient soul, his political project was quintessentially modern: the attempt to recapture the ancients' devotion to the polis while preserving individual autonomy.

Rousseau's dual commitment to voluntarism and virtue produces a variety of tensions, contradictions and paradoxes, captured by his grand idea of the general will. This paper offers an interpretation of the general will that places the tension between voluntarism and virtue at the center. I contend that Rousseau's general will is best understood not as a reconciliation of this tension but as a particularly profound illustration of its centrality to modern politics. Moreover, Rousseau's amenability to paradox — his willingness to accept tensions and theorize within them — yields an approach to political questions that is particularly suited to contemporary skepticism toward universal, noncontingent sources of political authority.

Rousseau defines the general will variously as the will of the individual *qua* citizen (as opposed to the will of the individual *qua* man), as the common good, and, frequently, he defined the general will by what it is not — in opposition to private will or the will of all. All of these definitions are accurate, but none captures what I take to be the essence of the general will — namely, the way it embodies the tension between voluntarism and virtue. I do not insist that Rousseau intended the general will to be understood in this manner (though, we shall find reasons to believe that he did), nor do

I claim that it is the only way of understanding it. I do claim, however, that it is the best way of understanding the general will, if one hopes either to fully appreciate the force of Rousseau's political theory or to think clearly about the challenges of modern politics.

One might ask whether it is possible to be an *homme à paradoxe* (as Rousseau called himself), while simultaneously maintaining a coherent system. Of course it is. It need only be that the world itself contain paradoxes, and this is a condition that Rousseau would have no trouble accepting. As Allan Bloom writes, "Rousseau's thought has an externally paradoxical character [...] but it is remarkably consistent, the contradictions reflecting contradictions in the nature of things" (559). Rousseau does not resolve these contradictions, but neither does he surrender to them; rather, he theorizes within them, and, in so doing, produces the revelations about political life that account for his enduring influence. One may attempt to reconcile the contradictions in Rousseau or to use them as evidence of his ultimate incoherence, but, in so doing, Rousseau's essential teaching is obscured.

In exploring the general will, I move beyond the procedural argument of the *Social Contract*, taking Rousseau up on his claim that his writings ought to be interpreted as a unified whole. This, I believe, is the only way to fully understand Rousseau's general will, which incorporates both a procedural argument for political right (which emphasizes voluntarism) and an account of the conditions necessary for putting those principles into practice (emphasizing virtue). The body of the paper examines in more detail, a couple of the tensions captured in Rousseau's general will — tensions between freedom and morality and autonomy and socialization. These tensions reflect Rousseau's dual commitment to the freedom of the moderns and the virtue of the ancients, and they are tensions not only for Rousseau but for egalitarian politics in general.

### Freedom and Morality

For Rousseau, it was insufficient to assert that whatever the people will is right. Although he does say "the general will is always right," he also says that only the general will is rightfully sovereign. The people always want what is good for themselves, but they do not always see it, which is to say that they do not always see the general will. From the fact that the general will is always right, it does not follow "that the people's deliberations always have the same rectitude... The people is never corrupted, but it is often fooled" (*SC, CW* 4: 147) In striving to both respect popular will and rationalize it, Rousseau's general will issues in a paradox. As Hans Barth puts it, "Everyone's will must be respected, but everyone

must also will what is general” (47–48). Addressing this paradox takes Rousseau beyond the question of the abstract principles of political right, to the social and cultural question of how to create citizens who embrace those principles.

Rousseau believed that no formal principles of political legitimacy could be defended without concurrent consideration of how human beings will be moved to observe those principles. In fact, it was this very issue upon which Rousseau distinguished his version of the general will from the reigning version, conceptualized by Diderot in an entry of the *Encyclopédie*.<sup>2</sup> To some extent, Rousseau formulated his own contribution to the *Encyclopédie*, POLITICAL ECONOMY, as a criticism of Diderot’s general will for its embrace of a cosmopolitan sense of justice — universally valid, with roots in the welfare of humanity as a whole (*ibid.*).<sup>3</sup> Rousseau rejected the premise that there is a general will of humankind as a whole, and, more importantly for our purposes, he rejected Diderot’s implied assumption that human beings will do the right thing if they know the right thing. It was empirically false to identify a “general will of the species,” as Diderot had done, and counter-intuitive to assume that this kind of cosmopolitanism could ever inform “thoughts and desires,” as Diderot had prescribed (20–21). Rousseau writes, “It is apparent from this what should be thought of those supposed cosmopolites who, justifying their love of the homeland by means of their love of the human race, boast of loving everyone in order to have the right to love no one” (*Geneva Manuscript, CW 4: 81*). The great failing of Diderot’s general will, according to Rousseau, was not so much that it posited a “general society of mankind” (77), but that it failed to address the question of how human beings are moved to observe principles of political right. If Diderot had attended to this latter concern, he would have understood the emptiness of the notion of a general will of all human-kind.

Given this orientation toward the general will, Rousseau’s introduction to the *Social Contract* must be seen as misleading. At the outset of that book Rousseau claims to be concerned only with the “principles of political right” — the subtitle to the work. He begins Book I, chapter I with an obfuscation: “Man was/is born free, and everywhere he is in chains. [...] How did this change occur? I do not know. What can make it legitimate? I believe I can answer this question” (*SC 131*). Rousseau presents the *Social Contract* as an argument about legitimacy, but, unless he has introduced a radically new definition, his argument pushes far beyond the question of legitimacy to the broader questions of human happiness and flourishing. His political philosophy is so revolutionary precisely because it extends the boundaries of politics beyond questions of legitimacy, to

incorporate the ethical and moral dimensions of the human experience that form the conditions for happiness — “the aim of every sensitive being” (*Émile*, OC 4: 814). While previous modern thinkers had been satisfied with the more modest goal of comfortable self-preservation, Rousseau approaches politics in the manner of the ancients, with an eye toward the highest peaks of human excellence.<sup>4</sup> We must, therefore, resist the commonly held belief that “Rousseau’s question is not what the best political order is but what can make society legitimate” (Gildin 145). On the contrary, the general will will do much more than set out the conditions for political legitimacy or principles of political right. It will tackle the question that Rousseau himself specified as the paramount question of politics — how to create the best men (*Conf.*, CW 5: 340).

Rousseau’s conclusions transcend the confines he establishes for them. This explains why it is natural — though wrong — to read the *Social Contract* as a doctrine that “permits one to distinguish between a legitimate and an illegitimate political order not a just from an unjust one” (Gildin 155).<sup>5</sup> The book allows one to do both — “[it] is the transportation of the most essential individual moral faculty to the realm of public experience” (Shklar 184). One should not make the mistake of reading the *Social Contract* outside of the context of Rousseau’s writings as a whole. For Rousseau, the underlying question was always of the loftiest dimensions — how to reclaim man’s natural goodness. Politics might be one way, and, on Rousseau’s account, there are others as well, but none of them could ever be separated from morality.

While, for earlier modern thinkers, the freedom of the individual had taken the place of virtue as the chief concern of political philosophy, for Rousseau, individual freedom is intelligible only in conjunction with virtue. However, what makes him revolutionary is not simply his refusal to separate politics from morality — that alone would make him retrograde. What makes him revolutionary is the way he combines the moderns’ emphasis on freedom and autonomy with the ancients’ concern for virtue. Morality does not stand above freedom for Rousseau, as it had done for all previous thinkers. Allan Bloom writes, “For [Rousseau] freedom is the source of morality, as opposed to nature or revealed religion” (Bloom 569).<sup>6</sup> So, while Rousseau insists with the ancients that politics and morality must be linked, he insists equally stubbornly with the moderns that freedom be the cornerstone of politics.

Freedom is the source of morality for Rousseau; however, morality is necessary for freedom as well. This is why the tension between morality and politics is a tension and can only be clarified (never resolved) by statements such as “for [Rousseau] freedom is the source of morality.” It is

true that Rousseau views freedom as a prerequisite for morality, but morality is also a prerequisite for freedom. This is both the most challenging and the most appealing characteristic of Rousseauian freedom — it demands both voluntarism and virtue, two qualities that do not always sit comfortably side by side. For Rousseau, freedom is, most fundamentally, “my being able to will only what is suitable to me, or what I deem to be such, without external constraint” (*Émile* 586). (Note that this formulation leaves open the question as to which standards ought to determine “what is suitable.”) Rousseau’s definition of freedom demonstrates the sense in which Rousseau viewed the tension between morality and politics as intrinsic to political life. For Rousseau, this tension could only be eluded by ill-conceived attempts to separate moral psychology from political philosophy. Although this strict dichotomy has currently won the favor of many political theorists, it must not be allowed to contaminate our reading of Rousseau, who not only rejected the dichotomy, but theorized within the tension between its two poles.

The term “general will” itself encompasses so many of the tensions within Rousseau’s conception of freedom. By using the word “will,” rather than “spirit” or “interest,” Rousseau emphasizes individual agency and decision-making; and, by demanding that the will be made general, he confronts us with questions about the conditions necessary for freedom. Had Rousseau been the authoritarian moralist many of his critics have made him out to be, he would not have made the general will the center of his political philosophy; instead, he could have opted for common good or *esprit général*, or he could have spoken of achieving perfect generality through a Platonic system of education (see Riley 1995: 1). Instead, he emphasized will, underlining the primacy of freedom in his political philosophy, even though, as we have seen, Rousseauian freedom is freedom of a particular kind.

### Autonomy<sup>7</sup> and socialization

Since Rousseau makes virtue and freedom interdependent, there exists an imperative in his politics that is absent from previous social contract theory. This imperative produces many of the tensions in Rousseau’s political philosophy and begins to explain his desire to temper modern autonomy with ancient virtue. The general will only prevails, according to Rousseau, when citizens feel a deep attachment to the fatherland and, therefore, to each other. Consequently, politics demands institutions that transform the totally self-interested goodness of natural man into the fraternally-bound morality of the citizen. “It is not enough to say to citizens, be good. It is necessary to teach them to be so” (*Political Economy* 150). The voice

of the citizens can only be considered the general will after the Legislator, customs, education and civil religion have instilled in them a deep, emotional attachment to the fatherland — hence Rousseau's belief that presiding over education is the state's most important business (156).

This emphasis on creating citizens has led many interpreters to conclude that he favored a rebirth of the tutelary regimes of antiquity. Tzvetan Todorov writes, "the principal object of Rousseau's political writings is not the life of the citizen but of the city" (30). Precisely the opposite is true, as I see it; the city is elevated in Rousseau, because it is only through the city that individuals can be emancipated from the social tendencies toward dependence. This is not to say that Rousseau favors individuality, which would be absurd, given his emphasis on the necessity of socialization. However, Rousseau clearly believed socialization to be compatible with individual autonomy, and that individual autonomy is a prerequisite for freedom. He embraces the tutelary model of Sparta and Rome not because he puts the greatness of the whole above the freedom of each, but rather because he views a background culture of that kind as the precondition for personal freedom. We should be wary of charges that Rousseau sacrificed the individual to the community; if anything the opposite might be plausible — that his idealization of political life actually instrumentalized it in the interest of the individual's well-being.

Indeed, Rousseau seems to believe that only an improbable, idealized picture of political life can guarantee individual freedom. The general will itself can seem mythical, in the way it simultaneously embodies and/or emanates from the sovereign, the laws, customs, *mœurs*, justice, and voting majorities. As Neuhouser writes, "the general will is both the embodiment and a precondition for freedom" (363). For example, Rousseau seems to simultaneously claim that the sovereign has absolute power over its members, because whatever the sovereign dictates is the general will, and because the general will is that which is sovereign. Paradoxically, the general will stands both for that which the sovereign decides and that by which the sovereign ought to decide; it originates both before and after the sovereign speaks. Only a felicitous coincidence between what the sovereign wills and what it ought to will can save political life from corruption.

Generally speaking, modern citizens have been corrupted, and their collective will reflects this corruption. Consequently, their freedom can be recaptured only if popular will is generalized. Only after it has been made properly general, will sovereign power maximize freedom. Put alternately, men must become citizens, and that means that Rousseau must find a way to simultaneously preserve autonomy and inculcate virtue. Liberty means self-rule for Rousseau, in the sense that man is only free when he obeys



laws he gives himself (Barth 43). Had this not been a central concern for Rousseau, he could have opted for an openly authoritarian approach to the cultivation of virtue; instead, he has to be more subtle about his social engineering, in a manner that allows it to be reconciled with individual autonomy.

Rousseau asserts that no one should ever part with the freedom to make his own decisions, because “that is to renounce one’s quality as a man” (Shklar 1973: 276). This is why sovereignty cannot be surrendered to a king or aristocracy; that would mean surrendering the moral autonomy that makes man free. It also explains why the general will cannot be represented; doing so removes its active component, the willing, which is nothing less than the faculty of free and moral action. The paradox is that politics must simultaneously respect individual autonomy and cultivate the conditions for realizing that autonomy. What Rousseau desired, to use Riley’s phrase, is for “the generality of antiquity to be legitimized by consent” (Riley 1982: 100). This puts Rousseau in the awkward position of maintaining that individuals remain autonomous even when they consent to laws they have been conditioned to accept.

There will be no resolution to this paradox in Rousseau’s work, only illumination of it. Some interpreters have tried to elude the tension by focusing on the formal side of Rousseau’s argument, by reading the *Social Contract* as a procedural argument about the institutions necessary to political legitimacy. This conclusion is attractive in that it resolves some of the tensions in Rousseau’s assertions about autonomy, however, for reasons already given, it distorts Rousseau’s intention. It simply cannot be made consistent with the claims Rousseau himself makes about the goal of politics and the aspiration to human fulfillment that underlies all of his writings. The hegemony of the general will involves much more than the institutions of self-government, and, it is only with this in mind that it is possible to understand the intricacies and contradictions of Rousseau’s political philosophy.

Rousseau does have a procedural argument, intended to secure the autonomous participation of every citizen in the articulation of the general will. Citizens must convene regularly, not to discuss or debate, but to indicate “whether [the law] does or does not conform to the general will that is theirs” (*Social Contract* 201). This falls well short of self-legislation, but Rousseau views it as participatory enough to qualify as consent and, therefore, preserve autonomy. By demanding that each member of the sovereign body participate, it becomes possible to call the decision produced by this process the general will. Thus, a set of judgments can be called the general will when the process of decision-making incorporates the will of

each member. The important implication here is that each member need not favor the actual results of this process, they need only to have been included in it. This allows Rousseau to claim that “the citizen consents to all the laws, even to those passed against his will [...]. When the opinion contrary to mine prevails, that proves nothing except that I was mistaken, and what I thought to be the general will was not” (200–201).

To be mistaken, in Rousseau’s terminology, is the equivalent of subordinating the general will to one’s private will. Political will must be rationalized or made general, according to Rousseau, and this rationalization comes at least as much from without as from within, which is the main reason why it will not do to say that Rousseau’s wants only to create the institutions for self-government. As Shklar notes, “once the Legislator has successfully rationalized personal will, the government does almost everything” (1969: 201). Once citizens have been taught to will generally, there is very little need for their active participation in policy-making. The general will becomes evident, or transparent to use Jean Starobinski’s language, such that the government, which, in Rousseau’s system is nothing more than the executor of the sovereign’s will, can simply enforce the laws. But if this is the case — if citizens must be made from denatured men — does it make sense to preserve the language of autonomy and will? Rousseau wants to condition citizens as much as is necessary to ensure that the general will prevails, but not so much as to prevent it from being formulated by autonomous agents.<sup>8</sup> He shares the ambivalence of his literary creation Claire, who tells Julie, “we are too educated [...] to allow ourselves to be governed by others and not educated enough to govern ourselves” (*Julie*, OC 2: 45).

This tension recurs in the different images of authority presented by Rousseau. The Legislator in the *Social Contract*, the tutor in *Émile*, and Wolmar in *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* all condition the will in an extremely subtle fashion, such that the subject of authority perceives himself to be acting of his own volition. The Legislator must be able to “persuade without convincing,” as Rousseau puts it (*Social Contract* 156). The undemocratic role of the Legislator is difficult to reconcile with Rousseau’s definition of freedom as willing for oneself. Again, Rousseau means to say something about the conditions necessary for free will. Unlike earlier liberals, Rousseau rejected the notion of a law of nature, of a morality inscribed naturally in each person; for him, morality depends on society. “It is certain that people are in the long run what the government makes them” (*Political Economy* 148). By nature man has only a self-absorbed primitive goodness, not the kind of moral awareness that can only be the product of socialization. Consequently, Rousseau pursues avenues for the cultivation

of generality or rationality that are consistent with liberty and consent.

By almost whatever means necessary, whether it be through the Legislator, censorship, civil religion, or public festivals, citizens must be inspired with patriotic zeal. Ironically, for Rousseau, the only way to safeguard citizens' independence is by making them entirely dependent on the collective for their identity. Zev Trachtenberg has argued that this paradox dooms Rousseau's project: "The cultural institutions [Rousseau] believes are needed to sustain society as it could be invalidate his explanation of how individuals can be free while they are obligated by law" (245). One may indeed be forced to this conclusion if one interprets the general will as a straightforward prescription for political action. If, on the contrary, one understands the general will as an ideal, intended to illuminate the tensions and complexities intrinsic to political life itself, one sees the problem differently. The paradox at the center of Rousseau's thought becomes a starting point for thinking about politics, and one is compelled to confront the intractable problem of how to secure the conditions for the viability of freedom in general without undermining the autonomy of particular individuals.

Rousseau's dual commitment to voluntarism and virtue does indeed issue in a paradox. Does that paradox demonstrate the incoherence of Rousseau's thought, or does it reflect the very character of politics in a modern context? Perhaps, we can answer yes on both counts. To the extent that Rousseau claims to have reconciled voluntarism and virtue, the general will does become incoherent. It is a sublime incoherence, though, one that embodies a problem that is at the very core of modern politics. Modern societies attempt to both respect popular decision-making and ensure its rationality. This produces a predicament: societies require a set of constraints on popular will, with which they can never feel totally secure. Rousseau accepts, even relishes, this problem. He does not attempt to elude it by positing a universal faculty of reason, as Kant does, or by appealing to the authority of natural law, in the tradition of previous social contract theorists. Instead, Rousseau accepts the fact that there is an inevitable tension between voluntarism and virtue at the center of egalitarian politics. He devised the general will as a reconciliation of this tension. Unfortunately, his articulation of the general will does not produce this kind of reconciliation. Instead, Rousseau's general will demonstrates the very intractability of the tension between voluntarism and virtue and illustrates the dangers involved in thinking about freedom apart from morality, and autonomy apart from socialization.

## Conclusion

Rousseau saw unity in the natural goodness of man, whose simple, transparent needs and desires meant that he always wanted only what he could do and did only what he pleased. Whatever the accuracy of this view, it forms the foundation of Rousseau's critique of the divisiveness of modern society. United by nature, man becomes divided by what Shklar calls a "semi-legitimate prison, half-natural and half-civic" (1969: 51). The goodness man has by nature must become virtue; otherwise he will always be divided between particular and general. The spectrum of Rousseau's works describes a variety of quests for unity, whether it be through solitude, education, or community. Self-sufficiency is the appeal of Emile's education, the life of Julie and Wolmar on their country estate, and Rousseau's solitary, philosophical reveries. Rousseau seeks to approximate the same kind of unity in political life, all the while aware of its implausibility and of the likelihood that, ultimately, true unity can be attained only by withdrawing from society.

Rousseau's skepticism is the result of his disdain for the compromises necessitated by the conditions of modernity. The tradeoffs modern societies make between particular and general, between voluntarism and virtue, etc., yield a *modus vivendi* that Rousseau finds unsatisfying, so much so that he ultimately abandons politics as a vehicle for recuperating the perfect unity found in natural man. In one of his more frustrated moments he wrote to Mirabeau,

In my old ideas the great political problem, which I compare to squaring the circle in geometry [...]. *To find a form of government that puts the law above man* [...]. If this form cannot be found, and I honestly believe it cannot, my opinion is that it is necessary to go to the other extreme and, in one stroke, to put man as high as possible above the law and to establish an arbitrary despotism — the most arbitrary that can be devised: I would like the despot to be God. In one word, I see no possible mean between the most austere democracy and the most complete Hobbism. (160–61)

If this is more than just a fleeting moment of frustration, the entire framework outlined in the *Social Contract* is called into question. Only the most austere republican virtue resembles the kind of unity and happiness attainable outside of politics, and Rousseau fears that virtue of this kind died with the onset of modernity. However, withdrawing from society has its drawbacks too, the most significant of which is that it is an option available only to exceptional men, or to children fortunate enough to have an expert tutor from birth. For most, man's natural goodness can only be recovered

through republican virtue, though, even there, perfect unity is highly unlikely.

Absent a perfect reconciliation of particular will and general will, societies will have to settle for an impoverished political sphere that leaves members divided between public and private. Exceptional individuals can take solace in a solitary life, but the flourishing of politics depends on the extent to which “public affairs dominate private ones in the minds of the citizen” (*Social Contract* 192). Rousseau shared the view of the ancients that politics inevitably creates essentially irresolvable tensions between public and private life. He rejected the notion that individual interests naturally harmonize in politics. Only the most austere republican virtue can save political life, and only the most fortuitous of circumstances permit the simultaneous flourishing of virtue and voluntarism. So, Rousseau’s exaltations of perfect political unity must be understood as utopian metaphors for human happiness.<sup>9</sup> In actually existing societies, citizens are unfortunately fated to live on the uncertain line that divides public from private.

When confronted with the actually existing societies of eighteenth-century Europe, Rousseau saw little hope for the realization of a free society along the lines he describes in the *Social Contract*, or even in the more modest *Government of Poland* and *Project for Corsica*. In most societies of Rousseau’s age, the majority did not will in accordance with the general will. The consequence, from a Rousseauian perspective, was that these societies and the people in them were not free. Rousseau explains why people are in chains, but he does not provide a viable prescription for political action. Rather, he creates an image of perfect political unity to show us the price we pay for the societies we have chosen. If we choose to value particularity over generality and voluntarism over virtue, political life will never produce truly free individuals. Rousseau understood that the will of all would subvert the general will most of the time and that even relatively successful societies would be illegitimate if judged by his standards. At the very least, it is certain that the sovereignty of a robust, Rousseauian general will is incompatible with large, pluralistic societies. Among other things, Rousseau’s ideal requires a small community, direct democracy, homogeneity, decentralized power, simplicity of mores, and an agrarian economy — none of which characterizes either contemporary Western democracies or eighteenth-century France. Indeed, in most societies, implementation of Rousseau’s social contract could easily slide into the totalitarianism Rousseau’s critics attach to him. However, Rousseau’s *Social Contract* was not intended for most societies. It resembles Cicero’s or Plato’s *Republic*, in that it presents a picture of the best regime while simultaneously doubting its plausibility. This is why Shklar called Rousseau the “last of the

classical utopists" (1969: 1).<sup>10</sup>

Except in cases where Rousseau makes explicit empirical recommendations, such as in his *Letters Written from the Mountain*, or in the *Project for Corsica*, Rousseau's utopian model of political life must be read as a critique of modern society. Rousseau knew that actual sovereign bodies could never match the perfection of the sovereign he described. His portrayals of natural man and Spartan society were self-consciously idealized, more to illustrate the failures of modernity than to celebrate the vibrancy of antiquity. One can read the entirety of Rousseau's corpus (including the autobiographies) as an effort to transcend the divisions produced by modern life, but then one must read it as tragedy, because each of Rousseau's pictures of unity ultimately fail in one way or another. *Emile* falters without his tutor (see *Émile and Sophie*); history makes both the simplicity of the Clarens estate and the parochialism of Sparta anachronistic; natural man, though inherently good, is a kind of pre-moral beast unsuited to the modern age; and Rousseau's solitary reveries are dominated by his desire to be part of a community. Human beings are destined to live on thin lines and slippery slopes, to remain divided even in the pursuit of unity. Rousseau says that "one must choose between making a man or a citizen, for one cannot make both at the same time" (*Émile* 248). Both his writings and his life belie this possibility — the truth is that one cannot make either and must settle instead for imperfect versions of both. The modern age necessitates politics and politics necessarily divides man. Rousseau's general will conjures an image of what perfect political unity would look like, but the image must always be bittersweet, because our circumstances make it impossible to realize.

Nonetheless, even if Rousseau's blueprint for political freedom under modern conditions does not suit most societies, his essential political teaching does. Rousseau considered it necessary to think both about abstract principles of justice and legitimacy as well as about the social and cultural prerequisites to the flourishing of those principles. His great political idea, the general will, was an attempt to address both questions at the same time. Indeed, Rousseau's general will incorporates both a set of procedures and an account of their viability. The result is an account of politics that is too demanding and too homogeneous for contemporary circumstances. However, it is not Rousseau's answers so much as his method of inquiry that should provoke our interest. Rousseau inhabits the tension between voluntarism and virtue, between popular will and rational will. He does not posit a faculty, as Kant does, that permits a reconciliation of these forces; nor does he rely on some notion of natural rights or divine authority to overcome the problem. Instead, he struggles within the predicament that

characterizes modern politics. Out of a desire to combine modern voluntarism and ancient virtue, Rousseau generates a set of contradictions and paradoxes. Ironically, it is precisely these paradoxes that can help us find a way within the context of our skepticism toward universal, noncontingent sources of political authority. Rousseau's general will does not reconcile the inexorable tension between voluntarism and virtue, but it does offer an approach to political theory that makes it possible to thrive within that tension.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See his *Jugement sur la Polysynodie* in *OC* 3: 643.

<sup>2</sup>NATURAL RIGHT, in John Hope Mason and Robert Wokler eds., *Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1992) 17–21.

<sup>3</sup>See also Shklar, “General Will.”

<sup>4</sup>Rousseau writes, “It is no small thing to have brought order and peace to all parts of the republic [...]. But if one does nothing more, all this will be more apparent than real” (*Political Economy*, *CW* 148).

<sup>5</sup>In *Political Economy*, for example, Rousseau writes: “the most general will is also the most just” (*CW* 144).

<sup>6</sup>This undoubtedly begins to explain why Rousseau has an almost religious devotion to the general will.

<sup>7</sup>Rousseau himself does not use the word autonomy, however I believe it clarifies his meaning. Autonomy is sometimes invoked with normative connotations or substantive content, as Rousseau uses the word “freedom.” In this section, I use autonomy to denote the idea of open-ended, formal self-governing.

<sup>8</sup>For a discussion of this problem see Trachtenberg.

<sup>9</sup>In *Political Economy* he goes so far as to say, “The body politic, taken individually, can be considered to be like a body that is organized, living, and similar to that of a man” (142).

<sup>10</sup>As Jovenel puts it, “Rousseau the social scientist predicts the destruction of what Rousseau the moralist wills” (496). In the *Geneva Manuscript*, Rousseau insists that a perfect realization of his principles is impossible: “The works of men — always less perfect than nature’s — never go so directly toward their end” (88).

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