

Desire, Decision and Faculty: Rousseau's General Will as a Form of Will

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Comments welcome.

Many interpreters have considered the meaning of Rousseau's concept of the general will. More than one has concluded that Rousseau's famous notion is a confused muddle. But is this too easy? Granted the concept is complex and Rousseau's use of it can be confusing. But, in this paper, I would like to ask some basic but hard questions about the general will in an attempt to elicit a better understanding of how Rousseau understood the concept and what he sought to do with it.

Some points seem quite clear. My working definition is that the general will is the will of the people as it is directed towards the common interest. The general will is the will of the body of the people and its declarations are expressed in laws. Each citizen votes upon the laws that will apply to all the citizens equally. There is also an individual psychological dimension to the general will. "Each individual," Rousseau writes, "can have a particular will, different from the general will he has as a citizen."¹ The citizen has particular will directed toward particular interest and a general will directed to the common interest. But these basic formulations raise as many questions as they answer.

Does Rousseau envision the general will primarily as a concrete aspiration of the people (however fallible) of the city of the social contract or as a more impartial (or "objective") concept which expresses what is truly in their best interest? What does he mean when he says that the general will is "*toujours droite*?" And how should one

¹Jean-Jacques Rousseau, On the Social Contract with Geneva Manuscript and Political Economy, ed. Roger Masters trans. Judith Masters (Bedford Books, 1978), 1. 7. p. 55. Subsequent page references to this edition will be embodied parenthetically within the text; otherwise translations will be my own. Where possible, references will be keyed to the Pléiade edition: Oeuvres complètes, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1964). I will indicate the volume and page number; e.g., the above passage is to be found at OC 3: 363.

For textual evidence supporting of this definition of the general will, see, for example, Social Contract (2.1) Rousseau does not provide an explicit definition of the general will in The Social Contract (1762) and the focus of the present paper is on his use of the term in that seminal work. However, in his Discourse on Political Economy (1755) Rousseau offers this definition: "The body politic is thus also a moral being that has a will; and this general will, which always tends toward the preservation and welfare of the whole and each part, and which is the source of laws, is – for all the members of the State in relation to themselves and to it – the rule of what is just and unjust." OC 3:245; Masters, p. 212. This is informative but we cannot assume that it is equivalent to the definition Rousseau assumes in The Social Contract. It seems rather the case that in the Social Contract, Rousseau tries with limited success to resolve problems (of the adequacy of a view of justice based on positive law and of the reasonableness of expecting the frequent compatibility of the welfare of each part and the whole) implicitly raised by this earlier definition.

understand his curious comments in the chapter called "On Voting," 4.2. of the Social Contract? There he writes that if, when the votes are counted, the opinion that prevails is contrary to mine, "this proves nothing else but that I was mistaken and what I thought was the general will was not."

There is also a division in the recent literature on the general will between those who believe that Rousseau conceives it as an *intention* to promote the common good and those who think that Rousseau conceives it as a *decision* of the community that promotes the common good. The two interpretations are sometimes presented as incompatible alternatives. These rival interpretations emerge as interpreters focus on different parts of the text. Generally speaking, the textual evidence for interpreting the general will as an intention (or as a desire) is contained in Rousseau's discussions of the general will in Books 1 and 2, whereas the textual evidence for interpreting the general will as a decision is found in Rousseau's discussions of the general will in Book 4, chapters 1-2.²

I lean toward the interpretation of the general will as an intention to promote the common good. In fact, I read it as a form of desire for the common good, but, that said, the reading of the general will as a decision *is* needed to make the best sense of the passages in Book 4, chapters 1-2. There is substantial evidence, then, in support of both approaches and I will suggest that they are complementary rather than incompatible. In addition, Rousseau understands the general will as a *faculty* of willing, or more precisely, a faculty of willing generally. In sum, in view of both the textual evidence and the multiple meanings of the term will, Rousseau understands the general will as not only an intention or a desire but also as a decision and as a faculty.

The General Will as a form of Will

First, I suspect that it has not always been adequately appreciated that the general will is a form of will. Rousseau consciously used the term will, even though he obviously he had alternatives – he might have simply have spoken of the general interest or of the common good.³

The General Will and the Common Interest

By its nature, the general will is directed to the good of the whole; this is because it is will and this is the way will works. Rousseau writes in the Social Contract, that "no

² Gopal Sreenivasan has argued that the account of the general will as the "intention to promote the common good" cannot be reconciled with the passages in Book 4, chapters 1 and 2, in which Rousseau suggests that a (majority) vote determines the common good. He writes that "even a modicum of realism undermines the view that the majority, in voting, always intends to promote the common good." He associates the idea that the general will is an intention to promote the common good with Patrick Riley, John Charvet and Andrew Levine. He quotes Riley's view from The General Will Before Rousseau that "Soon enough one finds Rousseau saying that the general will – the will one has as a citizen, when one thinks of the common good and of civic membership – is always right." Sreenivasan calls this the *over-simple account* of the general will. For Sreenivasan, the general will is instead "the constrained deliberative decision of the community." See "What is the General Will? *The Philosophical Review*, 109, no. 4 (Oct. 2000): 545-581.

³ The definition of the general will from the Discourse on Political Economy, quoted in note 1 emphasizes the general will as will. See also Patrick Riley, The General Will Before Rousseau, (Princeton, 1986) and Judith Shklar, Men and Citizens (Cambridge, 1969).

will can consent to anything contrary to the good of the being that wills.” (2. 1, p. 59). To be more precise, no will can consent to anything contrary to that being’s conception of its own good. The will of a being always seeks its conception of its good. Rousseau draws out this important nuance in a remark of the Savoyard vicar in Emile. The vicar responds to the determinist view that the will is unfree because determined to want its own good: “Doubtless I am not free to not want my own good; I am not free to want what is bad for me. But it is precisely in this that my freedom consists – my being able to will only what in is suitable to me, or what I deem to be such, without anything external determining me.”⁴

The general will, then, is not just a statement about the good of the people but an aspiration or orientation toward that good. Rousseau describes something of the character of the relation between the general will and the common interest when he points out that the general will “looks to” the common interest. He writes that the general will “*ne regarde qu’a l’interet commune.*” (2. 3. OC 3:371).⁵

I think it is because the general will seeks the common interest that Rousseau takes the position that it is “*toujours droite.*” This is sometimes translated as “always right.” It is true that the French adjective “*droit*” can mean right as in right arm or right-handed but that is hardly intended here. The other meanings are 1) straight, as in a straight road 2) upright, as in an upright tree 3) upright or honest, as in an upright person and 4) sane or sound as in a sound judgment.⁶ Victor Gourevitch translates the term “*droite*” as “upright.”⁷ This is a sensible alternative; as we shall see, Rousseau clearly does not mean that the general will is always simply correct.

At the outset of Book 2, Chapter 3, Rousseau declares that “From the preceding it follows that the general will is *toujours droite.*” What in the preceding serves as the premise or proof? I think it is his statement, at the outset of Book 2, that “the general will alone can guide the forces of the State according to the end for which it was instituted, which is the common good.” (2. I, OC 3:368; Masters, p. 59).⁸

⁴ OC 4: 586; Emile, or On Education, Allan Bloom, trans. (Chicago: Basic Books, 1979), p. 280. As we will see, the distinction between one’s own good and one’s conception of it is a live issue in The Social Contract. Compare Hobbes who explains that some rights can not be transferred because they are based on will : “transfer of right is a voluntary act: and of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some Good to himselfe.” Leviathan, ch. 14.

⁵ Compare Shklar’s view that “The nature and functions of the will as a psychological power, rather than its ‘generality’, really explain why Rousseau had to attribute a will to the people in its position of sovereignty. The people, the nobodies of this world, is ‘*par état*’ in favor of justice and equality.” Men and Citizens, p. 185. The general will, Rousseau writes, tends “toward equality.” 2.1, Masters, p. 59. He also maintains that is general in its object: the general will cannot judge or name particular individuals or facts. (2.4)

⁶ <http://www.frenchlinguistics.com/dictionary/> Accessed November 4, 2006. According to Antoine Furetière’s Dictionnaire Universel of 1690, the adjective “*droit*” “*se dit figurément en choses spirituelles. Cet homme a l’ame droite, a l’intention droite, pour dire, il est bon & équitable. Il a l’esprit droit, pour dire, qu’il a l’esprit juste, qu’il ne s’égare d’un côté ni d’autre.*” (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1970).

⁷ The Social Contract and other later political writings, (Cambridge, 1997).

⁸ For another reference to the general will as “*toujours droite*” see DCS 2.6, Masters, p.67. Of course, all of this also presumes that the citizens identify very strongly with the social whole: “The engagements that bind us to the social body are obligatory only because they are mutual, and their nature is such that in fulfilling them one cannot work for someone else without also working for oneself. Why is the general will always right [*toujours droite*]and why do all constantly want the happiness of each, if not because there is no one who does not apply this word *each* to himself, and does not think of himself as he votes for all?” II. IV Masters, p. 62. In the Discourse on Political Economy, Rousseau writes that, carefully educated men can

The General Will as a form of Desire

In thinking about the general will, it is also important to remember that will is a form of desire. The Jesuit's definition of the will is ratiocinative appetite. Rousseau's teaching differs in important ways from that of the Jesuits but this admirably succinct definition was part of the background knowledge of will in Rousseau's time.⁹

Beyond this, what evidence do we have that Rousseau sees the general will as a form of desire? Consider three passages from Books 1 and 2 of the *Social Contract*. First, there is a passage in which Rousseau refers to the need for the general will to be "shown the good path it seeks." (2. 6, Masters, p. 67). This description fits the notion of a desire more easily than that of a decision. That is to say, it is more natural to speak of showing a desire the path it seeks than to speak of showing a decision the path it seeks. If a decision is a result that has been chosen, then it is a decision that has been made to take a given path and showing it the path is, so to speak, too late and beside the point.

The second and third passages have already been cited. As noted at the outset, Rousseau points out that "Each individual can have a private will, different from the general will he has as a citizen. His private interest can speak to him quite differently from the common interest." Rousseau develops this thought by suggesting that an individual then "might wish to enjoy the rights of the citizen without wanting to fulfill the duties of a subject..." (1.7, Masters, p. 55). The passage sets up a comparison between the wishing of the private will for the private interest and the wishing of the general will for the common interest. To that extent, it implies that the general will is a wish or desire for the common interest.

Finally, the third passage is Rousseau's assertion, noted above, that "no will can consent to anything contrary to the good of the being that wills." (2. 1, p. 59). Here I would simply argue that this would be a nonsensical statement if we were to understand Rousseau to mean that no decision can consent to anything contrary to the good of being that decides. The statement makes sense as a statement about a being always seeking or

come to "identify themselves in some way" with the body of the State. OC 3: 259; Masters, p. 222. I think this must be an early political use of the term "*s'identifier*."

⁹ Aquinas uses the phrase in the *Summa Theologica* (Benziger Bros. edition, 1947). Translation by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, First Part of the Second Part, Question 8, <http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/FS/FS008.html>, accessed November 4, 2006. For a discussion of the different positions of Aquinas and Augustine on the relation between will and reason, see Hannah Arendt's excellent study, *Willing*, Vol. Two of *The Life of the Mind*, ed. Mary McCarthy, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978). Aquinas' understanding of reasoned desire owes a major debt to the discussions in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. But note that even Hobbes refers to the "will which is called rational desire" in *On the Citizen*. See the edition by Richard Tuck, translated by Michael Silverthorne, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ch. 15, p. 179. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes comments on the definition of the will as rational appetite as follows: "The Definition of the *Will*, given commonly by the Schooles, that it is a *Rationall Appetite*, is not good. For if it were, then could there be no Voluntary Act against Reason. For a *Voluntary Act* is that, which proceedeth from the *will*, and no other. But if in stead of a *Rationall Appetite*, we shall say an appetite resulting from a precedent Deliberation, then the Definition is the same that I have given here. Will therefore *is the last Appetite in Deliberating*." Ed. C.B. Macpherson, (London: Penguin, 1981), Ch. 6, p. 127-8.

desiring its own good but it does not make sense as a statement about a being always deciding its own good.¹⁰

I will use the approach to will as appetite or desire conditioned by (some form of) reasoning to structure the paper. In a first section, I will consider the way in which the general will is conditioned by a process of reasoning. In a second section, I will explore its status as a form of desire, and suggest that Rousseau sees the general will as both a desire and a desire about desire. However, I concede that he also thinks about willing the general will as having a desire about the community's decision.

Reasoning and the General Will: Wanting the Common Good and Seeing It

The general will is always upright but Rousseau writes that the people's deliberations may not have the "same rectitude": "One always wants one's good, but one does not always see it." The people, he adds, "is never corrupted but it is often fooled" ("*souvent on le trempe*") (II.3. OC 3: 371). In what sense can the people's articulations of the general will be mistaken? The general will is an expression of the people's desire for public utility, for the preservation and well-being of the people, but, as noted above, Rousseau writes that the "judgment that guides it is not always enlightened." ("*eclairé*") Cf 3. 2, end). Or, as he also puts it in the same passage, "the public wills the good it does not see." (2. 6. OC 3: 380; Masters, p. 67.

An illustration of the problem at issue is the reception of environmentalist ideas in the 1950's in North America. At the time, North Americans were relatively unconscious of the fact that they had a waste economy and mostly unaware of the dangers of using harmful chemicals such as DDT. Recycling was a glint in an ecologist's eye. Not only this, the prevailing public consciousness was such that the marginalized few who spoke out about the impact of such practices on the natural world and on human health might be greeted with the label "crackpot environmentalist." My point here is not to suggest that members of the general public in Canada and the United States were unconcerned with the common good or welfare. On the contrary, it is a fair assumption that most parents did not want to see their children die of diseases caused by pollution and environmental damage. In this case, I would suggest the public will was still good or upright in the sense it was seeking what was best for the people.¹¹ The public will was what I would

¹⁰ There is, however, some counter-evidence. In the Geneva Manuscript, Rousseau states that "no one will deny that the general will in each individual is a pure act of the understanding, which reasons in the silence of the passions about what man can demand of his fellow man and what his fellow man has a right to demand of him." I. 2, Masters, p. 161. This formulation closely resembles Diderot's statement in his article on "Natural Right" that "the general will is in each individual member of mankind a pure act of the understanding, which reasons in the silence of the passions as to what a man may demand from his fellow man and what his fellow man has the right to require of him." Excerpted in The Age of Enlightenment, edited by Lester G. Crocker (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969), p.154. Neither formulation turns on the notion of will as desire. My conjecture is that in the first stages of his thinking about the general will, Rousseau was dependent upon Diderot's core conception of it (their disagreement about whether the general will is a general will of the human race or of a given community within it, notwithstanding) but that he later developed and refined his ideas about the general will and the results are reflected in the understanding of the general will as a desire in the final version of the Social Contract.

¹¹ As noted, this is merely an illustration of the problem that "the public wills the good it does not see." Of course, the publics of the United States and Canada were not sovereign in the sense that Rousseau posits in

call “well-intentioned.” But, in such cases, there is a more enlightened judgment available, one which would better reflect what is truly in the people’s interest. When Rousseau talks about the “enlightened” general will, then, I think his formulation points to the fact that that an enlightened general will is more closely based on the truth about the people’s interest than an unenlightened will would be.¹²

Rousseau holds, then, that the people, though they cannot be corrupted, can be mistaken and these mistakes can be mistakes not only about the means needed to attain their own good but also about the definition or conceptualization of that good. Rousseau says that the people has to be taught “to see objects as they are.” (2.6, Masters, p. 67.) And, as noted above, he writes that “the public wants the good it does not see” (2.6, Masters, p. 67.) These statements raise a number of questions. Does Rousseau see the general will as an impartial or “objective” concept which expresses what is truly in the best interest of the whole? Does he believe in universal truths? Does he think that the general will reflects universal truths?

Later in the Social Contract, Rousseau posits that every system of legislation ought to aim for the general goals of freedom and equality. But he concedes that “these general objects should be modified according to the relationships that arise as much from the local situation as from the character of the inhabitants.” (2.11, Masters, p. 75). There may be some variations in applications of these goals in specific societies but the goals themselves are universal. This is consistent with the attitude toward relativism expressed throughout Rousseau’s work. Perhaps the clearest statement is his reply to Montaigne’s questioning of universal ethical standards in his Essay, Of Cannibals. “O Montaigne, he writes, “you who pride yourself on frankness and truth, be sincere and true, if a philosopher can be, and tell me whether there is some country on earth where it is a crime to keep one’s faith, to be clement, beneficent, and generous, where the good man is contemptible and the perfidious one honored?”¹³ There are universal goals, then, that the general will could and should embody and reflect.

We have suggested, so far, then, that the general will of the body of the people is never mistaken in wanting its good but can err in not seeing the means to that good and in defining that good. But what if there is a discrepancy between real empirical acts of the general will in political life and what truly tends to the good of the people? And what if the general will is mistaken about the common good and a principled individual believes that he or she perceives what is truly the good of the people? Rousseau addresses this in two ways in two different parts of The Social Contract. In 2.3, a chapter called “Whether

the Social Contract. He envisions a small republic which rules itself directly; the citizens as a body approve all the laws in person. Nonetheless, I think the illustration usefully shows that he is right to emphasize the discrepancy between wanting the common interest and grasping what it is. A similar argument might be made regarding seatbelt legislation, or (to my mind) state sponsored casinos.

¹² In a thought-provoking account of the general will, Iain Hampshire-Monk argues that “As the principle of political right, the general will ... has objective aims and characteristics, which the majority of the people, if uninformed, might fail to embody in their decisions.” A History of Modern Political Thought, (Blackwell, 1992) p. 182.

¹³ OC 3: 599; Bloom, Emile, p. 289. I have quoted the text from the Profession of Faith of the Savoyard vicar but Rousseau offered the first version of this passage in his own name in the Lettres Morales. The only minor difference between the two passages is that in the earlier version Rousseau refers to “quelque climat sur la terre,” whereas in the Profession of Faith he writes of “quelque pays sur la terre.” For the Lettres Morales version, see OC 3: 1109.

the General Will Can Err,” Rousseau refers to the conditions (related to avoiding faction) that are needed in order for the general will can be “well expressed” (*bien enoncé*). (Masters, p. 61). This last phrase deserves our attention. Authoritarian readings of the general will are certainly possible, but this phrase could imply the greater sufficiency or authority of an empirical general will, if only it is well expressed.¹⁴ The less authoritarian reading of the concept might distinguish between two “moments” or “stages” of general will. In the first moment, we can imagine the general will directed toward its conception of the good but not well expressed in laws. In the second moment, we can imagine the general will well expressed in laws and indeed, so well expressed that it becomes equivalent to the enlightened general will. This interpretation certainly requires reading against the grain of the text, but, with its focus on procedures and methods of expression, it provides some satisfaction to the reader of Rousseau who is committed to deliberative democracy.

Nonetheless, Rousseau clearly points to the disjunction between the people’s desire for the preservation and well-being of the community, on the one hand, and what actually conduces to the preservation and well-being of the community, on the other. And his keen awareness of this disjunction leads him to introduce the figure of the legislator, the great founder who is to inform the people’s wills and help them to see objects as they are. In order to do so, he suggests that the legislator may use religious fraud and attribute his “wisdom to the Gods.” Through this fraud, he persuades common men to accept a “sublime reason” that Rousseau thinks would otherwise be beyond their grasp. (2.7. Masters, p. 69) My conjecture is that Rousseau is so anxious to avoid the accusation that he advocates mob rule, that he ends up building in conditions that undermine the informed consent that makes democracy meaningful and desirable.

Desire and the General Will: First and Second Order Volitions.

The legislator must foster the requisite “social spirit” in the people, so that they will accept the need to make personal sacrifices for the common good: “Each individual, appreciating no aspect of government other than the one that relates to his private interest, has difficulty perceiving the advantages he should obtain from the continual deprivations imposed by good laws.” (2.7, Masters, p. 69). The legislator is to shape the wills of the citizens on the basis of his own ratiocination. He will attend to the mores, customs and opinions of the people so as to strengthen the general will, that is, the desire for the common good within them. (2.12) But beyond this I think his task is to instill in the citizens a desire to desire the common good.

Here I rely on the conception of desires about desires articulated by Harry Frankfurt, in his classic article; “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person.” Frankfurt argues that human beings are distinguished from the animals by the fact that they have desires about desires or a will to will. Animals, he writes, make choices and “some even appear to engage in deliberation and to make decisions based on prior

¹⁴ However, in the passages just before he introduces the legislator, Rousseau stresses the distance between the general will wanting the good and the enlightened general will. (2. 6-7)

thought.”¹⁵ But only human beings make evaluations of and form desires about their own desires:

Besides wanting and choosing and being moved to do this or that, men may also want to have (or not have) certain desires and motives. They are capable of wanting to be different in their preferences and purposes, from what they are. Many animals appear to have the capacity for what I shall call “first order desires” or “desires of the first order,” which are simply desires to do or not do one thing or another. No other animal than man, however, appears to have the capacity for reflective self-evaluation that is manifested in the formation of second-order desires.¹⁶

If we apply this conception to the general will, it appears that the general will is a first-order volition, in the sense that the people desire to do or not do something in their own interest; for example, they might desire to pass or revoke a given law. But it is clear that Rousseau is also concerned with instilling a process by which citizens might will to will the general will. He is especially interested in the problem of how, if there is a conflict between the general will and their particular will, they might will the general will, or even to will to will the general will.

Consider the remarks we quoted at the beginning from the chapter called "On Voting." 4.2. Rousseau contends that if, when the votes are counted, the opinion that prevails is contrary to mine, "this proves nothing else but that I was mistaken and what I thought was the general will was not. If my private opinion had prevailed, I would have done something other than I had willed, it is then that I would not have been free." Such a citizen wills the general will to prevail. And (however difficult such an attitude may be for those of us who live in contemporary liberal democracies to understand or accept) he wills that it prevail rather than his particular will. He is evaluating and indeed ranking his first order volitions.¹⁷ The question of the relation between reason and desire in willing to will the general will also arises.¹⁸

¹⁵ Journal of Philosophy, 68 (1971), p. 6

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 2

¹⁷ A few sentences before this statement, Rousseau writes that “The citizen consents to all the laws, even to those passed against his will, and even to those that punish him when he dares violate one of them. The constant will of all the members of the State is the general will, which makes them citizens and free.” OC 3: 440; Masters, p. 110. Also see Sreenivasan, “What is the General Will?” on Book 4, Chapters 1-2. Cf. Rousseau’s statement in the *Political Economy* that: “*nous voulons volontiers ce que veulent les gens que nous aimons.*” Since *vouloir* can mean to will or to want, the phrase might be translated “we willingly will what the people we love will.” (OC 3:254).

¹⁸ My inclination is to say that for Rousseau, the process of getting citizens to will to will the general will involves influencing their reasoning as well as forming their desires and tastes. But does this involve a melding of the two or a dialectic between them or both? The notion that the reflexivity of our wills involves a dialectic between reason and will is outlined by Hans Jonas in his important essay, “Philosophical Meditation on the Seventh Chapter of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans” in The Future of Our Religious Past: Essays in Honor of Rudolf Bultmann, (Harper and Row, 1971). Jonas suggests that St. Paul’s letter reveals the alteration between the will willing (or affirming) itself and the will observing itself. Jonas describes this as a dialectic between *volo me velle* and *cogito me velle*. He suggests that the nobility of human freedom is revealed in the dialectic between the two.

However, an alternative reading allows for greater precision. It is here that the interpretation of the general will as a decision can be of use. The passage indicates that when the individual wills to will the general will, the individual *desires* that the general will as a community *decision* prevails. Note, however, that having made this statement about being mistaken about the general will when the opinion contrary to his own prevails, Rousseau immediately adds that “This presupposes, it is true, that all the characteristics of the general will are still in the majority.” (p. 111). Are these characteristics not those of seeking the good and being upright by definition that he has stipulated in Books 1 and 2? Those characteristics, it might be argued, suggest that the general will is a form of intention and, indeed, desire.

Nonetheless, our concession that the general will viewed as a decision makes the best sense of this passage indicates that this interpretation is a necessary component of a complete understanding of the general will. While both the view that the general will is a desire for the common good and the view that it is a decision of the community are necessary, neither is sufficient. Moreover, they are not incompatible. Consider here Hobbes’ definition of will in Leviathan (cited note 9) which postulates that will is both a desire and a decision. He defines it as the “*the last Appetite in Deliberating.*”

Finally, we have also asserted that the general will is a *faculty* of willing. Here it is important to consider Rousseau’s metaphor of the body politic that has a will. In the Social Contract, Rousseau writes that the “act of association produces a moral and collective body...which receives from this same act its unity, its common *self*, its life and its will.” (1.6 Masters, p. 53) The most plausible reading of this is that the moral and collective body receives its *faculty* of will (rather than its will understood as a decision or a desire) through this act of association.¹⁹ In the same work, Rousseau asserts that “sovereignty, being only the exercise of the general will, can never be alienated, and that the sovereign, which is only a collective being, can only be represented by itself. Power can perfectly well be transferred, but not will.” (2.1, Masters, p. 59). If the general will cannot be transferred it is not because it is a desire (which might be instilled in others through inspiration, for example) nor because it is a decision (the execution of which might be delegated). The general will cannot be transferred because will is a moral faculty or aptitude and not a mere power. Sovereignty, on this reading, is the exercise of the faculty of the general will.

In this paper, I have begun to analyze the noun, will, as a way of asking questions about Rousseau’s famous idea. A fuller understanding of the concept would require an analysis of the adjective, general.

¹⁹ Rousseau also uses a vivid metaphor of the body politic with a capacity for will in the Political Economy. There he writes as follows: “The body politic, taken individually, can be considered to be like a body that is organized, living, and similar to that of a man. The sovereign power represents the head; the laws and customs are the brain, source of the nerves and the seat of the understanding, will and senses...” (Masters, p. 211). Cf. His description a few paragraphs later of the body politic as a “moral body that has a will...” quoted in note 1.

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