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Part II. Hegel's Interdisciplinary Concept of the Will

4. Rousseau and Hegel on the Universal Will

Rousseau and Hegel were both untroubled by the question of how a thought could move matter. Both followed Spinoza's idea that all beings are by nature *striving*. The problems they were addressing was how an individual can be free while living in communities with millions of others. Key to enjoying freedom in a large community was the moral education of the people and the formation of a good state.

Rousseau and the general Will

Rousseau (1762) understood the modern state in terms of a "Social Contract."

The Social Contract is based on a foundation myth, according to which, when people could no longer maintain themselves in the state of nature, they joined together as equal citizens in a social contract.

Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general Will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.

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As a result of this contract, individual citizens formed a single body which acted according to a general Will. However, the general Will is an *ideal*.

The general Will is always right and tends to the public advantage; but it does not follow that the deliberations of the people are always equally correct. Our will is always for our own good, but we do not always see what that is; the people is never corrupted, but it is often deceived, and on such occasions only does it *seem* to Will what is bad.

1762, Book 2, Chapter 3

But for a variety of reasons, when the citizens seek to determine that general Will, they may be mistaken. The question is then: what conditions cause the people to err when they seek to determine the general Will?

The general Will differs in principle from an individual Will, but an individual should always ask themselves: "What is the common good?" not what is good for me, in determining my own Will.

Majority voting may be a means of determining the general Will, but it is only a method, and may be *fallible*. The first condition for the people to be able to correctly determine the general Will is that the people are well informed so that they can determine what is for the common good.

Secondly, Rousseau believed that if there were no communication between individuals, each would tend to produce the same conception of the general Will. And thus: "Each citizen should think only his own thoughts" (Book 1, Chapter 3). So there must be no factions, or at least, if there are factions, then no faction should be so great that its particular Will should have excessive weight in determining the general Will. In Rousseau's words:

If, when the people, being furnished with adequate information, held its deliberations, the citizens had no communication one with another, the grand total of the small differences would always give the general will, and the decision would always be good.

1762, Book 1, Chapter 2

There must be no master; the moment a master exists, there is no longer a Sovereign. The Sovereign is the entire collective being, bound by the social contract, including any office which acts on behalf of the general Will.

There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will; the latter considers only the common interest, while the former takes private interest into account, and is no more than a sum of particular wills: but take away from these same wills the pluses and minuses that cancel one another and the general will remains as the sum of the differences.

Book 1, Chapter 3

The general Will must always be expressed in terms of universal laws, and not policies in relation to this or that contingency which arises. Generals or civil servants are all responsible to determining policies in their respective domains, but must do so governed by the general Will, which alone is sovereign.

Rousseau's is a distinctively modern view of the general Will. He does not exclude monarchy, but the monarch is still bound like anyone else to obedience to the general Will and no special place in its determination. The people give the head of state the right to act on their behalf only by their silence. The general Will is the supreme law, but its actual laws can be always be found to be mistaken.

The Corporate Subject

Most of the above is written as if the subject were an individual person. But in general the subject can be a corporate actor such as a political party or an institution, or a social movement united by some universal concept in the absence of actual organizational ties. The subject identifies itself by means of a concept of itself and its welfare and shared intentions.

What this suggests is an approach to a social theory in which agency is given its rightful place through units, each of which is an *intention* – some universal concept which is the shared content, the soul, of each aggregate of actions. The term I prefer for this unit is 'project'.

The theory outlined above, which forms the basic content of the middle section of *The Philosophy of Right* on Morality, has raised some problems for social movement activists. I will examine these in a reflection on Hegel's Morality.

The Universal Will and Universal Suffrage

Hegel argues consistently for highly mediated forms of representation and against universal suffrage. Marx responds by pointing out:

“The question whether all as individuals should share in deliberating and deciding on political matters of general concern is a question that arises from the separation of the political state and civil society.” (p. 118)

and

“It is not a question of whether civil society should exercise legislative power through deputies or through all as individuals. Rather, it is a question of the extension and greatest possible universalisation of voting, of active as well as passive suffrage. This is the real point of dispute in the matter of political reform, in France as well as in England.”

Marx does not proffer solutions to this problem, but makes an extended criticism of Hegel which brings out the contradictions entailed in his construction of representative politics.

Without meeting the problems raised by Marx, Hegel makes a powerful argument against universal suffrage.

“As for popular suffrage, it may be further remarked that especially in large states it leads inevitably to electoral indifference, since the casting of a single vote is of no significance where there is a multitude of electors. Even if a voting qualification is highly valued and esteemed by those who are entitled to it, they still do not enter the polling booth. Thus the result of an institution of this kind is more likely to be the opposite of what was intended; election actually falls into the power of a few, of a caucus, and so of the particular and contingent interest which is precisely what was to have been neutralised.” op. cit. §311n.)

According to Hegel, the deputies in the Legislature have to do with the various branches of society, and the electorate must not be seen as an agglomeration of atoms op. cit. §311). Deputies should represent the various real groups in society and give them equal weight. Universal suffrage on the contrary requires every individual to cast their vote privately, as an isolated atom. Hegel believes that the public must be educated in national affairs, and he sees the assemblies of the Estates as the means of achieving this, while political discussion “at his fireside with his wife and his friends” can never be better than “building castles in the sky.” Participation in assemblies is essential for political education, and this can only be achieved in the bodies mediating between the associations of civil society and the Legislature. ‘Public opinion’ is the name given to “individuals ... in their having and expressing their own private judgments, opinions, and recommendations on affairs of state” (op. cit. §316). Public opinion is therefore “a repository of genuine needs and correct tendencies of common life” but “infected by all the accidents of opinion, by its ignorance and perversity, by its mistakes and falsity of judgment,” and Hegel quotes Goethe: ‘the masses are respectable hands at fighting, but miserable hands at judging’.

The Mediation of the Will in Voluntary Association

The State

References

Hegel, G. W. F., (1821/1952). *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, translated with Notes by T. M. Knox, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.