

THE GENERAL WILL.

By J. H. WARREN.

CAN there be any sure and *legitimate* authority? inquires Rousseau in his challenging opening sentence.¹ The problem, as he sees it, is to find a form of association giving protection to life and property in which men, although united, remain free.² Rousseau hopes to reconcile authority and freedom. The unalterable condition of union is the "complete alienation of each associate . . . to the whole community. . . . Each gives himself absolutely." In this way the natural man, hugging his rights, gives way before the creation of a new creature; a moral and collective body is set up which "calls out the moral and intellectual capabilities of the individual."³ "Each puts his person and all his power under the direction of the general will."⁴ It is as a member of that association that man becomes a moral creature. It is just because he chooses to lose his natural liberty that he satisfies his moral nature. He is free because he has turned his face towards the light. He has gained civil liberty. Moral liberty alone makes him master of himself. "Obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves is liberty." As Vaughan puts it, "Real freedom is willing acceptance of service."⁵ It means annihilation in a collective absolutism. For civil rights and moral life begin *in* the State. And man no longer cherishes the notion that he is a "right-bearing atom" set over and against the State. Liberty is no more a holy flame athwart the brow of every man. To find himself, man must first lose himself. His real liberty is achieved through the association. No interest of that collective body can be contrary to his. Thus, obedience to this moral person is justified.

The contingency of *disobedience* Rousseau meets squarely. "Who-soever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. . . . He will be forced to be free."⁶ And what in that appears tyrannical, when seen in the light of the ideal State, proves to be but the action of a man's best self linked to those of other men. His real freedom is in no way infringed. His deepest needs, did he but clearly recognize them, are being met by what is "more truly part of the individual than the individual himself."⁷ This is high ground indeed. The collective consciousness is, therefore, the sum of the good we would will. And it is always right. Individuals who see the good they reject must be compelled to bring their wills into conformity with their reason.

The body politic is created by the social compact. There are mutual undertakings binding each man to each, and all are under the *general will*. The general will is rational; it is found in everyone who desires the best for the community. "It is the common-self of society—the supra-individual." Generality is its obvious character-

1. *Social Contract*, p. 5.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
3. Vaughan, p. 57.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
6. *Social Contract*, p. 18.
7. Vaughan, p. 112.

istic, being described as "general in its object and essence . . . it is a common interest uniting. . . ."⁸ This soul of the State is not an abstraction. It not merely rests upon the wills of the individuals composing it. It has absolute power over all its members.⁹ It is sovereign. Every authentic act of the general will is the act of sovereignty. "The whole people decrees for the whole people."¹⁰ "It is also superior to judge and law."¹¹

If the public fails to see the good, it must be enlightened. Where individuals reject the good, compulsion is enjoined. If a man "attacks social rights, he is not so much a citizen as an enemy."¹² The violation of law brings to an end his membership in the community. In short, let a man become conscious of his real needs, his best self, and for that man *liberty and authority are one*.

This is truly an inspired view of the reconciliation of authority and freedom under the guidance of man's essential rationality. It may well be that Rousseau has produced true principles of political right upon a moral basis. But his claim for the existence of the general will has a deeper significance. At bottom, the problem is that (suggested by C. D. H. Cole) "of making the general will, in any particular State, active and conscious." And that is "the problem Rousseau is trying to solve when he claims the existence of a general will."

Can there be, therefore, *the realization of the general will* in the pulsating life of the nation? Can Rousseau show that the "common interest uniting voters"¹³ participates in rationality, and that men *will* the best? The test Cole¹⁴ supplies is adequate. "The general will is realized when what is done is best for the community, and, in addition, when the community as a whole has *willed* the doing of it." We could not withhold our allegiance from this State. We trust Rousseau to produce it.

As *law* is the expression of the general will, and as the people are the repository of legislative power, naturally we might expect "heaven begun below." But Rousseau feels how fallacious are the expectations based on mass wisdom. He recognizes that ignorance and numbers are a bar to the "enterprise" of legislation.¹⁵ "How can a blind multitude legislate?" How can it aim at a target it has failed to pick out? Wants speak louder than needs. To cite Mr. Maurice Blackburn, M.H.R., speaking at the time of the Prohibition Campaign, the temporary satisfaction they find in alcohol keeps back the workers from pursuing the goal of their political emancipation, and to-day how can a blind multitude pick its way through a maze of complications and technicalities in modern legislation?

To overcome this difficulty, although without disturbing the source of legislative power, Rousseau proceeds to set up a propounder of law,

8. *Social Contract*.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

13. *Social Contract*, p. 28.

14. Cole, p. XXXVII.

15. *Social Contract*, p. 34.

and this law shall be confirmed by the people. *The lawgiver* shall act for moral ends. It is true that he and they are linked together by the chain of rationality, in which all participate. But Rousseau advances beyond this. He exalts the legislator who appeals to "sublime reason, far away above the common herd."¹⁶ In fact, Rousseau is urging the claims of the "philosopher-king," and, in a lyric passage of platonic beauty, "he raises Daphnis to the stars": "The legislator, whose great soul proves his mission. . . ."

To be consistent, Rousseau should not ascribe so great rationality to a part of the whole. The gulf between them deepens when he asserts that the high-minded giver of laws must ask, "whether the nation is *capable* of bearing them." If they are eminently rational, why cannot *voters* determine whether they accord with man's highest interests? And, again, where "human prudence cannot move" men, they are to be constrained! It is surely a pathetic admission that the responses of man's rationality are poor enough to need psychological reinforcement. By implication it is evident that Rousseau is uneasy. His inspired conception has met some hard facts. The best is not actually willed by the whole. Take, e.g., his legislator. A direction, he feels, to the current of political thought and feeling is desirable and necessary. Why? Surely because the "blind multitude" is blind, and must be compelled to obey the general will.

To the argument that even "the wisest may be governing for their own profit," Rousseau replies,¹⁷ (i) that since the lawgiver and the executive are not the same, this is prevented; and (ii) the ultimate repository of power is in the people, accordingly such a state of affairs can be put an end to when all assemble and have submitted to them two fundamental questions:

"Does it please the Sovereign to preserve the present form of government?"¹⁸

"Does it please the people to leave its administration in the hands of those who are actually in charge of it?"¹⁸

Rousseau must concede the weakness of the institution of a legislator.

It will be urged, of course, that this superior being—the legislator—is "enlightened." And yet, presented to the Sovereign with the "wise man's" label, there could be a measure which perhaps conceals a reactionary policy. How can the people's choice in that case be a right one? The proposition that "the particular will acts in opposition to the general will"¹⁹ is an admission that selfishness can thwart beneficial projects. And who, indeed, can distinguish between "the will of the whole people" and "the clamour of a faction?"²⁰ Ideally, "the general will is not corrupted or exterminated." But this means no more than morally the general will is unimpaired.

But the problem still confronts us, how are you going to apply—

16. *Social Contract*, p. 37.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 88 and 89.

and get men to apply—Rousseau's test—"is it to the advantage of the State?" We will suppose that X., a candidate for Parliament, has an appeal for many electors based upon his attitude to moral questions. They urge his claims strongly, satisfied that he will present man's essential rationality. Now, X. feels that to win he must broaden his appeal, and accordingly secures support for his candidature by making ambiguous and even contradictory promises. Success thus gained is at the price of favouring private interests, rather than considering only the real needs of the State, the general will. And men despair of the general will ever being truly expressed in public life.

Take another example. An Attorney-General suggests to Premiers constitutional change, frankly stating that the appeal to the electorate should be in a simple form to gain easy acceptance. Was he putting the capacities of the electors too low? He implies that they cannot even understand the situation, much less know whether it is advantageous to the State. With that as a foundation, men justify the handing over of hard political thinking to the experts. Where, then, is the essential "willing" on the part of each man? Thus, in practice, the claim made on behalf of the State fails; it does not "call forth man's moral and intellectual capabilities" (*supra*). Great decisions are made *for* men.

It is precisely at this point that Rousseau is significant and corrective. What a spirit should animate the State! Rousseau's political principles are perhaps, as yet, "a pattern laid up in the heavens," but, as "the blind multitude" becomes enlightened, these will increasingly mould the life and thought of the actual world. They claim our allegiance. In so far as the particular State participates in the ideal State, to that extent it is worthy of man's obedience. As men "turn more and more away from the shadows of the Cave to the bright light of the Good,"²¹ will their political principles express the general will.

21. Plato *Republic*.