

Summary

The General Will in Political Philosophy

This book, an undertaking conducted at the juncture of the history of ideas and political philosophy, treats of the role and place attributed to the general will in modern and contemporary political philosophy. On the one hand, historical and philosophical topics are explored by tracing the modifications which the idea of the general will has undergone in the writings of various philosophers, often representing very remote eras. The author follows the birth and evolution of the idea through Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the modern era and contemporary times, devoting the bulk of his attention to the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau as well as nineteenth and twentieth century British idealists. On the other hand, the author's aim is to provide arguments in support of the work's main theses. These state, firstly, that it is by a modification of the Rousseauian idea of the general will that the program of British idealist political philosophy came to include a blending of individualist and communitarian attitudes, becoming the prototype for today's liberal-communitarian orientation, and secondly, that the Rousseauian general will must inevitably be interpreted in a twofold manner. It ought, on the one hand, to be viewed as a strictly ethical concept, and as a political and legal one on the other.

The exposition proceeds in four parts. The first describes the history of the category of the general will prior to its taking shape as Rousseau's well-known conception of the *volonté générale*. The author first describes the process whereby the idea evolved as an as-yet nonpolitical category, strictly theological in nature. In this context, he presents the turns taken by disputes concerning the nature of Divine will, both in respect of salvation as well as the universal laws governing the world. Hence the chapters that follow present the views of thinkers whose deliberations focused on these topics – St. Paul, philosophers and theologians involved in the dispute on predestination, Blaise Pascal, Nicolas Malebranche, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, François Fénelon, Charles de Montesquieu, Denis Diderot and finally Rousseau himself. The latter's thought dominates Chapter I. The author makes an attempt, respectively, to give a more precise account of the attributes ascribed to the category of *volonté générale* by Rousseau and

to define the categories of *volonté particulière/volonté de tous* as well as their relationship to the general will, the political implications of each of the possible readings of the *volonté générale*, finally also the problem of the constitution of an ideal community.

The thesis proclaiming the necessity of a twofold reading of the Rousseauian general will is justified by the distinction of two mutually irreducible ways of understanding the *volonté générale*: as a political and legal concept on the one hand, and an ethical one on the other. In the first of these readings the general will is defined by reference to a specific type of democratic institutional order in which the general nature of the enacted law as well as the direct character of the legislative process compel the citizens to an equal concern for the common good as for their own private interest. The second, ethical, reading makes it necessary to define the *volonté générale* as a specific state of the civic spirit, rendering individuals indifferent to the dictates of particular interest. Going further, the author demonstrates that each of these readings implicates a wholly different type of community. In the first case, we are dealing with a political community in the proper sense, where the ideal of the general will is realized in the act of voting by citizens, and achieves its most perfect incarnation in the legislation enacted by them. The members of such a community are people of flesh and blood, not devoid of concern for their own good, and even egotistical in placing it above the common interest. In the ethical interpretation meanwhile we are faced with a community whose members are bound together by indissoluble emotional bonds, where each fully devotes himself to the pursuit of the common good, being in fact unable to differentiate between the communal *volonté générale* and his own egotistical *volonté particulière*. This is the vision of an apolitical society whose ideal members, conscious of their part in laboring towards the well-being of the whole, conscientiously fulfill their duties, desiring nothing beyond the good of the common Self. Although seemingly irreconcilable at first sight, these two visions are not mutually exclusive. Both types of community, that of virtue and that of duty, can be combined if we consider the former a regulative idea governing the functioning of the latter or the subsequent (most certainly unattainable) stage of the latter's development. Despite the possibility of such a reconciliation, the interpretative duality of the general will cannot be eliminated from the thought of Rousseau, while the two readings advanced here cannot be made into one. Unless of course we are prepared to pay the price of an unjustified impoverishment of the entirety of Rousseau's political thought.

The second chapter centers on the political thought of British idealism, focusing on three figures of key importance to the subject at hand: Thomas

Hill Green, Francis Herbert Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet. Having outlined their biographies, the author gives a twofold, negative and positive, characterization of their philosophical positions. Within the first of these approaches, he presents idealist critiques aimed against the proponents of apriorism, individualism, contractualism and modern jusnaturalism. The idealist critique of exponents of the “duty for duty’s sake” conception as well as “theories of the first look” – J.S. Mill, J. Bentham and H. Spencer or, for that matter, modern contractualists like Hobbes, Locke and Spinoza, is therefore outlined here. The chief mistake of these theories has, above all, to do with the abstractionism and individualism at their basis, which renders them of little use for diagnosing communal life. The fundamental political theses of the idealists are next described. The first, positing the social origins of human identity, found expression in Bradley’s conception of “my station and its duties”, Bosanquet’s community of ideas as well as Green’s vision of the relationship between moral duties and legal obligations. All of these point to the contextual character of idealist thought, discerning the origins of moral prescriptions in the customs and law of specific communities. In seeming (but only apparent) opposition to them is the second idealist thesis, emphasizing the teleological dimension of reality (both ethical and political), which even against the will of individuals pushes towards the unfolding of the moral potential dormant within them.

In the third chapter, the author analyses the place and role of the general will in the writings of the British idealists. Here the exposition also proceeds in two parts. Green’s and Bosanquet’s idealist critiques of the Rousseauian *volonté générale* are first presented. The former charged the author of the *Social Contract* with individualism as well as excessive rigor in defining the conditions for establishing the government of the general will. Bosanquet, on the other hand, viewed Rousseau’s thought as incapable of developing a real concept of community, hence also of a will that could be seen as truly general. To his mind, the thought of Rousseau was an apotheosis of the will of the majority, scorned by the author of the *Social Contract* himself. The second part of the argument contained in Chapter III focuses on the way in which the notion of the general will was modified by the idealists. In Bradley’s *Ethical Studies*, the general will took the form of a community’s universal will which, as manifested in its institutional order, ought to be the main foundation of individual conduct. For Green, the general will was “impalpable congeries of the hopes and fears of a people bound together by common interest and sympathy”, whereas in the writings of Bosanquet it represented a community of ideas. In spite of fundamental differences between the last two interpretations, in both cases the general will forms the

basis on which communities function. In presenting the subject, the author additionally touches on a wide range of issues of importance in idealist thought, such as its ambivalent attitude towards legal positivism (especially of the variety present in the thought of J. Austin) or the supposed differences between the political perspectives of Green, Bradley and Bosanquet.

The reflections of Chapter III are supplemented with an account of the subsequent career of the idealist conception of the general will. Here one may read of the nature of Hobhouse's attack on Bosanquet's interpretation, and about other interpretations of the concept as exemplified in the writings of the last exceptional representatives of the British idealist tradition, including John Henry Muirhead and Hector James Wright Hetherington, or those of the "new liberals" – Hobhouse and Hobson.

Chapter IV attempts to evaluate the academic thesis assigning a crucial role to idealist thought within contemporary philosophical and political debates. Since one of the two main theses of the book concerns the conciliatory nature of idealism with regard to the individualist and communitarian positions, these two orientations are introduced along with their chief exponents. In the first case, we are looking at liberals, and at communitarians in the second. Communitarian conceptions closest in content to idealist thought are then presented: Charles Taylor's theses concerning the dialogical nature of reality and the fundamental importance of social recognition, Alasdair MacIntyre's statement of the teleological dimension of human existence, Michael J. Sandel's critique of the unencumbered self as well as Michael Walzer's theory of the spheres of justice. The presentation of individualist and communal positions is followed by an analysis of the intermediate standpoint of liberal communitarianism. At the end, arguments are given in favor of counting exponents of the idealist tradition among nineteenth-century proponents of communalised liberalism. The part played by the theory of law elaborated in their writings turns out to be of key importance here, in particular, three of its theses, proclaiming the recognition-based nature of laws, their inevitable connection to the common good as well as the fundamental importance of the notion of positive freedom (interestingly, the idealists turn out to be nearly 100 years ahead of George MacCallum and Taylor's theses about the indivisibility of positive and negative liberty). Having also presented the further career of the idealist theory of law, the author finally indicates those elements of idealist thought which ultimately confirm its conciliatory nature with respect to the two feuding traditions of liberalism and communitarianism. Mentioned and presented are, in order, the teleologism of British idealism as well as the attempt to give politics a metaphysical grounding undertaken within its bounds, ethico-political

contextualism, the hesitation between relativism and universalism, the critique of negative liberty, and individualism. In describing each of these elements the author consequently demonstrates similarities between idealist thought and contemporary statements regarding these issues. Similar conclusions can be drawn from reading the abovementioned elements of idealist thought in conjunction with three elements characteristic of liberal communitarianism, presented by David Miller. Namely the acceptance of liberal democracy as the proper platform for resolving ethical debates, opposition to abstract universalism as well as the acceptance of the cultural and ideological diversity of contemporary societies.

To conclude, the author presents further directions in which reflection on the general will has scholarly potential to develop, placing particular emphasis on its relation to the idea of public reason present especially in the writings of J. Rawls as well as the idea of deliberative democracy.

translated by Dominika Gajewska