

The Identity of the General Will

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Note: this paper is a version of Chapter 3 of my forthcoming book *Rousseau on Identity* (Oxford UP). I have added a prefatory section briefly summarizing Chapter 1 of the book on “The Development of Identity,” which is in turn based on an article I published: “Rousseau and the Development of Identity” (Political Research Quarterly, 2024).

Rousseau’s theory of political legitimacy in which sovereignty is necessarily held by the people and in which laws are the expression of the general will of the citizens has been identified as a decisive turning point in modern political thought (Tuck 2016). Indeed, the general will (*volonté générale*) is one of the most famous, not to say infamous, concepts in the history of political thought. “The general will is Rousseau’s most successful metaphor,” states Shklar (1985, 184): “It conveys everything he most wanted to say. It ties his moral psychology and political theory as no other words could.” Bertram (2012, 403) agrees: “The central concept of Rousseau’s political philosophy is the general will.” And Cohen (2010, 15): “The idea of the general will is one of the essential ideas in Rousseau’s political philosophy.” If scholars are perhaps unanimous in agreeing that the general will is the central concept of Rousseau’s political theory, this consensus ends with the question of its importance. What exactly did Rousseau want to say with the general will? “Few concepts in the history of political thought have proved so troublesome as Rousseau’s notion of the general will,” states Dagger (1981, 359). And the troubles have not ceased, as recently attested by Spector (2019, 55): the general will “is the most famous and the most decisive concept of Rousseau’s political theory. It is also the most difficult concept, if not the most obscure.” In short, there is considerable disagreement over the nature, basis, and aim of the general will and the means for ascertaining it.

My focus on the development of identity in Rousseau’s thought opens up a new way of understanding the general will. If the will is the faculty or act of choosing or willing based on the belief of what is good for one’s self-preservation and well-being, as I will argue, then the general will is best understood as, at bottom, grounded in the will each individual has qua citizen. As such, the general will is rooted in the citizens’ identity as citizens and their identification with the political association and their fellow citizens. I say that the general will is best understood as “at bottom” the general will of the citizen because Rousseau sometimes refers to the outcome of voting as the general will and also seems to attribute the general will to a collective body, especially the sovereign, which has led some to view the general will as somehow transcendent in relation to the citizens. However, I will argue that these usages on Rousseau’s part are more properly speaking what Rousseau terms a “declaration” of the general will as determined by the voting of the citizens. Finally, my interpretation reveals the necessary relationship between the two sides of Rousseau’s political theory, the principles of political right and the “science of the legislator,” which are typically treated separately and even as detachable. For the general will to be realized the wills of the citizens must be shaped by extralegal institutions to promote a strong political identity and civic virtue.

Previous scholars have glimpsed certain aspects of my argument concerning the expansive nature of the “self” and its connection to his political thought, though not, with a few exceptions, in relation to the general will. Interpreters have seen how Rousseau wants somehow to extend the self to others within the political association, and they have pointed to various psychological mechanisms for doing so: self-love (Mara 1980, 540; Charvet 1974, 78-9, 85-7), pity (Boyd 2024, 249), conscience (Abizadeh 2001, 565-9; Derathé 1948, 97-8), or, closer to my own interpretation, self-consciousness or “*conscience*” (Guerpillon 2016) or “identity-constituting attachments” (Neuhouser 2000, 192-8). Likewise, others speak of “transforming our moral psychology” (O’Hagan 2004, 96-101), nurturing a “common self” or “*moi commun*” (Spector 2019, 55; Bernardi 2006, 405; Strong 1994, 34-40; Cullen 1993, 153), extending one’s “selfhood” (Douglass 2024, 74-7), fostering “a sufficient sense of shared identity” (Bertram 2012, 405), or stating that the citizen “must wholly transform his identity, his self, his locus of identity” (Melzer 1990, 104). My focus on the relationship of the general will to Rousseau’s understanding of the development of identity offers a more sustained and thorough interpretation than has hitherto been available.

My emphasis on the *will* in the *general will*, or its voluntarist basis, speaks to several long-standing debates over the nature, basis, and aim of the general will. In particular, it provides an alternative to two dominant interpretations. The first line of interpretation sees the general will as “transcendent,” either as something like a Platonic idea which the citizens attempt to ascertain (e.g., Williams 2007), or, more prosaically, as a “common good” that exists independently of the citizens’ wills (see Bertram 2012). By contrast, I argue that when the citizens will qua citizens they are indeed seeking the common good, but that there is nothing “transcendent” about the common good or their willing it. The second interpretive school is often termed the “social autonomy” reading, as first coined by Cohen (1986). The most influential forebearer of this line of interpretation is Cassirer’s (1989 [1932]) Kantian interpretation of Rousseau (if not Kant himself), but more recently includes among its representatives (whether they identify themselves as such) influential scholars such as Rawls (1999), Cohen (2010, 1986), and Neuhouser (2008). According to this interpretation, the aim of the state in Rousseau’s thought is to create a community of autonomous individuals who are capable of rationally legislating for themselves. As Hasan (2018; see also 2016) argues, these interpreters tend to sever the link between the rational grounds of obligation in Rousseau’s political theory from his moral psychology. For example, Cohen (2010, 123) argues that while the passions may offer motivational support for citizens to do their duty, they are distinct from theory of obligation itself, including the general will. By contrast, while I acknowledge that reason plays an important role in how the citizens ascertain the common interest that is the object of the general will, and that there are epistemic challenges to doing so, I argue that the general will is foremost grounded in the passions at play in the development of identity and identification.

Finally, I focus on the *Social Contract* as Rousseau’s most mature and developed account of the general will. Scholars have persuasively argued that there are important differences in his articulation of the concept across his works, although they also conclude that the differences are less contradictions than developments of the concept (Canon 2022; Guerpillon 2016; Bernardi 2006, esp. 317-54). Canon (2022) identifies three principal versions of the general will across these texts, arguing that in “Political Economy” (1755), where Rousseau first employs the term, it is restricted to an implicit will of the collective

body detached from deliberation, that the “Geneva Manuscript” additionally characterizes it as the declared will of the deliberation of the sovereign people, and, finally and most importantly, that the *Social Contract* further grounds the general will in the personal will of each citizen. Following Canon (2022, 369), I emphasize the centrality of the “willing” in the general will, and I demonstrate how willing the general will relates to Rousseau’s understanding of identity and identification.

[Brief Summary of Chapter 1: The Development of Identity] Identity and Identification

In order to understand how the general will is rooted in personal identity and how the citizens of Rousseau’s state are shaped to have a strong civic identity, it is necessary to outline Rousseau’s theory of the development of identity. The main point is that the “self” or personal identity is not given or natural but is instead the result of a developmental process which occurs as individuals interact with the environment and especially with their fellow human beings. This developmental process as Rousseau understands it has been elaborated by Scott (2024), who confines his analysis to the psychological dynamics of this process and does not extend it to how it grounds the general will. Like Scott, I build upon Jean-François Perrin’s (2014, 61-86) important observation that Rousseau was the first author to use the related terms “identity” (*identité*), “identification” (*identification*), and “identifying” (*identifier, s’identifier*) in the psychological sense, having adapted them from their original theological meaning. Rousseau’s understanding of the process of identification was therefore in itself an important innovation whose novelty is obscured for us precisely because it has become familiar. I limit myself here to a brief sketch of Rousseau’s understanding of the development of identity, focusing on the role of identity and identification in that process, and then I extend the work of my predecessors by arguing that this same process underlies morality, including justice, via an expansion or generalization of self-love through identification with others.

Rousseau characterizes his investigation in the *Discourse on Inequality* of human nature as a form of “meditation” which reveals the basic psychological elements and operations that will turn out to be central to the development of identity:

meditating on the first and simplest operations of the human soul, I believe I perceive in it two principles preceding reason, one of which interests us ardently in our well-being and our self-preservation, and the other of which inspires in us a natural repugnance to see any sensitive being, and principally our fellow humans, perish or suffer. (*Inequality*, 54-5)

These “principles,” or what might be characterized as primary motive forces, will revealed to be self-love and pity. The interplay of these principles, their “the concurrence and combination,” whether in cooperation or competition, determines the forms they take, most notably different manifestations of self-love, and thus the shape of the very self.

Personal identity and identification with one’s fellows develop most importantly through the interactions among human beings which put into play these two “principles.” Self-love is manifestly related to the self or identity, and pity also has a central role in the development of identity as we expand the self to others through identifying with them (see Scott 2024, 363). This interplay in the development of identity is most clearly seen in *Emile*. The first glimmerings of individuality occur in childhood when the child becomes capable of directing his bodily forces and thereby interacting with his physical environment: “It is at this second stage that, strictly speaking, the life of the individual

begins: it is then that he gains consciousness of himself. Memory extends the sentiment of identity [*identité*] to all the moments of his existence, he becomes truly one, the same” (*Emile*, 78). At this stage of psychological development, one might term an incipient personal identity. It is only with adolescence and the dawning of the passions and imagination that the imaginary pupil becomes fully a self for himself and for others. Central to this process is the role of pity, which connects one’s own identity to others through identification. The relationship between self-love and pity is suggested by the fact that Rousseau’s thematic discussion in *Emile* of pity emerges out of his treatment of self-love. “The source of our passions, the origin and principle of all the others,” presumably including pity, “is *amour de soi*-- a primitive, innate passion, which is anterior to every other, and of which all others are, in a sense, only modifications” (*Emile*, 212-13). Self-love (*amour de soi*) begins as an “absolute sentiment,” concerned with the “I” (*moi*) alone, but with the development of the passions and especially imagination it becomes a “relative sentiment,” *amour-propre*, and henceforward “the relative I [*le moi relatif*] is constantly in play” (*Emile*, 243). The tendency for *amour-propre* to degenerate into vanity or “pride” in the negative sense should not obscure how can be regulated in a positive manner through pity, itself a “relative sentiment” which might itself be understood as the expansive potential of self-love (see Scott 2024, 366; Neidleman 2013; Cooper 1999; Grace 2001).

Pity involves an imaginative extension of the self to others: identification. Previously limited to “gut reactions” to the suffering of others, the adolescent *Emile* can now extend his self to others. “Thus is born pity, the first relative sentiment which touches the human heart according to the order of nature,” explains Rousseau: “In fact, how do we let ourselves be moved by pity if not by transporting ourselves outside of ourselves and identifying [*identifiant*] with the suffering animal, by leaving, as it were, our own being to take on its being? ... Thus, no one becomes sensitive until his imagination is animated and begins to transport himself out of himself” (*Emile*, 222-3). We especially identify with “our common miseries,” he explains, hence commiseration. “It follows from this that we are attached to our fellows less by the sentiment of their pleasures than by that of their pains, for we see far better in the latter the identity [*identité*] of our nature” (*Emile*, 219-21).

Finally, and importantly for my argument concerning the grounding of the general will in identity, the psychological dynamics seen in the development of identity also underlie moral judgments concerning justice through generalizing self-love by way of identification. “So long as his sensibility remains limited to his own individuality, there is nothing moral in his actions. It is only when [sensibility] begins to extend outside of himself that [sensibility] takes on, first, the sentiments and, then, the notions of good and evil which truly constitute him as a man and an integral part of his species” (*Emile*, 219-20).

If this were the place for it, I would try to show how the first voices of conscience arise out of the first movement of the heart, and how the first notions of good and bad are born of the sentiments of love and hate. I would show that *justice* and *goodness* are not merely abstract words—pure moral beings formed by the understanding—but are true affections of the soul enlightened by reason, and hence only an ordered development of our primitive affections. (*Emile*, 235)

The moral notions of justice and goodness arise through an ordered development of “our primitive affections,” namely self-love and pity, or our “sensibility” (see Rousseau 1990-2010, 1: 112). In a note attached to the continuation of this passage Rousseau elaborates:

“Even the precept of doing unto others as we would have them do unto us has no true foundation other than conscience and sentiment.” The golden rule depends upon the expansion of self-love to others: “when the strength of an expansive soul has me identify myself [*m’identifie*] with my fellow, and I feel that I am, so to speak, in him, it is in order not to suffer that I do not want him to suffer. I am interested in him for love of myself... Love of men derived from love of self is the principle of human justice” (*Emile*, 235 n.). Here we see the same elements of identification through an extension of self-love as we witnessed in the development of identity, now directed toward virtue. As Spector (2022, 206) explains: “Only the affective extension of [self-]interest can found morality; it is a matter of enlarging the sensitive self [*soi sensible*] in order to give rise, through a process of identification, to an extended form of interest.”¹ Rousseau is explicit about the process of extension of self-love as the basis of morality: “Let us extend *amour-propre* to other beings. We shall transform it into a virtue.... The more one generalizes [one’s] interest, the more it becomes equitable, and the love of mankind is nothing other than the love of justice” (*Emile*, 252-3). While *Emile* generalizes his interest in a cosmopolitan manner to mankind as a whole, the same psychological mechanisms of extension or generalization of the self to others also underlie a more limited generalization through which citizens identify with one another and the *patrie* seen in Rousseau’s specifically political writings (cf. Douglass 2024, 65-6).

[End of Summary]

Rousseau’s Understanding of the Will

In the previous chapter I examined the relationship between the development of identity and morality, and especially how the principle of justice lies in the extension of love of self to others through identification, especially as it comes to light in *Emile*. Nowhere in his discussion there of the development of morality does Rousseau employ the terminology of the will, much less the general will, so central to his political theory. I do not intend to enter here into the debate over the relationship between *Emile* and Rousseau’s specifically political writings, notably the question of whether or not *Emile* is raised to become the sort of citizen required by the *Social Contract*.² What I do want to note as I turn to the general will and its role in his political writings is that Rousseau nowhere defines the will (*volonté*). The first order of business, therefore, is to reconstruct his understanding of the will in order to comprehend the nature, basis, and aim of the general will.

Let me begin with a stipulated minimalist definition: the will is the faculty or act of choosing or willing by an individual based on the belief of what is conducive to one’s self-preservation and well-being. The term “will” is also used to refer to the outcome or

¹ For a more comprehensive discussion of the moral psychology elaborated by Rousseau in *Emile*, see Spector 2022, 167-210, esp. 196 ff.

² Some scholars argue that the education given to *Emile* is meant to prepare him to be a citizen of a legitimate state as articulated in the *Social Contract* (e.g., Gomes 2018; Neuhouser 2008, 20-24; Bloom 1979). Others see Rousseau’s educational and political projects as largely distinct, and argue that *Emile* is raised to be a much more contingent and cosmopolitan sort of citizen than envisioned in the *Social Contract* (e.g., Mara 1980; Shklar 1968). I count myself among the latter group.

decision reached through willing, e.g. “such is my will,” or what I briefly introduced above as what Rousseau terms the “declaration” of the general will (see Rousselière 2024, 88; Dagger 1981, 366-70). This dual usage will turn out to be important in interpreting the general will. In either case, the will is by definition or tautologically directed to one’s self-preservation and well-being, as revealed for example when Rousseau writes: “Now since the will always tends toward the good of the being who wills...” (CW, 4: 87). One may however be mistaken about what is actually in one’s interest, a fact which raises epistemic issues regarding the will and the general will. Overall, this definition suggests a tight connection between the will and self-love, and also between the will and identity, since what I believe is good for me is shaped on how I conceive of myself.

Let me now defend this definition in relation to what Rousseau does write. First, in the passage from the *Discourse on Inequality* which I examined in the previous chapter, he maintains that humans are distinguished from the animals by being a free agent and having a “consciousness of this freedom,” and he further claims that “the power of willing, or rather of choosing, and in the feeling [*sentiment*] of this power,” cannot be explained by the mechanical laws of physics (*Inequality*, 71-2). Note that he equivocates between “willing” and “choosing,” and I follow him in doing so in my minimum stipulated definition, thereby leaving open the question of the metaphysical status of the will. In any case, the will goes undefined in this passage. Second, in *Emile* he contrasts “wills” and “things,” for example cautioning that the child must not prematurely come to perceive will in the actions of others lest the corrupting effects of personal dependence arise (*Emile*, 66). But once again he does not define the will, although it seems to entail intentionality and therefore consciousness of being able to choose. Third, in the *Social Contract*, when introducing the distinction between the “sovereign” and the “government,” he explains: “Every free action has two causes which concur to produce it: one moral, namely the will which determines the act, the other physical, the power which executes it” (III.1, 205). “Determining” an act would again appear to require conscious choice. Finally, in the previous chapter I examined a passage from the “Profession of Faith” in *Emile* in which willing is related to judging. To repeat in part: “When I am asked what the cause is which determines my will, I ask in turn what the cause is which determines my judgment; for it is clear that these two causes are only one; and if one clearly understands that man is active in his judgments, and that his understanding is only the power of comparing and judging, one will see that his freedom is only a similar power or one derived from the former” (*Emile*, 280). While this argument is advanced by the Vicar is part of his argument for free will based on a metaphysical dualism, I argued that the passage in question can be read independently of the Vicar’s argument concerning metaphysical dualism given its similarity to what Rousseau writes in his own name and without himself making such philosophical commitments. In any case, I suggest that questions concerning the metaphysical status of the will and freedom are not relevant for my argument concerning the grounding of the general will in identity and identification.

Let us return to the *Social Contract* and see how the will is connected to identity, and this to prepare an analysis of the general will. In his discussion of the government as a separate body that executes the laws made by the sovereign people in their legislative capacity, Rousseau articulates the “wills” an individual may simultaneously have. The “government” (which he provocatively terms the “prince”) is the body charged with executing the laws that come from the sovereign people, and is composed of magistrates.

“We can distinguish three essentially different wills in the person of the magistrate,” he explains:

First, the individual’s own will, which tends solely toward his particular advantage. Second, the common will of the magistrates, which I concerned exclusively with the advantage of the prince, and which may be called the corporate will, which is general in relation to the government and particular in relation to the state of which the government is a part. In the third place, the will of the people or sovereign will, which is general, as much in relation to the state considered as the whole as in relation to the government considered as part of the whole. (*Contract* III.2, 210)

Note first that these “wills” are all wills in a single person depending on how he identifies himself: as an individual, as a member of a corporate body, as a member of the political association. As Dent (1988, 173) states: “There is nothing mysterious about the possibility of one person having different ‘wills.’ In one’s life one takes many parts, occupies many positions” (see also Cohen 2010, 61; Strong 1994, esp. 82; Mara 1980, 362). Riley’s (1970) argument that “will” and “generality” are “mutually exclusive,” and thus the “general will” is a contradiction in terms, is based in part on not having appreciated the possibility of a multiplicity of “wills” in an individual as well as how the self or identity can be generalized through identification. Finally, note that the “generality” and the “particularity” of a will are also relational terms, for in the case of the government its will is “general” with respect to its members and “particular” with respect to the state.

Further, these “wills” can be in competition with one another. As Rousseau explains: “In perfect legislation, the particular or individual will should be null, the government’s corporate will will be very subordinate, and consequently the general or sovereign will always be dominant and the sole rule for all the others.” Although Rousseau’s phrasing here abstracts from the different wills in an individual, treating the will as an attribute of the corporate body of the government or the sovereign, an issue to which I will turn shortly, the continuation of the passage suggests the underlying role of the personal will. “According to the natural order, on the contrary, these different wills become more active in proportion as they are concentrated. Thus the general will is always the weakest, the corporate will has the second place, and the particular will is the first of all. As a result, each member within the government is first of all himself, and then a magistrate, and then a citizen—a gradation directly opposed to that required by the social order” (*Contract*, III.2, 210-11). The person’s differing and competing identities produce different wills: here as individual, magistrate, and citizen.

We can now profitably turn to undoubtedly the best-known occasion where Rousseau discusses the conflict between two wills in a person. “Indeed, each individual can, as a man, have a particular will contrary to or differing from *the general will he has as a citizen*. His particular interest can speak to him entirely differently than the common interest. His absolute and naturally independent existence can lead him to view what he owes the common cause as a gratuitous contribution....” The solution to the problem of freeriding is notorious: he must be “forced to be free” (*Contract* I.7, 175; emphasis supplied). Without entering into what it means to be forced to be free,³ let me note several things about this passage germane to the present inquiry. First, both wills are

³ For an excellent treatment, see Neuhausser 2000, chap. 2.

found in the same individual: the “particular will” this individual has as a “man” qua man, that is as a natural being seeking his own self-preservation and well-being, and the “general will he has as a citizen,” that is his general will seeking the common interest. Rousseau is later emphatic on this point when he states of a citizen that the “general will within himself” can be evaded by ignoring it in favor of his particular interest, but it cannot be extinguished (*Contract* IV.1, 244). Second, in both cases the individual is seeking his “interest.” Seeking the common interest through the general will is the task of each citizen willing qua citizen together with his fellow citizens.

The General Will

What Rousseau understands by the general will only gradually becomes apparent in the *Social Contract*, and his first mention of the concept there provides little guidance. Having articulated the fundamental problem to which the social compact is the solution, he summarizes its “essence”: “*Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and as a body we received each member as an indivisible part of the whole*” (*Contract* I.6, 173; emphasis original). The general will is here undefined, although in context it appears to refer to the will of the collective body formed by the social compact, however that will is to be understood. This initial impression is strengthened by the continuation of the passage: “Instantly, in place of the particular person of each contracting body, this act of association produces a moral and collective body made up of [*composé d’*] as many members as there are voices in the assembly, which receives from this same act its unity, its common self [*moi*], its life, and its will” (ibid.). Likewise, he will later offer a similar account of the formation of the government in the passage discussed above in which he distinguishes the three “wills” one simultaneously has as individual, magistrate, and citizen. The “artificial body” of the government must have “a real life which distinguishes it from the body of the state, in order for all its members to be able to act in concert and to heed the end for which it was instituted, it must have a particular self [*moi*], a sensibility common to its members, a force, a will of its own that tends toward its self-preservation” (*Contract* III.1, 209). Note that in both cases Rousseau speaks of what is “common” to the members, either the “common self” of the sovereign or the “common sensibility” among the members of government.

A brief pause to explain Rousseau’s terminology in referring to the state and the government as a “corporate body,” a “moral and collective body,” or an “artificial body” will demonstrate that these entities do not properly speaking have a will independent of the outcome or “declaration” of the willing of its members, even if he sometimes writes in a way that suggests that they do. Rousseau derives his terminology from the modern natural jurisprudence school, principally Pufendorf. In his *On the Duty of Man and Citizen according to Natural Law* (1673), Pufendorf introduces the terminology of a “moral person,” in contrast to “natural persons,” to define the state: “Hence a state is defined as a composite moral person, whose will blended and combined from the agreement of many is taken as the will of all so that it may employ the forces and capacities of every individual for the common peace and security” (II.iv.10; [1991, 137]). In *On the Law of Nature and Nations* (1672), Pufendorf insists (against Hobbes; see Holland 2020) that the “compound moral person” of the state does not have existence independent of the individuals who compose it: “properly speaking, a multitude of men is not one compound body, but many separate persons, each of which has his own judgment and his own will to determine him in all matters that shall be proposed” (VII.ii.6 [1710,

511; spelling modernized]). The “compound moral body” of the state is therefore only “conceived to exist like one person” (ibid., VII.ii.13, 517).

That Rousseau is following Pufendorf is clearer from the earlier version of his political treatise. He explains there (in what would later become *Social Contract* II.1): “It is apparent from this that the sovereign is by its nature only a moral person, that it has only an abstract and collective existence, and that the idea attributed to this word cannot be likened to that of a simple individual” (CW, 4: 87). Similarly, in another passage (in what becomes II.4 of the final version) he states: “As the state or city constitutes a moral being whose life consists in the cooperation and union of its members...” (ibid., 95). Finally, in his defense of the *Social Contract* in the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, he explains: “the will of everyone is thus the order, the supreme rule, and that general and personified rule is what I call the Sovereign” (CW, 9: 232). He seems to employ “will of everyone” (*la volonté de tous*) here in a non-technical manner (see *Contract* IV.1, 244) and, following Pufendorf, he uses the term “personified” (*personifiée*), the sole occasion on which he does so, to refer to the “moral person” of the state as a personification of a “natural person.” “But how does this abstract and collective being act?” he asks: “It acts by means of laws, and it cannot act otherwise.... And what is law? It is a public and solemn declaration of the general will, on an object of common interest” (CW, 9: 232). Finally, in the chapter of the *Social Contract* “On Voting” (IV.2), he explains that, in voting on whether a proposed law is “conformable to the general will that is theirs,” each citizen “expresses his opinion on this by voting, and the declaration of the general will is taken from the counting the votes” (ibid., 146). In short, the general will of the sovereign is the declaration of the citizens acting in their legislative capacity and the “abstract and collective being” of the sovereign does not properly speaking have a will. In this way, we can reconcile two of the meanings of the general will Canon (2022) identifies in the *Social Contract*: the declared will of the sovereign and the personal will of each citizen willing qua citizen.

Returning to the *Social Contract*, this interpretation of the general will of the collective body of the sovereign in relation to the wills of its members explains how Rousseau proceeds in his explication of the social compact which creates the political association. He states that “the act of association encompasses a reciprocal commitment of the public with private individuals, and that each individual, in contracting with himself finds himself, so to speak, engaged in a double relation: namely, as a member of the sovereign toward private individuals, and as a member of the state toward the sovereign” (*Contract* I.7, 174). It is the individuals who compose the sovereign that are in a “double relation” with themselves as citizens and subjects, and their relationship to “the public” is to an association of individuals, to themselves. Rousseau’s explanation in the *Letters Written from the Mountain* further clarifies the point when he terms the social contract a “reciprocal engagement of all [*tous*] toward each” (CW, 9: 231). Here “*tous*” means “all of them” taken separately, as opposed to an engagement with “*le tout*,” “the whole.” This reading further explains why Rousseau goes on in the same chapter in his political treatise with his (in)famous discussion of being “forced to be free.” Having stated that each individual can have a conflicting “particular will” and “general will he has as a citizen,” he writes: “And considering the moral person that constitutes the state merely as a being produced by reason because it is not a man, he would enjoy the rights of a citizen without being willing to fulfill the duties of a subject....” (*Contract* I.7, 175). This would-be free rider correctly recognizes that he is a “man” or a natural being who follows his particular

will and, likewise, that the state is a product of reason, a “moral person.” His sin is to refuse to honor the “reciprocal commitment” in which he has engaged himself as both citizen and subject.

Rousseau develops the concept of the general will in his explanation of sovereignty. “The first and most important consequence of the principles established above is that the general will alone can direct the forces of the state according to the end of the institution, which is the common good. For if the opposition of particular interests has made the establishment of societies necessary, it is the agreement of these same interests that has made it possible” (*Contract* II.1, 179). Here “particular interests” refers primarily to the self-interest of individuals, directed by self-love to their self-preservation and well-being. Given the conflict that arises among particular interests, society becomes necessary and the general will is concerned with the “common good” where the self-interest of the individuals agree.

The general will of the citizens qua citizens is directed toward the common good as opposed to a particular self-interest. Rousseau remarks in this context that the sovereign is “nothing but a collective being” (*Contract* II.1, 179). This is a faint echo of the same passage in the original version quoted above where he clarifies that the sovereign “is by its nature only a moral person, that it has only an abstract and collective existence, and that the idea attributed to this word cannot be likened to that of a simple individual” (CW, 4: 87). Thus, the “general will” of the sovereign can mean only the decisions reached by the citizens willing qua citizens. This understanding explains what Rousseau means when he states at the end of the same chapter that “the commands of leaders [can] be taken for general wills, as long as the sovereign, being free to oppose them, does not do so” (*Contract* II.1, 180). Here “general wills,” and note the plural, refers to the decisions reached by voting. As such, in the following chapter on the indivisibility of sovereignty, he states: “For the general will is either general* or it is not; it is either the will of the body of the people or only of a part. In the first case, this will *when declared* is an act of sovereignty and constitutes law.” Although the general will is attributed to the “body of the people,” it is clearly the declared outcome of voting by the citizens. This also evident from the note Rousseau appends to the passage (indicated by the asterisk): “For a will to be general, it is not always necessary for it to be unanimous, but it is necessary that all the votes be counted” (*Contract* II.2 and n., 180; emphasis supplied). In other words, the general will here is the declared outcome of the voting of the body of the citizens voting qua citizens.

Voluntarist and Epistemic Issues with Regard to the General Will

If the general will attributed to a corporate body, most especially the sovereign, is to be understood as the declared outcome of voting, then various issues arise concerning the relationship between the voting of citizens, the activity of their general wills qua citizens, and the general will as the outcome of the willing. There are two principal issues. First, there is what I will refer to as a voluntarist concern: how can naturally self-interested individuals will the general will they have qua citizens? Second, an epistemic concern: if the will by definition aims at the good of the individual and the general will he has as a citizen wills the common good, and the individual can nonetheless be mistaken about the good or common good, then how is the general will as the outcome of voting related to the general will considered as the common good at which they are aiming?

Rousseau broaches both the voluntarist and epistemic issues when considering whether the general will can err. He argues that it follows from his discussion of the

general will as an act of sovereignty that “the general will is always right [*droite*] and always tends toward the public utility. But it does not follow that the people’s deliberations always have the same rectitude. One always wants [or: wills—*veut*] what is good for oneself, but one does not always see it” (*Contract* II.3, 182). Let us first take the voluntarist issue. By the general will always being “right,” Rousseau means “rightly directed” or possessing “rectitude.” In other words, the “rightness” of the general will is not an epistemic question, of getting the “right” answer,” but is instead a voluntarist claim concerning a properly directed will. (When considering whether the general will can “err,” one should keep in mind the root sense of “err” (*errer*) as “wandering,” for example from the right or straight path.). As Rousseau explains: “One always wants/wills what is good for oneself”: a laconic expression of the tautological understanding of the will as by definition of willing what is good for the being who wills. As such, the general will by definition aims at the common good and in this sense is “always right” (see Spector 2019, 57; Williams 2014, 70; Masters 1968, 325-6). This is true for both the willing of the citizens qua citizens and the declared outcome of their voting, so both senses in which Rousseau refers to the general will. If an individual votes in accordance with “the general will he has as a citizen,” then that will “tends toward” the public utility. Likewise, if the citizens acting in their legislative capacity as sovereign vote in accordance with their general wills, the general will understood as the outcome of that voting is likewise directed toward the common good. In neither case is the general will a transcendent idea or concept that is somehow ascertained through voting, reason, or otherwise.

Rousseau further addresses the voluntarist issue in a way that brings us back to the way in which the general will is rooted in identity and identification when he draws a distinction between the “general will” (*volonté générale*) and the “will of all” (*volonté de tous*). “There is often a considerable difference between the will of all and the general will. The latter considers only the common interest, while the former considers private interest, and is merely a sum of particular wills” (*Contract* II.3, 182). In both cases Rousseau refers to the will understood as the outcome of voting. Nonetheless, underlying both types of will is a voluntarist issue: do the individuals voting do so by consulting the general will they have as citizens, in which case the outcome of the voting is the “general will,” or do they do so by consulting their particular wills, in which case the result is the “will of all”? Here we must keep in mind the meaning discussed above of “*tous*” in the term “*volonté de tous*” as “all of them” separately. Insofar as I identify myself as a citizen and identify with my fellow citizens when I am voting, then I am willing the general will. On the other hand, if I identify as an individual, I consult my particular will, and if the members of the state do so then the outcome of their voting is “merely a sum of particular wills.” The same argument pertains to Rousseau’s counsel in this context that factions or “partial associations” are to be avoided if the general will is to be realized since “the will of each of these associations becomes general in relation to its members and particular in relation to the state,” in which case the votes are essentially the votes of these partial associations (*Contract*, II.3, 182-3). In other words, insofar as the members of these associations identify themselves and with one another as members, then their general wills are directed at the good of the partial association to which they belong, which is “particular” in relation to the state as a whole. We saw the same logic with regard to the members of the government.

The role of identity and identification in willing the general will now comes to light more clearly. Rousseau states that the commitments that bind individuals to the social

body are obligatory insofar as they are mutual and that in fulfilling them we work for ourselves at the same time as we work for others. “Why is the general will always right [*droite*], and why do all [*tous*] constantly will the happiness of each one of them [*chacun d’eux*] if not because there is no one who does not appropriate the word *each* [*chacun*] to himself, and who does not consider himself when voting for all [*tous*]?” (*Contract*, II.4, 184). The meaning is perhaps clearer if we transform the negative phrasing: each citizen when voting considers himself in terms of all the others, “each of them” and as one among “all” of them. Further, since the will by definition aims at the good or happiness of the being willing, and in this sense is “right” (*droite*), insofar as the individual follows “the general will he has as a citizen,” he wills the happiness of himself at the same time as he wills “the happiness of each one of them.” In other words, he identifies as a citizen and identifies with his fellow citizens.

What follows from this understanding of voting is nothing less than the reconciliation of right and interest, justice and utility, Rousseau proposed at the outset of the work: “In this inquiry I will always try to join what right permits with what interest prescribes, so that justice and utility are not always at odds” (*Contract*, I.Proemium, 163). Having said that each citizen considers himself when voting for all, he states: “This proves that the equality of right and the notion of justice it produces derives from the preference that each person has for himself and consequently from the nature of man, that the general will—to be truly general—should be so in its object as well as in its essence, that it should come from all in order to be applied to all, and that it loses its natural rectitude when it is directed toward some individual and determinate object.” The latter part of this sentence concerning the generality of the general will is usually interpreted as meaning that the laws emanating from the general will have to come from all and apply to all, and rightly so as far as it goes. However, I suggest that when Rousseau says that the general will must be general “in its essence,” he has in mind the nature of the willing of the citizens itself, in other words whether or not they are consulting their general will qua citizens. This interpretation is suggested by the beginning of the sentence in which he states that the right and justice produced by the general will derive from the preference each person has for himself, or natural self-love, but as extended to one’s fellow citizens through identification. “It should be understood from this that what generalizes the will is less the number of voices than the common interest that unites them,” he explains: “For in this institution each necessarily submits to the conditions which he imposes on others—an admirable agreement of interest and justice...” (*Contract*, II.4, 184-5). The will—here meaning both the will of the citizens qua citizens and the outcome of their willing—is “generalized” by being directed at the “common interest,” thereby uniting interest, that is self-love, and justice. Such a reconciliation is made possible through the members identifying as citizens.

My emphasis on the central role of the will of citizens identifying qua citizens helps explain a statement Rousseau makes in his discussion of law which has been used to support the interpretation that the general will is a transcendent concept of some sort. Speaking of giving the body politic movement through legislation, he writes: “What is good and in accordance with order is so by the nature of things and independently of human conventions. All justice comes from God; he alone is its source. But if we knew how to receive it from on high, we would need neither government with laws.... Conventions and laws are therefore necessary to unite rights with duties and to bring justice back to its object” (*Contract* II.6, 188). This passage has divided scholars. Some

emphasize the first part of the passage, arguing that the divine source of justice at which the general will aims means that the general will is a transcendent standard, perhaps akin to a Platonic idea, with substantive content (e.g., Williams 2007). Others underscore Rousseau's statement that we do not know who to receive or know this transcendent justice, even if it exists, and are therefore left with conventions and laws determine justice, for example through certain formal procedures (e.g., Shreenivasan 2000; Masters 1968, 314), or, in a more extreme version, even define justice (e.g., Melzer 1983; Strauss 1953, 284-9). These alternative interpretations, and those in between, thus wrestle with both the voluntarist and epistemic issues concerning the general will.

My interpretation of the general will as an attribute of individuals willing qua citizens suggests an alternative interpretation. Whatever the meaning of his statement concerning all justice coming from the deity and our inability to receive it from on high, I suggest that justice is not the content or object of the general will, but instead a feature relating to equal application. As noted above, Rousseau states that the "common interest" is the object of the general will and he also remarks there that "the particular will tends by its nature toward partiality, and the general will toward equality" (*Contract* II.1, 179). The particular will tends toward partiality due to natural self-love, and so that self-love must be redirected through one's identification as a citizen toward the common interest of all--each of them-- considered equally. As Rousseau states in a passage examined just above, consideration of "the equality of right" of all citizens produces a "notion of justice" (*Contract* II.4, 185). Justice is therefore the equal application of the law from all the citizens as applied to all in willing the common interest, or a feature of the law qua law rather than its content or object. "But what in the end, then, is a law?" asks Rousseau, chiding those who attach only "metaphysical ideas" to the word, answering: "But when the whole people enacts statutes regarding the whole people, it considers only itself, and if a relation is then formed, it is between the entire object from one point of view toward the entire object from another point of view, without any division of the whole. Then the subject matter of the statute is general like the will that enacts. It is this act that I call a law" (*Contract* II.6, 188-9). Those who emphasize the formal character of the general will and law in Rousseau's theory are therefore correct to a point, for the general form of the law does not dictate its substance but it does constrain it. However, failing to understand how the general will is based in identity and identification, they do not see that the general will of the citizens willing qua citizens definitionally seeks the common good, a good which has substantive content and is not merely the result of following certain procedures, even if it is difficult to ascertain.

The issue of ascertaining the common interest raises another strand of interpretation widely referred to as the "social autonomy" reading of Rousseau, a reading which offers a rationalist understanding with citizens' seeking their "rational will" or "true interest" and realizing their freedom as autonomous agents through the general will. As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, this interpretive strand stems from Cassirer's (1989 [1932]) classic Kantian reading of Rousseau and is often assimilated to Rawls' (1971) theory of justice as a rational justification of the state. Cohen (2010) and Neuhaus (2008, 1993) are perhaps the leading scholars in this regard, although others offer kindred interpretations (e.g., Bertram 2012, 405; Sreenivasan 2000; Rawls 1999, 229-34; Dent 1988, 96-102, 114-18). Insofar as such a reading conceives the general will as an aggregation of the wills of autonomous individuals (even if they are seeking their "rational will" or "true interest"), it is in danger of blurring the distinction upon which Rousseau

insists between the “general will” and the “will of all.” To be sure, reason does play an essential rule in the general will and the epistemic issues involved in discerning the common interest at which the general will of the citizens aims. In any case, these interpretations tend not to focus on the role of *willing* of the citizens willing qua citizens.

The epistemic issues regarding the general will come to the fore when Rousseau turns to the question of how the citizens can identify the common interest when self-legislating. “How will a blind multitude, which often does not know what it wants because it rarely knows what is good for it, carry out by itself an undertaking as vast, as difficult as a system of legislation? By itself the people always wants [or: “wills”—*veut*] the good, but by itself it does not always see it. The general will is always right, but the judgment that guides it is not always enlightened.” Before turning to Rousseau’s answer, let me pause over this passage. Rousseau repeats his claim that general will is always “right” (*droite*), a claim that follows from the very nature of the will, here the will of the citizens. This is the voluntarist issue: how to get the citizens to heed the general will they have qua citizens. The epistemic issue, in turn, is how to enlighten them as to what is actually in their interest, their common interest qua citizens. Rousseau’s answer: “From this arises the need for a lawgiver” (*Contract* II.6, 189-90). If the citizens are to be able to will the general will qua citizens, their very selves must be shaped.

Shaping Political Identity

Rousseau’s political writings are concerned not merely with the standard of legitimacy, but also with the conditions that make such self-government possible, including foremost a strong political identity and civic virtue. Scholars who have attended to what Rousseau terms “the science of the lawgiver” have generally treated them as distinct from the principles of political right, as practical issues rather than as intrinsically related to more theoretical concerns (e.g., Masters 1968, esp. 354). Others have embraced certain aspects of his political theory while rejecting the practices Rousseau suggests, viewing them as based on an outdated “political sociology” not intrinsic to his philosophical account of political legitimacy (Cohen (2010, 21-2, 57-8) or as a “culture model” of civic loyalty inculcated through common culture, mores, and opinions that threatens the principle of free self-determination of the “freedom model” (Stilz 2009). Still others reject the lawgiver, civil religion, and the whole lot as introducing various forms of heteronomy inconsistent with the principles of political right (e.g., Griswold 2015; Ellenburg 1976, 252-3) or as undemocratic, illiberal, or just plain scary. Whether or not these fears are legitimate I will not adjudicate here. What I hope I have demonstrated through showing how the central principle of political right, the general will, is rooted in identity and identification is that theory and practice in Rousseau’s political thought are inextricably related. Since the extralegal institutions Rousseau recommends for shaping a strong political identity and civic virtue are familiar, I restrict my analysis how they are related to identity and identification.

In the previous chapter we saw that natural goodness is no longer sufficient for developed human beings, at least beyond the exceptional case of Rousseau himself, and that they require virtue in order to resist inclinations which conflict with duty. The virtue required of citizens, for Rousseau, has a specific character. In his essay “Political Economy” he explains: “Do you want the general will to be fulfilled? Make sure that all private wills are related to it; and since virtue is only this conformity of the private will to the general, to say the same thing briefly, virtue reign” (*CW*, 3: 149). In the *Social Contract* he addresses the potential conflict between the general will and the particular will

in the (in)famous passage, discussed above, in which he concludes that the individual who does not will the general will must be “forced to be free”: “Indeed, each individual can, as a man, have a particular will contrary to or differing from the general will he has as a citizen. His particular interest can speak to him entirely differently than the common interest...” (*Contract I.7*, 175). The extralegal institutions he recommends as the instruments available to the lawgiver for shaping the citizens’ identities qua citizens are designed to close the gap between the general will one has as a citizen and the particular will one has as an individual and thereby to render the citizens virtuous.

By introducing the figure of “the great lawgiver” to found the political association, Rousseau recurs to an ancient tradition in political practice and thought holding up exemplars such as Lycurgus, Romulus, Numa, and Moses, a tradition still represented in modern times by Machiavelli, whom Rousseau cites approvingly as an authority on the question (*Contract II.7*, 193 n.). The lawgiver is absent in Rousseau’s immediate predecessors in the social contract tradition, for example in Hobbes or Locke, who would seem to believe that reason and force alone can do the work of forming a state and commanding obedience from its members. Rousseau does not share this confidence, especially given the requirement that the citizens must legislate for themselves, setting a much higher bar for what it means to be a citizen.

The way in which Rousseau introduces the necessity of a lawgiver in the passage from *Social Contract II.6* cited above emphasizes the epistemic problem of how to enlighten a “blind multitude,” but his discussion of the lawgiver’s task in the following chapter devoted to the subject initially focuses on the voluntarist problem of shaping the will (see Spector 2019, 78). Citizens—individually and collectively—need to be made into citizens by shaping their identity. “He who dares to undertake to establish a people’s institution must feel that he is capable of changing, so to speak, human nature; of transforming each individual, who by himself is a complete and solitary whole, into a part of a larger whole from which that individual receives as it were his life and his being;... of substituting a partial and moral existence for the physical and independent existence we have all received from nature” (*Contract II.7*, 191). The lawgiver only changes human nature “so to speak” because heeding one’s general will as a citizen entails not a renunciation of self-love, but instead involves its redirection based on one’s identity as a citizen and identification with one’s fellow citizens (see Bernardi 2006, 405). If this transformation is successful, Rousseau writes, “each citizen is nothing, can do nothing, except with all the others” (*Contract II.7*, 191). Similarly, in *Emile* he explains: “Good social institutions are those that best know how to denature man, to take his absolute existence from him in order to give him a relative one and transport the *I [moi]* into the common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but a part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole” (*Emile*, 40). The goal is to transport the self—the “*I*,” the “*moi*”—into the “common unity.”

In the *Social Contract* Rousseau gives limited guidance about how this goal is to be achieved. As for the lawgiver who must feel himself “capable of changing, so to speak, human nature,” we soon learn that he cannot communicate the “sublime reason” he possesses to the people, that he must “persuade without convincing,” and that he does so by claiming divine authority for his laws (*Contract II.7*, 193). The necessary turn to persuasion speaks to both the epistemic and voluntarist issues concerning the general will. First, as to the epistemic issue, the lawgiver appears to possess knowledge concerning what is in the common interest, which is the object of the general will, an object beyond

the grasp of “the vulgar.” “For there are a thousand kinds of ideas which are impossible to translate into the language of the people. Overly general views and overly remote objectives are equally beyond its grasp. Each individual, appreciating no other plan of government than that which bears on his particular interest, has difficulty perceiving the advantages he is to derive from the common privations imposed by good laws” (ibid., 192). In short, the multitude is still “blind” as to its true interest. Yet this passage also raises the voluntarist issue: namely, these individuals still follow their particular wills rather than the general will they have as citizens, and this is the case because they are not yet citizens. Kelly (1987) argues that the persuasive language employed by the lawgiver is itself one way in which shared feelings of citizenship are instilled, for in Rousseau’s understanding, especially as articulated in the *Essay on the Origin of Language*, persuasive speech such as employed by the great lawgivers of the past is melodic and imitative, conveying and forming emotions in its auditors (see also Scott 1996).

We get some more guidance about the lawgiver’s activity from Rousseau later in the *Social Contract*. In a chapter on different classifications of laws—political, civil, and penal—Rousseau adds a fourth type “unknown to our politicians [*politiques*],” presumably including earlier thinkers in the social contract tradition. These “laws” are engraved not on tablets but “in the hearts of the citizens”: “I speak of morals, customs, and opinion—a part of the laws unknown to our politicians, but upon which the success of all the others depends, a part to which the great lawgiver attends in secret while he appears to restrict himself to particular regulations which are merely the sides of the arch of which morals—slower to arise—ultimately form the unshakeable keystone” (*Contract* II.12, 202-3). While Rousseau does not mention the general will here, one might easily imagine substituting “general wills of the citizens” for their “hearts,” meaning that these morals, customs, and opinion shape the wills of the citizens qua citizens.

Finally, one can point to Rousseau’s discussion of civil religion in *Social Contract* IV.8 as another extralegal institution meant to bind the citizens to the state. This discussion is highly controversial, especially given Rousseau’s pronouncement that anyone who behaves as though he does not believe the dogmas of the civil religion he has acknowledged in becoming a citizen should be punished with death (*Contract* IV.8, 271). This stricture arguably violates the conditions of the social compact itself (see, e.g., Griswold 2015). These are difficult questions beyond the scope of the present inquiry (for more, see Scott 2023, chap. 8). I restrict myself here to remarking that the civil religion Rousseau proposes, whose minimalist dogmas include belief in “the sanctity of the social contract and the laws” (*Contract* IV.8, 271) is a rather anemic solution with regard to forming the political identity required for the citizens of Rousseau’s state. This is particularly the case in light of the fact that Rousseau eschews the much stronger versions of “religion of the citizen” seen among the pagans, which, despite their effectiveness in tying the citizens to the state, are founded on falsehood and error, impossible given the advent of monotheistic religions, especially Christianity, and perhaps undesirable as well (ibid., 267-8). If Rousseau returns after his own fashion to the ancient figure of the great lawgiver, he does not embrace their particularistic religions.

Insight into how the citizens’ wills to create a strong political identity can be gained from Rousseau’s other political writings, including the essay “Political Economy” (1755) and the *Considerations on the Government of Poland* (1771-2). As for “Political Economy,” after introducing the concept of the general will for the first time in his writings and stating that it aims at the common good, Rousseau considers to the

motivational question of how to move the citizens to obey the laws they make. The “genuine statesman ... extends his respectable dominion over wills even more than over actions,” he explains: “If it is good to know how to use men as they are, it is better still to make them what one needs them to be. The most absolute authority is that which penetrates to the inner man and is exerted no less on his will than on his actions” (CW, 3: 147-8). Note the centrality of the will in this statement.

In this essay Rousseau speaks of relating “private wills” to the “general will” (ibid., 149), although as noted above with reference to Canon (2022), he has not yet developed the understanding of the general will as a personal will. Nonetheless, he does turn to the language of identification he first uses in the contemporaneous *Discourse on Inequality*. “Now, forming citizens is not accomplished in a day,” he avers, and explains that the passions should not be destroyed, but should rather be shaped:

it must also be agreed that although men cannot be taught to love nothing, it is not impossible to teach them to love one object rather than another.... If, for example, they are trained early enough never to consider their persons except as related to the body of the state, and not to perceive their own existence, so to speak, except as part of the state’s, they will eventually come to identify themselves [*s’identifier*] in some way with this larger whole, to feel themselves to be members of the fatherland; to love it with that delicate feeling that any isolated man feels only for himself; ... and thereby to transform into a sublime virtue this dangerous disposition from which all our vices arises. (CW, 3: 155)

This “disposition” is, of course, self-love. Lamenting the lack of true citizens in his times, he writes: “It is too late to change our natural inclinations when they have become entrenched, and habit has been combined with amour-propre. It is too late to draw us out of ourselves once the *human self* [*moi humain*] concentrated in our hearts has acquired that contemptible activity that absorbs all virtue and constitutes the life of petty souls” (ibid., 155). Self-love is redirected by shaping the self. “It is certain that the greatest miracles of virtue have been produced by love of fatherland. By combining the force of amour-propre with all the beauty of virtue, this sweet and ardent feeling gains an energy which, without disfiguring it, makes it the most heroic of all the passions” (ibid., 151).

As for his late writing on Poland, Rousseau begins by harkening back to the “spirit of ancient institutions” for guidance. “There can never be any good or solid constitution except the one in which the law rules over the hearts of the citizens,” he states, and he blames modern peoples for not appreciating this: “Our prejudices, our base philosophy, the passions of petty self-interest, concentrated along with egoism in all hearts by the inept institutions that genius never laid down” (CW, 11: 171). Put into the terms of the present interpretation, they have failed to generalize self-love to others through identification. In this light, then, Rousseau’s recommendations to the Poles are less elegiac appeals to the ancient lawgivers, though they are that, than meant precisely to effect such identification. He explains that Numa made the institutions begun by Romulus “solid and durable” by turning a troop of brigands into “citizens, less by means of laws ... than by mild institutions that attached them to each other and all to their land by finally making their city sacred.” Again, put in terms of my focus on identity and identification, such institutions “attach” the citizens to each other and to the city. The Poles can likewise shape a distinctive national identity through education, festivals, and other means “to give national form to souls, and direct their opinions and their tastes so that they will be patriots by inclination, by passion, by necessity.” The citizen’s love of the fatherland and

his fellow citizens “makes up his whole existence; he sees only the fatherland, he lives only for it; as soon as he is alone, he is nothing: as soon as he has no more fatherland, he no longer is, and if he is not dead, he is worse than dead” (ibid., 179). More hyperbole on Rousseau’s part, perhaps, but once again the point is clear: the identity of this citizen has been thoroughly transformed.

Conclusion

If we return in conclusion to the opening passage of the *Social Contract* where Rousseau characterizes the subject of his inquiry we can in retrospect glimpse how the general will is grounded in identity and identification. “I want to inquire whether there can be any legitimate and reliable rule of administration in the civil order, taking men as they are and laws as they can be. In this inquiry I will always try to join what right permits with what interest prescribes, so that justice and utility are not always at odds” (*Contract*, I.Proemium, 163). “Taking men as they are” entails accepting that they are fundamentally and inextricably motivated by self-love, the enduring core of identity, and yet also recognizing that the sense of self is developed through identification with others and can therefore be shaped. What “interest” prescribes is that the laws be in accord with how the citizens identify as citizens and what is in accord with their self-love and self-interest. In turn, taking “laws as they can be” requires that for the laws to be “legitimate” or in accordance with “right” they must come from the general will. If the citizens identify as citizens, then their general wills are directed toward justice and the common interest, and there is thereby a concord between right and interest, justice and utility. The grounding of the general will in identity underlies both the principles of political right and their actualization in Rousseau’s political project.