

Can Rousseau's Theory of the General Will be Illuminated with J. Searle's Collective Intentionality?

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ABSTRACT

Freedom has been one of the most fundamental debates in the history of political philosophy. During the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau sought to develop a theory of freedom grounded in the social contract. According to Rousseau, the original form of freedom that existed in primitive societies had been lost in the modern era. Therefore, individuals must reclaim their freedom. In this context, he formulated a new social organization based on the idea of the general will to address the problem of freedom. While this theory seemed the best solution for Rousseau, it has received significant criticism.

Making freedom meaningful in terms of subject-state relations is vital for political discourse. In this regard, I believe that Rousseau's theory, based on the consensus of all wills, can still serve as a resource for political theories. Therefore, I believe it is helpful to reexamine and illuminate Rousseau's theory within the axes of the subject and the collective general will. In this context, I examine John Searle's theory of collective intentionality. I argue that Searle's concept of collective intentionality offers a valuable perspective on the passages in Rousseau's theory of the general will that leave the coexistence of the individual and general wills unclear.

Keywords: Political Philosophy, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, General Will, Freedom, John Searle, Collective Intentionality.

ÖZET

Özgürlük, siyaset felsefesi tarihindeki en temel tartışmalardan biri olmuştur. Aydınlanma döneminde Jean-Jacques Rousseau, toplumsal sözleşmeye dayalı bir özgürlük teorisi geliştirmeye çalışmıştır. Rousseau'ya göre, ilkel toplumlarda var olan özgün özgürlük biçimi modern çağda kaybolmuştur. Bu nedenle bireyler özgürlüklerini geri kazanmalıdır. Bu bağlamda, özgürlük sorununu ele almak için genel irade fikrine dayanan yeni bir toplumsal örgütlenme formüle etmiştir. Bu teori Rousseau için en iyi çözüm gibi görünse de, önemli eleştiriler almıştır.

Özgürlüğü özne-devlet ilişkileri açısından anlamlı kılmak, siyasal söylem için hayati önem taşır. Bu bağlamda, Rousseau'nun tüm iradelerin uzlaşısına dayanan teorisinin hâlâ siyasal teoriler için bir kaynak teşkil edebileceğine inanıyorum. Bu nedenle, Rousseau'nun teorisini özne ve kolektif genel irade eksenlerinde yeniden incelemenin ve aydınlatmanın yararlı olduğuna inanıyorum. Bu bağlamda, John Searle'ün kolektif niyetlilik teorisini inceliyorum. Searle'ün kolektif niyetlilik kavramının, Rousseau'nun genel irade teorisindeki bireysel ve genel iradelerin bir arada var olup olmadığını belirsiz bırakan ifadeleri anlamak için yararlı bir okuma sunduğunu savunuyorum.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Siyaset Felsefesi, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Genel İrade, Özgürlük, John Searle, Kolektif Niyetlilik.

1. INTRODUCTION

The general will is accepted as a concept in political theory that prioritizes the idea of the common good or the general interest. In the history of thought, Nicolas Malebranche first addressed the general will in the second half of the 17th century. For Malebranche, the general will is related to God's will, and it reflects itself through the general laws in the world. Secondly, in the 18th century, the encyclopaedist Denis Diderot describes the concept of the general will. He holds that the general will is humanity's will (Munro, 2020). Then, philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

considers the concept of the general will and ties it to the social contract within his philosophical framework. In turn, it can be argued that the idea of the general will has evolved.¹

In my opinion, the concept of the general will remains essential today, prompting us to reevaluate the specific dynamics between the political system and individuals. How do politics and sovereignty function as the common will of the people? What kind of function can the benefit and good of society, rather than the benefit and good of individuals, have in the society we live in? How can we ensure the good for all? If some people may not be able to agree on the general will? What kind of effect can the concept of the general will have on individuals in terms of their equality and freedom? When we read Rousseau's theory of the general will, those questions arise from it and draw us into deep discussions of the subject. That is why I consider Rousseau's theory in my examination of the general will. I aim to reevaluate the concept of the general will in Rousseau's thought, which does not separate it from the social contract that people can agree upon.²

To make it clear, this study focuses on Rousseau's theory of the general will in relation to the individual. The work aims to establish a foundation or approach that better illuminates Rousseau's theory of the general will in its contradictory points. Thus, firstly, the concept of the general will will be examined along with its main points in Rousseau's account. Next, to illuminate Rousseau's theory on the general will, John Searle's (1932-) concept of collective intentionality will be briefly reviewed. In my opinion, there are some similar tendencies in Rousseau's and Searle's theories. By pointing out these connections, I will then conclude that Searle's interpretations of collective intentionality can illuminate Rousseau's theory of the general will.

Structurally, in the first part of the paper, I analyse Rousseau's concept of the general will grounded in society with the social contract. His theory presents a more detailed and nuanced analysis than that of the other social contract thinkers, such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, who preceded him. Although Rousseau conducted extensive studies on human nature, economics, and politics, he also received considerable criticism. In other words, though his works had great resonance in his time, Rousseau has been widely discussed for his concept of the general will. In my paper, I consider these discussions generally, arguing that Rousseau's concept of the general will remains valuable for idealist political philosophers who prioritize the consensus of the wills on a social contract.

Secondly, I address John Searle's ideas on collective intentionality. Prima facie, John Searle is interested in the philosophy of mind. He also addresses social reality and its construction through communication, action, and language. Specifically, collective intentionality plays a significant role in John Searle's social constructivist views. In my study, I focus on Searle's thoughts on intentionality because his theory of intentionality allows us to consider the intentions of "I" and "We" separately and together in the context of social behavior. I believe this approach helps illuminate some of the darker aspects of Rousseau's theory of the general will, particularly the ambiguity surrounding the choice between the general will and the individual will. For this reason, I will attempt to clarify Rousseau's theory of the general will through the lens of Searle's ideas on collective intentionality.

I describe that there is an interesting connection between Rousseau's and Searle's theories. Therefore, in my reading of Searle, I try to focus on potential intersections. Finally, I return to Rousseau's theory to clarify some unclear points regarding the general will and individual freedom. Considering their connections in the theories, I defend that Rousseau's thoughts on the general will can be illuminated through Searle's ideas on collective intentionality.

¹ For a broad analysis on the theory of the general will, you may see further in Munro, A. (2020, May 22). General will. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/general-will>

² This work is an extended version of one of the author's written Master's assessment projects in 2017.

2. THE IDEA OF THE GENERAL WILL IN J.J. ROUSSEAU'S THOUGHT

Rousseau is one of the most important philosophers of the 17th-century Enlightenment. His works, particularly his social ideas in education and politics, continue to have influence and value in the history of philosophy. Notably, he possesses a rigorous analysis of political philosophy. Perhaps the most important of these analyses is the ideal order he suggests as the social contract. While this analysis places Rousseau among social contract theorists, his frequent mention of the return to freedom in the state of nature and his proposed solutions to the problem of freedom elevate his approaches to a different level. Furthermore, Rousseau's ideas, particularly on political philosophy, have been the target of criticism both during his time and today. How reasonable are these criticisms? On what grounds has Rousseau's theory been subjected to serious criticism? Despite this criticism, can his theory still retain its value today? Motivated by these questions, I shall begin analysing my considerations.

Rousseau specifically focuses on his theory of the general will in his *Discourse on Political Economy* (1755) and *The Social Contract* (1762).³ Firstly, in the *Discourse on Political Economy*, he lays the foundations for a legitimate state to connect individuals. In this regard, a political body or state is like a human body: a unified entity, though comprising a variety of parts with distinct functions. Just as a body has a will that looks after its well-being, a political state has a will that looks after the well-being of its entire society. On that point, he approaches the general will. He believes that each places their power under the general will, which unites us as a body. In other words, as an individual part of the whole, members choose to be united willingly (Rousseau, 1994, p. 55).

In this new social order, laws are fundamental as they form the primary elements of the state. If people agree on the rules under the general will, it can be said that the general will amounts to a consensus. When the laws are in harmony with the general will, citizens can respect the state and its citizens. Here, Rousseau suggests that people can create laws and are free to modify them in the process (Rousseau, 1994, pp. 75; 89). In general, his suggestion seems plausible to achieve a better social order. However, Rousseau is unwilling to take into account those who are unwilling to create the laws and later change them. At the beginning of Rousseau's theory, this point or assumption remains silent.

In the 1st Book of *The Social Contract*, in chapter IV, Rousseau develops his idea that the members of the society are also moral beings. Since they follow the laws that they have chosen for themselves. These laws are the result of the collective general will, and they are for everyone in social life. It means that there is an ethical side to the general will as it aims at the whole society.⁴ According to Rousseau, an ethical element is attached to human behaviour with the transition from the state of nature to the civil state. Thus, people treat justice as a fundamental criterion for their behaviour rather than an instinctive factor, thereby developing moral behaviour. Now, with the contract, people have a moral understanding (a moral freedom) by desiring everyone's well-being.

To frame this idea clearly, Rousseau points out that the general will pursues only the general interests and the common good of the public as a whole, rather than individual interests. It means that the general will provides equality by aiming for the goodness of everyone in essence (Rousseau, 1994, p. 63). Rousseau believes that the general will is always in the right position, as it aims at the public's general welfare (Rousseau, 1994, p. 66). This is the rightness of the general will for him. Perhaps, for every individual, Rousseau's framework for the general will may be meaningful. For people, the

³ Rousseau's political thoughts can also be found in *Emile, or Education* (1921).

⁴ On the social contract theory in Rousseau's account, you may go further in Friend, C. (2025, 13 January). Social Contract Theory. *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

general will may provide equal rightness. However, how can the general will ensure that what is right for every single person in a society full of differences? Rousseau presents his argument here, distinguishing between the will of the individual and the general will (Rousseau, 1994, p. 66). He pictures a line between two different wills. Although the latter concerns the common good or interest, the former focuses on private interests (Rousseau, 1994, p. 66). On that point, he favours the general will for the importance of the common good.

Considering Rousseau's ideas so far, it can be said that it is essential to establish a new social order with a social contract based on the principle of the general will. The new social order is a legitimized political state that reflects the general will of the people. After each individual gives up their power and goods under a consensual social contract, the general will arises. The general will is related to law because people create laws to govern their behaviour. Hence, people can get their freedom by obeying the rules they formed. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize that Rousseau idealizes the concept of people who are willing to consent to this consensus and think of the common good.

Rousseau believes that the primary purpose of the social contract is to establish an association in which individuals can obey themselves and remain as free as before (Rousseau, 2004). He suggests that the solution lies in uniting under the social contract and surrendering all rights to the general will. Thus, people can be equal and regain their freedom by creating the general will without privilege. It may be felt that Rousseau attempts to explain a kind of harmonious relationship between individuals and the general will.

Nonetheless, he is aware that at some points there can be a contradiction between the general will and the individual will (Rousseau, 1994: x). What he means is that individual interests can resonate with them differently than common interests do. For Rousseau, if there is a contradiction between the general will and individual will in the state, if anyone refuses to obey what the general will suggests, they will be compelled to comply again. For the whole body or social order, people need to choose and follow the general will. According to him, this not only compels people to conform to the sovereignty of the whole but also forces them to be free (Rousseau, 1994, p. 58).⁵

Regarding the theory of the general will, people should prioritize the public's needs over their own interests. In this respect, how is it possible to follow the general will instead of the individual will? Or, why should people necessarily choose the common good even though they still have individual interests? To answer these questions, it may be helpful to review Rousseau's ideas on human nature. Rousseau focuses on the notion of human nature in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754).

To Rousseau, human thought initially aims at self-interest, goodness, and compassion for others.⁶ By nature, human beings tend to be peaceful and happy. Nevertheless, over time, they face some changes due to living together and making discoveries and inventions. In particular, the invention of private property has had a profoundly adverse impact on human life. Human beings have

⁵ To explore more, you may see in Sreenivasan G. (2000), *What Is the General Will?* and Gündoğan, E (2008), *J.J. Rousseau and the Theory of the General Will: An Introduction*.

⁶ Unlike Hobbes, Rousseau describes the natural man as peaceful, mute, and lacking foresight to worry about what the future might bring. For a broad analysis of Hobbes's terms of human nature, you may view in Çağmar, Mehmet Şirin (2024) Human Nature, Equality And Violence: Hobbes A Political Review, *Kalagatos*, V.21, N.1. <https://doi.org/10.23845/>

become the captives of private property and have lost their natural freedom in modern civilization. From that point on, regaining natural freedom becomes more important. On that point, the concept of the general will serves as a theory that helps individuals regain their freedom (Rousseau, 2004).

When the features of the general will are reviewed, it can be said that the general will appears to be a condition of consensus within the entire society. As it encompasses all individuals, sovereignty originates from the people themselves. People create laws, and the laws become the basis for their freedom. Nevertheless, there is something to remind ourselves here: Even if they have their freedom, when their individual and general interests conflict, people should be compelled to prioritize the general interests. This leaves the concept of freedom open to controversy.

It is possible to argue that the meaning of freedom has evolved since *The Social Contract*. In terms of the content, natural freedom seems individual for Rousseau. However, after social contact, it develops a moral character that considers the well-being of others. On the other hand, instead of unlimited individual freedom, people obtain genuine freedom, bounded by the general will and grounded in the law created by the people. Thus, by obeying the law and thinking of the common good for everyone, people regain their freedom as individuals and citizens under the general will. In this respect, people create the rules of law with the general will, thereby determining their actions. Hence, the new concept of freedom gives self-determination. As a consequence of the social contract, freedom has two sides: as an individual and as a citizen.

It can be seen so far that Rousseau's purpose is to design a state in which the general will can express itself. Utilizing the social contract, people can come together and relinquish some of their rights for the sake of the general will. In Rousseau's theory, this is an essential renunciation to live together on an equal footing peacefully. The new state requires its people to obey the laws to protect their freedom. If the general will misinforms people, how can people make sure of obeying the rules? To reduce the likelihood of this situation, Rousseau suggests that Legislators be well educated (Rousseau, 1994: Book II, Chapter VII). It seems that Rousseau wants to frame a powerful argument itself. However, how can we choose well enough Legislators?⁷

Even if we elect good enough lawmakers, will individuals be able to comply with the laws enacted in all cases? If the individual cannot find any possible way to comply with what the general will offers to them, how can we then explain freedom while forcing them to do so by the general will? In fact, to effectively implement the general will in a well-ordered society, it is essential to reconcile the general will with individual will. In Rousseau's theory, the problem begins here. There is actually no satisfactory idea in his theory to reconcile the individual will with the general will (Bertram, 2025).

Although Rousseau describes the positive aspects of the general will for individuals, he is well aware of the potential problems underlying the theory. Even if he views the general will as an art in politics, he also acknowledges certain obstacles (Rousseau, 1994, p. 86). In his *The Social Contract* and some other works, he gives the Greek and Roman republics as examples. He thinks that even

⁷ In some interpretations, the Legislator in Rousseau is presumed to be the dictator, and people's freedom is seen as in danger. Some others put forward that the Legislator is like an engineer who invented the machine (Chapman, 1956)

though Sparta and Rome achieved success, they could not maintain it forever. Therefore, we cannot assume a perfect establishment of the general will in society (Rousseau, 1994, p. 121).⁸

As you may infer, although he attempts to formulate an influential theory of the general will, he believes that it may not be possible to imagine the general will persisting ideally in society. He sometimes feels disappointed with his delivery of the ideas, which is why he thinks he cannot explain them all simultaneously (Rousseau, 1994, p. 72). Of course, for a systematic philosopher of the Enlightenment, it is difficult to see the fractures in his theory. However, he is not willing to light them up convincingly. For example, whether it is possible to explain the common good without assuming errors is not addressed in his theory. Alternatively, why does he presume that people are unable to regain their freedom, as they lack knowledge and the law? He leaves these points open to debate and ambiguous. On that point, I find it helpful to visit some main interpretations of his theory. Perhaps, they may clarify some points in Rousseau's theory.

Rousseau's project is the subject of the most serious and critical scrutiny by liberals. The point that liberals agree on is that Rousseau's theory of freedom essentially includes some totalitarian elements. Regarding this, it is possible to group their ideas into four: 1- In Rousseau's theory, freedom is under the control of the state. 2- Rousseau does not give space for individual rights. 3- For Rousseau, the nature of humanity is shaped by the state, which has unlimited power. 4- Forcing for freedom is one of the most negative elements in Rousseau's freedom theory (Wokler 1995: 189).

Can the criticism of Rousseau's totalitarian perspective be justified? Of course, some might think that it is possible. However, for me, we cannot simply accuse Rousseau of being a totalitarian when he frames his theory. This is because his theory attempts to answer how people can regain their freedom in the Enlightenment era, ideally. Freedom is not under the control of the state; indeed, there is a reciprocal relationship between the individual will and the general will in establishing a desirable social system. Without the individual wills, the general will cannot be thought. In the meantime, the individual wills cannot have the common goods aimed at their happiness either. In turn, there is an inevitable reciprocal relationship between them, but no primacy of the state. Here, freedom seems to result from this reciprocal relationship. When reading Rousseau's theory from that point of view, one may want to understand what Rousseau actually says between the lines of his work on the general will.

On the other hand, I am unsure whether Rousseau allocates sufficient space for individual rights when prioritizing the general will. When we deeply consider the concept of freedom in Rousseau's theory, it leaves us in a dilemma. Perhaps, the critics related to the nature of humanity's shaping by the state might be discussed comprehensively. It is because the power of the general will exemplifies an unlimited structure. Especially when forcing the individuals to choose the common good at all times, it seems to portray a negative character of freedom. Does this concept freedom truly refer to a freedom resulting from coercion in a negative sense? Or does it refer to a general will that must be embraced as a moral and civic character in a positive sense? In fact, in his work *The Social Contract*, Rousseau addresses three different kinds of freedom: natural, civil, and moral. The issue of

⁸ According to Patrick Riley, Rousseau mainly adopts ancient models in his thoughts because, in an ancient model, it does not need to reconcile common and individual interest and does not require consent. In this respect, thinks Riley, Rousseau was aware of what he admired: the virtue of ancient society and the perfection of the laws. Thus, in his theory, he attempts to reconcile ancient society models by harmonizing conflicts with conformity, which leads society toward virtue. Additionally, he seeks to adopt a specific form of general will. Still, he never fully reconciles the tension between his theory of obligation and the concept of political perfection in essence (Riley, 1970).

freedom, which seems complex in his theory, was nevertheless addressed by Rousseau with proposed solutions (Bertham, 2024).

Regarding this, Isaiah Berlin takes a different standpoint, for instance. In his book, *Four Essays on Liberty*, he distinguishes between two forms of liberty: negative and positive. For him, negative freedom refers to the area within the system in which individuals can move without any intervention in their lives. It also refers to the legal regulations that include the lowest limits for their actions. On the other hand, Berlin believes that positive freedom refers to a liberty regulated by law and is also political in character. As for Berlin, Rousseau describes freedom as dependent on the general will, the collective will of the people. Hence, freedom has a positive meaning in Rousseau's theory (Berlin, 2002).⁹

To discuss the concept of freedom in Rousseau's theory, we can take drunk driving. For example, drunk driving can lead to an accident and lead to negative consequences. Therefore, no one actually wants to be the victim of someone else's drunk driving. By this, they may recognize that there is a reason not to drive drunk and agree that drunk driving laws are good to follow. When a drunk driver faces a sanction, it is not a coercion against their free will, but rather a forced imposition of rationality, reminding the driver of their own interests. Considering this example, it might seem that the "forced to freedom" in Rousseau's theory does not actually contradict freedom in the positive sense (Soroka, p.51).

Besides these criticisms, some interpretations have been proposed to find a middle ground for a better understanding of Rousseau's general will. For example, W. T. Jones believes that a careful reading could be helpful to show that Rousseau's theory of the general will is not muddled nor paradoxical. In his article "Rousseau's General Will and the Problem of Consent", Jones focuses on the procedures that are in the general will theory. For Jones, Rousseau argues that some compulsion is necessary for a consistent general will. The consent of the citizens is quite essential here to supply this consistency. Citizens' consent is the basis of the general will, and this consent encompasses the principles of political morality. The idea of consent may seem problematic to some. Nevertheless, for Jones, what is needed is to know whether the concept of the general will may solve the problem of consent in Rousseau's theory (Jones, 1987).

According to Jones, *The Social Contract* is concerned with the problem of consent instead of the art of legislation itself. If we analyse the general will in terms of its procedural rules or structure, we can better understand Rousseau's theory. Moreover, with the help of this examination, it is possible to recognize why Rousseau insists that the state is best when it is homogeneous. In this respect, Jones firstly thinks that in a large and heterogeneous state, it would be challenging to design legislation and aims that are willed by the whole. Additionally, members of a small, homogeneous state are more likely to empathize with one another easily. Therefore, with these reasons in mind, Rousseau uses ancient cities as examples to illustrate his theory. At that point, Jones thinks that, to gain a sense of empathy, Rousseau used the power of education, deliberately cultivating and supporting the whole (Jones, 1987).

In light of the interpretations, it is possible to say that, whereas there are some criticisms about Rousseau's theory, others try to find a ground to illuminate it. It is open to us that if we interpret the general will theory in itself, Rousseau puts forward that, for the sake of freedom, people should obey the general will. However, they can obey themselves at the same time. Even if Rousseau refers to the

⁹ For a consistent analysis on freedom in Rousseau's theory, you may have a look at Riley, P. (1995). Rousseau's General Will: Freedom of a Particular Kind. *Rousseau and Liberty*.

role of a well-educated lawgiver to reconcile those two wills, it is not clear in the general will theory. It remains problematic again as it is not framed thoroughly.

How can these two different wills reconcile? Can the general be reduced to the will of individuals? Or, is the individual freedom of an individual dissolved in the general will? How does Rousseau's legitimate state make its citizens free in this uncertainty? If we illuminate Rousseau's theory in a way, it could help clarify this reconciliation in the theory itself. In my opinion, since Rousseau's general will theory encompasses collective intentions and actions, we can better illuminate his concept of the general will by drawing on John Searle's concept of collective intentionality. That is why I will continue to describe John Searle's approach next.

3. JOHN SEARLE'S CONCEPT OF COLLECTIVE INTENTIONALITY

As I mentioned earlier in the Introduction, John Searle has a valuable place in contemporary philosophy of mind. In his philosophy, John Searle believes that intentionality derives from brain processes. In this respect, it is a feature of the brain that all intentionality resides in individual minds (Searle, 1983). The main feature of intentionality is that it always has a direction, including an object which can be physical or abstract. For example, if one intends to have a cup of coffee, they unsurprisingly head to the kitchen and make one for themselves. Searle goes on to assert that we collectively perform several actions in society through the same form of intentionality (Searle, 1990). Because we are always in contact with other people, we expect to achieve shared goals with them. This refers to the collective intentionality in Searle's account.¹⁰

Searle thinks, especially, of a concept of collective intentionality that is non-summative to individual intentions, yet remains individualistic, as seen in *Collective Intentions and Actions* (1990) and *The Construction of Social Reality* (1995). The notion emphasizes that collective intentionality constitutes a form of group agency, characterized by We-intentions, which are irreducible to I-intentions (Searle, 1990: 402).¹¹ Searle denies that groups (or, more specifically, the group mind) can be intentional agents independent of a form of individualism. The question, then, is why Searle calls these two intentionalities separately.

The response would be that, in collective action, each participant's action is situated in a different context than that of the others, even if they share the same goal (Searle, 1990, p. 403). He uses a football team as a metaphor, suggesting that while each player plays differently according to their duty, the collective goal, which is winning the match, is the same. Therefore, we conclude, as far as Searle's argument is concerned, that there are two separate intentions in a collective action. Another example can show their distinct places. For instance, workers seem to work partly in a factory, but their aim is the same, and they produce the same product. Indeed, the goal is the same

¹⁰ In fact, in his writings on the philosophy of mind, Searle noticed his interest in speech behaviours and performativity. Then, he sought to deepen this discovery by exploring the concept of intentionality. What he aimed to do was to point out how social reality is constructed on a mental basis through communication, speech, and behaviour. Some of his works, which I did not discuss in this article but that you may find interesting about the subject, are as follows: *Speech Acts* (1969) and *Making the Social World* (2010).

¹¹ In his theory, he does not put as the I-intention and the We-intention. This will be my way of describing two different intentions of Searle during the article. Here, I owe a big thank to Dr. Andrew Chitty for making me realize this separation comprehensively.

with the collective intention (making the same product). The individual action is a part of the collective action in collective intentionality (Searle, 1990: 405).

Furthermore, it is possible to assume that We-intention and I-intention differ in content and have different subjects. When I say, “I intend to make pasta,” it is different from “We intend to make pasta.” As an inference, even if the goals are the same, my action will differ from the collective action, as collective action, including We-Intention, refers to the group as a whole.¹²

Here, Searle maintains that as a capacity, the idea of We-Intention is biologically primitive in humans (Searle, 1990: 403). Thus, in a collective case, individual intentionality derives from the collective intentionality. “I am doing act A,” comes from “We are doing act A.” In addition to this, Searle puts the ‘background conditions’ argument for supporting his notion of collective action (Searle, 1990: 413). In the first condition, the individual agent must think of others as agents who are *capable* of We-intentions. In the second condition, the same individual must also consider others as potential agents who could form part of a collective agent. So, the latter condition seems to give way to a sense of community.

Why does Searle pay that much attention for We acts? Perhaps, to be able to understand the meaning of the We-intentions in Searle’s theory concretely, we could try to think on a deep level. In the literature, Raimo Tuomela and John Searle have originally developed their ideas of we-attitudes in the context of collective action. For them, the continuity of the institutions rely on the existence of the we-attitudes in essence (Searle 1990; Tuomela 1984, 1995, 2000) Similar with Searle's line, Tuomela takes the idea of the collective acceptance in his thoughts. This collective acceptance includes the production and maintenance of the social things. What both agree on is that there is the realm of the we-attitudes and decisions in the construction of social reality. The we-attitudes include I-attitude, however it cannot be reducible to the we-attitude. Therefore, for the sake of explaining the construction of social reality covering institutions to follow and agree upon, there is need for the we-attitudes or We-intention.

Of course, there are some opponents of Searle’s theory of collective intentions. For example, some researchers argue against Searle’s thesis, defending the idea that We-intentions cannot be biologically primitive in us (Salice, 2015). One might strongly advocate for it. I think that Searle’s thought on the We-intention could be convincing when it comes to the examples of choosing the general goods or to do an action altogether in case of danger. I share Searle's view that intentionality is an indispensable part of human beings. He distinguishes I-intentions and We-intentions. He thinks that We-intentions cannot be reduced to the I-intentions. His theory allows us to think about two different views separately and together, making them meaningful. In addition to these, Searle points out the importance of individual intention in front of the other. Therefore, he locates individual intentions at the centre by considering it as a part of the collective action again.¹³ In my opinion, those views can be important for me to clarify some points in Rousseau’s theory of the general will.

¹² For an extended discussion on Collective intentions, you may have a look at Mathiesen, K. (2002). Searle, Collective Intentions, and Individualism, Meddle G. (Ed.) in *Social Facts & Collective Intentionality* (pp. 27-40). Arizona State University ILL.

¹³ For collective intentionality in Searle’s thought, you may see further in Tollefsen, D. (2025, January 13). Collective Intentionality. *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-0002, Retrieved from <http://www.iep.utm.edu/coll-int/>

4. THINKING GENERAL WILL WITH COLLECTIVE INTENTIONALITY

In our analysis so far, we have attempted to address a point that remains unclear in Rousseau's theory of the general will. How could individuals, despite the wishes and desires of individual wills, allow the general will to take precedence? Could there be a good that could be pursued for everyone? Let us suppose a situation that works for the benefit or well-being of all does not align with the interests of some individuals. Could the general will be considered capable of rendering people free and therefore happy? These ambiguous points are not sufficiently discussed in Rousseau's theory. On this point, I believe that Searle's ideas can be utilized to understand why individuals, in particular, could accept the general will.

It can be grasped that Rousseau's theory of the general will and Searle's concept of intentionality have some similar points in essence. To utilize Searle's theory, I will highlight these similarities to show the ambiguous sides differently. First of all, as described earlier, a general will comprises the wills of individuals in society. It aims to achieve people's freedom within the context of social consensus. Thus, the general will is grounded upon the individuals in essence. Rousseau distinguishes between the individual will and the general will, giving priority to the latter. However, he explains their relationship in terms of reciprocity within his theory. Again, the primary aim is to explain how people can regain their freedom in social life, as seen through Rousseau's perspective. What I mean is that Rousseau proposes to define, in essence, an ideal social order for individuals.

Similarly, John Searle employs the concept of collective intentionality to explain why and how people intend to act in social life. Searle also divides intentionality into two categories: I- and We-intentions. For him, I/individual intentionality contributes to the We/collective intentionality. However, individual intentionality lies at the centre of Searle's theory. Here, one may see that although Searle aims to explain human acts in social reality, his priority is the individual. For me, this is the first similarity between their theories.

Searle understands the individual as part of collective intentionality, encompassing both individual and collective concepts. For instance, while voting for Law A, people vote for both individual aims and collective aims. Similarly, in Rousseau's idea of the general will, people create laws to obey them, thereby serving their own interests and the interests of the general will. From that point, one can assume that they may also vote for the same reason. This is, for my part, the second similarity in Searle's and Rousseau's understandings. As individuals and citizens, people should be aware of their responsibilities.

For Searle, when individuals engage in collective intentional behaviour, they act as part of this collective intentionality with the same goal. Even if individuals' actions seem different, they share the same goals. That is to say, collective behaviour, which is the general will in Rousseau's idea, may be evaluated as consistent with the form of We-intention in which the individuals represent citizens of society.¹⁴ I think the goal here refers to the one that is meaningful for the actions of all. Plus, individual wills or individual intentions can be thought differently and together under the same goal.

Taking everything into account, one may also interpret individual decisions in terms of the general will or We-intention. It can be observed that an individual's freedom of choice is characterized by two distinct aspects: as an individual and as a citizen. For example, suppose we consider acts or laws as a consequence of both the general will (We-Intention) and the individual will (I-Intention).

¹⁴ For more detailed study, see in Corlett, J. A. (2016). Searle on Human Rights, *Social Epistemology*, 30:4, 440-463, DOI: 10.1080/02691728.2015.1119912

In that case, we can presume that individuals are part of this collective intentionality, with two sides of intention: as individuals and as citizens. Therefore, their intentionality reflects two sides of a coin regarding freedom. They are free in the sense of being able to choose what is best for themselves and society, in conclusion. Freedom is two-sided and can actually be framed under the theory of collective intentionality or the general will.

In a nutshell, collective intentionality naturally includes individual intentionality and freedom of choice. In other words, although Rousseau focuses on the general will in his theory, illuminating liberty from the perspective of intention can provide a clearer understanding of the concept of attending to the general will. Perhaps, instead of the concept of 'consent', the idea of 'intention' would be more helpful for clarifying how Rousseau's theory works with respect to individual freedom as well. Consequently, one can read Rousseau's theory of the general will in conjunction with Searle's conception of collective intentionality to illuminate the location and meaning of individuals and their freedom of choice in the face of the general will.

5. CONCLUSION

In contemporary political philosophy, considering freedom and fundamental rights in the context of social contracts remains valuable. In this regard, Rousseau's theory is still valuable with its emphasis on natural freedom within social contract theory. Therefore, in this study, I have attempted to examine Rousseau's theory of the general will in terms of its prioritization over the individual will. Although Jean-Jacques Rousseau attempts to reconcile the individual and general wills in his theory of the general will and proposes the good of all, this point remains ambiguous.

However, because Rousseau's theory prioritizes the collective good in a social sense, I argue that the points he discusses require clarification. While Rousseau's theory of the general will has sparked debate regarding the relationship between the general will and individual wills and the establishment of freedoms, it also calls for the consideration of all individuals in society. At this point, I point to the concept of collective intentionality in John Searle's theory of social reality. This is because I believe that the collective intentionality in Searle's theory will clarify the points left unclear by Rousseau regarding individual will, general will, and freedom.

When we examine Rousseau's theory of the general will from Searle's perspective, we realize that, in his theory, individuals can consider their own wills differently, simultaneously with general or collective intentionality. At this point, when individuals determine their freedom of choice through their intentions, they act in accordance with the general will or collective intention. Here, I believe that an interpretation within the context of intentionality, in favor of the general will, would be more meaningful, rather than the situation in which individuals who do not choose the general will are forced to consent in Rousseau's view.

Additionally, drawing on Searle's theory, I predict that individuals possess both We-intentions and I-intentions, which can help understand individual-citizen intentions and wills in Rousseau's theory. Therefore, I argue that Searle's views on collective intentionality offer a helpful way to fill the gaps in Rousseau's theory.

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