



## The BIG Thinkers

Leaving Certificate Politics and Society

# Rousseau, Jean-Jacques



**Key Concepts:** Power and Decision Making; The Role of the State; Rights and Freedoms of Individuals

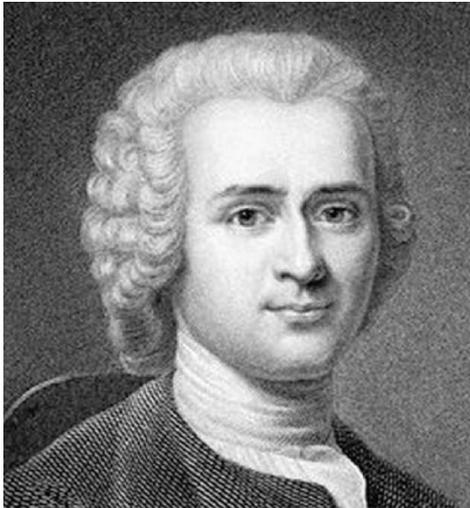
**Specific Arguments:** State of Nature, Social Contract, Legitimate Power, Civil Education and Religion



**Influential Work:** *Discourse on Inequality* (1754), *The Social Contract* (1762)

# Jean- Jacques ROUSSEAU

(1712 to 1778)



## Rousseau in Context

Rousseau must initially be regarded as everything but a political thinker. He was a writer, a poet, a composer of music, a proponent of emotion over civility and religious thought, and was ardently opposed to tenets of the very movement he found himself immersed in: the Enlightenment. All aspects of life, for Rousseau, were intrinsically linked to a supposed 'enlightened' discourse; one which he felt was bound to tenets of progress and rationalism. Here, he argued, humankind had been inordinately separated from its most natural state, its emotions. Rousseau was a fervent critique of progress and rationalism, arguing that '*Civilised man is born and dies a slave*'.

His interpretation of the Enlightenment espoused in France by theorists such as Descartes was that its influence exponentially grew into a monstrous disaster. Enlightenment thinking had re-wired the human mind to be progressive and rational, subsequently and comprehensively negating basic human emotions. Thus, thought made us sceptics. The Enlightenment resulted in careful, boring, and vain creatures of thought according to Rousseau. So ardent was his rejection of the movement that he outlined how its core characteristics had their origins in the most base and reprehensible human qualities: astronomy was borne out of astrology, a field of *superstition*; mathematics emerged from accounting, which owed its origins to *greed*; and even law, borne of *inequality* and *injustice*.

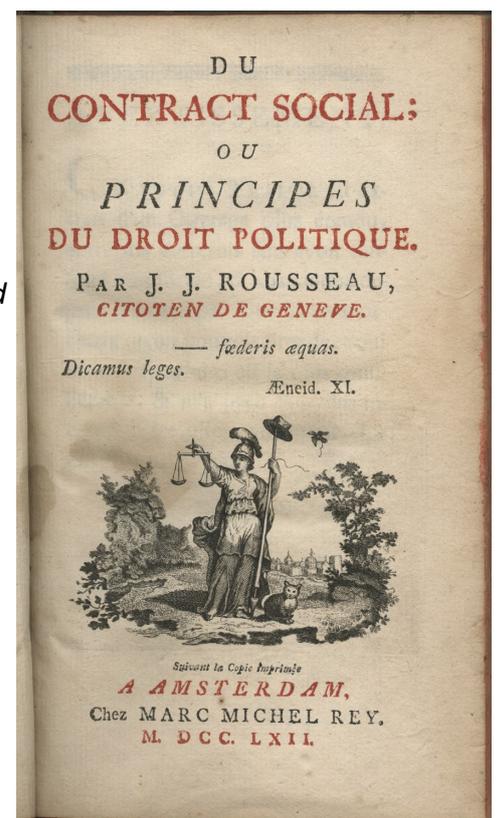
What was revered by Rousseau, though, was the classical republican model of the city state - something that was present in Europe at the time.

## His View of the Human Person and the State of Nature

If we are to make sense of where Rousseau may fall on our contemporary political spectrum of left to right, then it is in *Discourse on Inequality* where we may begin to find an understanding. He stated that one purpose of the treatise was to:

*'mark, in the progress of things, the moment at which right took the place of violence and nature became subject to law, and to explain by what bizarre chain of events the strong submitted to serve the weak, and the people to purchase an imaginary repose at the expense of real happiness'.*

Interestingly, Rousseau engages with the hypothetical natural state of man in a very anthropological and historical perspective. Unlike the metaphysical hypotheses of Locke and Hobbes, Rousseau fully embraced a school of thought linked to the *actual* origins of societies. In Rousseau's state of nature, man was vastly superior to modern descendants, in both physicality and cognitive ability, and would have been accepting of the natural processes of aging and death. This, of course, serves to pre-empt Rousseau's political argument; such sentiment is found in his belief that like domesticated animals, the domesticated or civil man is weak and timid, accepting of toil and suffering.



Rousseau also alleged that what further separated mankind from animals was the possession of free will. It is this free will, this choice, he argued, that has made us unique, and has ultimately led to our downfall in the maelstrom of rationalism. He asserted that the first human to create a blanket was not responding to necessity, as animals do, but instead to inconvenience. Once we normalise and become conditioned to this new convenience, and in turn accept it as natural, we have begun our destructive journey into rationalism. He also espouses the belief that for innovation to develop in the natural state, then communication was imperative. Here he touches on the question of whether or not man developed communication/language through feelings of sympathy or self-interest. One thing he did fundamentally assert, however, was that reasoned reflection - reflection through careful and analytical thought - undermines the organic nature of sympathy. So, for Rousseau, man's natural state is vastly superior to his contemporary state, but it did at one point embrace rationalism, thereby distancing itself from its natural form. Summarily, he seems to argue that on the journey from nature to society, man attained reason, and discarded compassion.

Finally, opposing the state of nature hypothesis of Hobbes, Rousseau believed that such a world was one bereft of the more serious causes of conflict perforating modern Europe. Coarseness of taste, owing to an austere and normative existence in the state of nature, allows man not to desire the possessions of others: *'man is attuned only to the disposition received from nature, not to the taste he could not yet have acquired'*. Similarly, in the natural state, man is not beholden to egoism of vanity, pride, and self-love. He argues that these are conceptions engendered through rational thought. Thus natural man is largely averse to conflict, whereas social man, through rationalism, is doomed to it.

## The Social Contract/Origins of Power

Although Rousseau debated on the title of his 1762 treatise, he settled on *The Social Contract* as he believed it a necessity to tackle the inadequacies of other contract thinkers. In his work, he attempted to create a confluence of two very French ideals: an absolute sovereign and a popular constitutional republic. Rousseau railed against previous contract theorists who believed that man relinquished his freedom through his own free will. He believed this to be **slavery**, and his challenge to it can be seen throughout his writings. Whereas Hobbes believed that the moment of granting power to a sovereign **unified** a people, or rather, an association of people, Rousseau rejected this and attested that this was the very moment an association of people was **disbanded**. He felt that legitimacy can only exist in the hands of the people.

For Rousseau, a political entity such as a government and its contract must fundamentally change the personalities of those in agreement. Here, he attested that this moment affords the individual person a moment of great personal change when they **exchange natural liberty**



***'You are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the Earth belong to us all, and the Earth itself to nobody'.***

Jean-Jacques  
Rousseau

**for civil or moral liberty.** This liberty, according to Rousseau, had two forms: a civil right which guaranteed the right to enjoyment of the government and its possessions; and more pertinently, that where natural man's liberty was to pursue impulse, civil man's liberty was his **liberty to live in accordance with the general will.** So, for Rousseau, it's not just about a contract, but rather a contract that has profoundly changed the very personalities and worldviews of its participants. Like Locke, Rousseau believed that a contract was not a unique instance, but must be continuously reaffirmed by citizens in assembly.

## General Will

Perhaps most important for Rousseau's contract is the concept of the **general will.** He firmly believed that there was a profound freedom in obedience to a people's own law and government. Here, the general will dominates. It is, he argued, the popular decision of a sovereign assembly of citizens. His assumption is that there exists an objective common good that is notably different from the desires of individuals. Secondly, Rousseau believed that the general will must hold philosophical merit, but must also be an integral component of a people's collective moral psychology so that they may desire it. It is, ultimately, the requirements and needs which keep a society unified. Rousseau asserts that should the general will no longer be known, if it 'vanished', then society no longer exists. This underlines one of Rousseau's most singular and **identifiable beliefs: his aversion to political parties.**

For, within a party, individual persons are likely to be more loyal to their own cause than to the general will, this being something quite rational. As we will see, this is why Rousseau desired to **keep governments small.**

## Rousseau's Legitimate Government

Rousseau's preferred form of establishing a general will was a most open affair - an assembly constituted of citizens. Once, he argued, the assembly focused on the treatment of an individual, rather than the general will, then it lost all legitimacy. Rousseau's proposed form of governance is something similar to the concept of direct democracy but is far less radical and much more complex.

To begin with, the general will must be established. Here, he argues, people should be cognisant of, and hostile to, the emergence of political parties, for these are beholden to their own will. He believed a person's will was stronger in respect to themselves, and became corrupted by extraneous influence. Thus, as well as an aversion to political parties, Rousseau also desired governments to be small, much like the functioning city state of Geneva. He believed that by doing so, a true and legitimate general will would emerge. Finally, he felt that persons should present themselves to vote; voting through a proxy, for Rousseau, was akin to hiring a mercenary in a time of war.

Although he had opined on the necessity of continuous consent, Rousseau does acquiesce to the concept of tacit consent, whereby without sedition and unrest, governance is accepted.

Ultimately, Rousseau espouses his perfect form of government to be a *'democratic sovereign'*. His distinction between *'government'* and *'sovereign'* is of particular salience. The sovereign is understood to be constituted of the citizenry, whilst the government are an elected intermediary, a legislative branch.. The government, according to Rousseau, should be made up of an aristocracy best suited to the task. So, general will, and its subsequent desire, is achieved by the sovereign in an assembly. The enacting of this law, the enforcement and administration of it and all others, is left to the government.

It is important to note that although Rousseau's form of legitimate government may sound communitarian, even altruistic, he is presumed to have excluded women from citizenry, and also the lower echelons of what he referred to as *'classes of citizenship.'*

It was Rousseau's firm believe that the relationship between the sovereign and the government would likely grow increasingly strained as the state grew. He believed that an individual's will - notably one acting in a form of government, be it judge or King - became more dominant as the size of the state grew. Thus, the sovereign must also grow to reflect this, and to balance the office holder's will with the general will. It is here that Rousseau's propensity for a small state becomes clear.

## Civil Education and Religion

One final aspect of Rousseau's hypothesis remains - that of the utilisation of religion for the betterment of the state. He felt that much like how a censor was needed in ancient Rome to *'remind'* the citizenry of their morals and beliefs, a *'legislator'* was needed in his perceived society. Unable to impinge upon the law, the legislator was required to be charismatic and influential, modelling and espousing the very best morals of the people - morals that were, of course, in line with the sustaining of the state. This is best achieved, Rousseau argued, when the legislator utilises the morality of religion to become a *'religious ventriloquist'* who can speak for the respective deity. This final chapter of *The Social Contract* was met with much antipathy, largely owing to France's standing tradition of separating church and state.

Ultimately, Rousseau argued that the state should embrace all religions so long as they did not pose a threat to the sovereign; thus certain faiths which placed supremacy on dogma over the state were not to be tolerated, namely Roman Catholicism - a tenet echoed by Locke in England. For Rousseau, religion could impart upon the citizenry the necessity of morality, something that was, in turn, needed to maintain the *'moral state'*.



***'We are approaching  
a state of crisis and  
the age of  
revolutions'.***

Jean-Jacques  
Rousseau

## In Summary

- Rousseau was fervently opposed to rationalism, even though he was a thinker of the Enlightenment
- He believed that rationalism led to the destruction of, the natural world (state of nature)
- He felt that rather than relinquishing freedom when entering a contract, one attained freedom
- 'Civil' Man's freedom was a freedom to live in accordance with the general will
- The general will represents the popular desire of the citizenry, and must be attained through assembly with public, individual, voting and no interference from others
- Politicians were a useless intermediary comparable to mercenaries
- Governments were charged with enacting the will of the sovereign (the citizenry)
- Governments were to be small, much like city states (Geneva)
- Religious pluralism was to be embraced to further the morality of the people

## Material Consulted

Hampsher-Monk, Iain. (2012) *A History of Modern Political Thought: Major Thinkers from Hobbes to Marx*. Victoria. Blackwell Publishing.

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