

## JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU (1712-1778 )

### Life

born in Geneva, Switzerland

his mother died two days later and father fled when Rousseau was ten

raised by an uncle, he fled Geneva at age 16, living as a vagabond until settling in Paris in 1742

there he became friends with Diderot

his 1749 essay, the *Discourse on the Arts and Science*,

which contained an attack on the corrupting influence of civilization, won a literary award

he composed music and one of his operettas won acclaim

he made a modest living as a music tutor

he returned to Geneva in 1754

also returning to Protestant Church after briefly becoming a Catholic

his *Discourse on the Inequality Among Men* (1755) put forth his thesis on the natural goodness of man

and the corrupting influence of society

in 1755 moved to a cottage at the edge of the forest of Montmorency with his common-law wife Thérèse

there he wrote his popular and romantic novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761)

in 1762 published *The Social Contract* and *Emile*, two of his best known books

these works were extremely controversial and made him an outcast

his Romantic temperament brought him into conflict with Voltaire

lived for awhile in England and briefly befriended Hume

after quarreling violently with Hume, who ripped him in a published account of the feud

Rousseau fled panic-stricken back to France in 1767

officially banned and oppressed by a feeling of universal persecution

he moved from place to place, eventually settling again in Paris in 1770

his last years were devoted to the composition of a remarkable series of personal works

notably, the *Confessions* and the *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*

both of which are remarkable for their lyrical power and sustained efforts at self-analysis

### Philosophical Overview

Rousseau had an optimistic view of human nature and a pessimistic view of social history

like Voltaire and other French Enlightenment figures

Rousseau rejected much of the teachings of the Church, especially the concept of original sin

but against the Enlightenment optimistic view of the progress of civilization

Rousseau had a pessimistic view of the development of society

which he held to be the cause of the degeneration of mankind

this contrast highlights how Rousseau's thought conflicted with

both the conservative and radical thinking of his day

the contrast between nature and society

also helps us understand the central features of Rousseau's thought

Rousseau praises nature and the naturally simple ways of life

in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* Rousseau conceives of man in the state of nature

as a noble savage, one who naturally loves the good and who lives freely

According to Rousseau it is society that corrupts this noble savage

and in this *Discourse* Rousseau delivers a harsh judgment on modern society

for creating an unnatural inequality based on power and wealth

modern society thus brings about a fall from happiness into misery

this conception of the noble savage is purely a hypothetical and imaginative reconstruction

not based at all on historical fact or anthropological analysis

it is rather a philosophical fiction conceived to illustrate the nature of man as revealed in Rousseau's intuitive perception

this contrast between nature and society shapes Rousseau's views on education  
children have a natural ability to learn and develop  
but the system of modern educational institutions thwart these natural tendencies by imposing adult expectations on children

the contrast between nature and society also shapes Rousseau's views on religion  
natural religion consists in a spontaneous love of the good  
in contrast, the revealed religion of Scripture and the Church ends up being superstitious, dogmatic, and authoritarian  
thus leading to the degeneration of man

it is also this contrast between nature and society that defines the main problem of Rousseau's political theory  
if humans are naturally good and free,  
then why are political societies unjust, tyrannical, and corrupt?  
if society were built on the right principles  
then it ought to be possible for free persons to construct a social order in which they retain their freedom and natural goodness  
*The Social Contract* addresses this fundamental problem  
and thus attempts to lay out the principles of a government in which the freedom and natural goodness of man are preserved

Rousseau's political theory as laid out in *The Social Contract* has three primary assumptions:

- 1) the original state of nature
- 2) society as it actually is
- 3) society as it ought to be according to the social contract

in the state of nature humans are naturally free  
what distinguishes humans from other animals is not so much reason  
but the capacity for the soul's feeling of free will, which defies mechanical explanation  
in their natural state, Rousseau maintains that humans have self-love *and* compassion  
he rejects thus both the Church's conception of man as fallen by 'original sin'  
as well as Hobbes mechanistic portrayal of man as inherently, inescapably egoistic

with the beginning of private property the natural innocence of the noble savage comes to an end  
and for the sake of self-preservation humans enter into a social contract  
but for the contract to be just it must not diminish one's natural freedom  
in contrast to man in the state of nature, and man in an ideal civil society  
Rousseau argues that actual society corrupts natural human goodness and destroys freedom  
thus the famous opening sentence of *The Social Contract*:  
"Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains"  
this defines the problem of politics—how can we have a government that preserves our liberty?  
and Rousseau's conception of the social contract provides the solution

Rousseau states the basic problem of *The Social Contract*:

To find a form of association which defends and protects with the whole force of the community the person and goods of every associate, and by means of which each, uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself, and remains as free as before. (Bk. I, chap. VI)

Rousseau's conception of the social contract is quite complex on the one hand, it was concerned primarily with the problem of freedom with conceiving a form of government which protected the liberty and rights of all citizens (the subtitle of *The Social Contract* is *Principles of Political Right*) in civil society, according to Rousseau, man faces a problem not found in the state of nature: the possible tyranny of his fellow men for Rousseau a true and just society can never be based on sheer force:

Let us agree, then, that might does not make right, and that we are obligated to obey only legitimate powers. (Bk. I, chap. III)

obviously he rejects Hobbes' view that clearly seems to affirm that might makes right the purpose of government cannot then primarily be, as it is for Hobbes, peace and security:

What do they gain if this peace itself is one of their miseries? One lives peacefully also in dungeons: is this enough to find them good? (Bk. I, chap. IV)

Rousseau rejects the view that justifies the right of conquerors to subject the vanquished to enslavement and thus goes a step further than Locke in rejecting any form of slavery liberty, is for Rousseau, an inalienable human right:

To renounce one's liberty is to renounce one's quality as a man, the rights of humanity and even its duties. For whoever renounces everything there is no possible compensation. Such renunciation is incompatible with man's nature; and to deprive his actions of all morality is tantamount to deprive his will of all freedom. (Bk. I, chap. IV)

Rousseau's thought, along with Locke's, would have a profound influence on both the American and French Revolutions his influence on the French Revolution is particularly evident, for example, in *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* approved by the French National Assembly on August 27, 1789

and yet, paradoxically, in addition to this influence upon revolutionary developments of 1776 and 1789 both of which were conceived as attempts at liberation from tyranny Rousseau's thought has also been criticized for leading to totalitarianism some would say Rousseau's thought led not only to the Revolution of 1789 but also the Reign of Terror that began in 1793 and one can trace a certain line of development from Rousseau's thought to Hegel's in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which led to totalitarian regimes of both the right and the left in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

this paradox thus presents us the challenge in understanding Rousseau's notion of the social contract though his thought has been described as a forerunner of totalitarianism this was certainly not his intention

if the problem to which *The Social Contract* is addressed is the problem of freedom the solution for Rousseau involves a contract that consists in the formation of a collective body in this contract or social pact individuals are welded together into a community and this community has a 'general will' that everyone then takes as their own will

If, then, everything which is not of the essence of the social pact is set aside, one finds that it reduces itself to the following terms: *Each of us puts in common his person and his whole power under the supreme direction of the general will; and in return we receive in a body every member as an indivisible part of the whole.* (Bk. I, chap. VI)

this concept of the ‘general will’ allows individual citizens, in Rousseau’s view, to share power through this contract a social morality of justice, rights and duties replaces actions freely motivated by instinct

the transition from the state of nature to that of civil society thus involves, for Rousseau a transformation in the nature of man, and in the nature of freedom

the *natural freedom* enjoyed by man in the state of nature

differs in several important respects from the *civic freedom* attained in civil society

In a crucial chapter Rousseau marks this transition:

This passage from the state of nature to the civil state produces in man a very remarkable change, by substituting in his conduct injustice for instinct, and by giving his actions the morality that they previously lacked. It is only when the voice of duty succeeds physical impulsion, and right succeeds appetite, that man, who till then had only looked after himself, sees that he is forced to act on other principles, and to consult his reason before listening to his inclinations. Although, in this state, he is deprived of many advantages he holds from nature, he gains such greater ones in return, that his faculties are exercised and developed; his ideas are expanded; his feelings are ennobled; his whole soul is exalted to such a degree that, if the abuses of this new condition did not often degrade him below that from which he has emerged, he should ceaselessly bless the happy moment that removed from it forever, and transformed him from a stupid and ignorant animal into an intelligent being and a man. (Bk. I, chap. VIII)

we can see in the rest of this chapter Rousseau distinguishes three kinds of liberty

1) *natural liberty* is our ability to satisfy our appetites (for Rousseau it is really a form of slavery which is surrendered and given up when we enter the social contract

2) *civic liberty* is what we gain by entering the contract

3) *moral liberty* is what makes a man master of himself

here Rousseau distinguishes natural from civil liberty:

What man loses by the social contract is his natural liberty and an unlimited right to anything which tempts him and which he is able to attain; what he gains is civil liberty and the ownership of all that he possesses. In order not to be mistaken about these compensations, we must clearly distinguish natural liberty, which is limited only by the force of the individual, from civil liberty, which is limited by the general will. (Bk. I, chap. VIII)

in entering into the contract, one not only gains civil liberty, but moral liberty as well:

Besides the preceding, one can add to the acquisitions of the civil state the moral freedom which alone renders man truly master of himself; for the impulsion of mere appetite is slavery, and obedience to the law one prescribes to oneself is freedom. (Bk. I, chap. VIII)

Rousseau’s key assumption here is that freedom consists in obeying a law we give to ourselves while acting on mere impulse is not to be free

(this notion was to influence Kant very much)

what seems to be implied here is that the law that is capable of giving us freedom is not just any law but *moral law*

Rousseau's view here obviously contrasts with Hobbes  
for placing ourselves under a sovereign as in Hobbes' conception  
would be inconsistent with freedom since the sovereign will be giving us the law

his view also contrasts with Locke's majority rule system  
since the minority would not be truly free in Rousseau's sense  
since the minority have not given themselves the law

for Rousseau the only form of association that is consistent with our freedom  
is one that consists in our transforming ourselves into a collective person  
which he refers to as the 'general will'  
once separate individuals have been welded into this 'general will'  
we then give ourselves a law and act accordingly  
in the social contract, according to Rousseau, individuals are bound to follow the 'general will'  
for Rousseau this need not diminish our freedom  
because, for Rousseau, it is the capacity to obey laws that makes a person master of his appetites  
and thus freedom finds full expression in a civil society governed by the social contract

there is a crucial difference in a very basic assumption  
that marks Rousseau difference with both Hobbes and Locke  
and illustrates another sense in which Rousseau was a counter-Enlightenment figure  
Rousseau's thought involves somewhat of a return to the view we find in both Plato and Aristotle  
that the individual's identity is inseparable from the community  
the philosophy of both Hobbes and Locke develop out of the characteristically modern notion  
that really begins with Descartes  
which conceives the starting point of philosophy to be the isolated individual  
the individual is conceived in that conception as already complete  
as autonomous, rational beings sovereign over themselves  
the state is justified, for both Hobbes and Locke, in terms of the interest of the individual  
Locke's conception accommodated a wider form of self-interest than Hobbes'  
for Locke, especially, the individual identity is fully separable from the state

in Rousseau's notion the state does not have just an instrumental value  
in serving the interests of individuals  
the state has value in itself, and it is through the state that individuals realize their identity  
in Rousseau's view there is no community whatsoever without the social pact  
it is the contract which transforms us into moral beings capable of existing in society  
Locke assumes that individuals are capable of forming communities without the aid of the state

perhaps the principal difficulty with Rousseau's conception of the social contract  
is just what is meant by the 'general will'  
it is a notion that is not altogether clear  
the idea seems to be that everyone in society shares interests  
and these shared interests can be regarded as the common good

The first and most important consequence of the principles established above is that the general will can only direct the forces of the State in keeping with the end for which it was instituted, which is the common good, for if the opposition of private interests has made the establishment of societies necessary, the harmony of these same interests has made it possible. That which is common to these different interests forms the social bond; and if there were not some point in

which all interests agree, no society could exist. Now it is only on this common interest that the society should be governed. (Bk. II, chap. I)

the sovereign power, for Rousseau, is thus not an individual—the monarch  
nor an assembly of men—the legislature however conceived,  
it is the ‘general will’

I say, then, that sovereignty, being only the exercise of the general will, can never be alienated, and that the Sovereign, which is only a collective being, can be represented only by itself; power can well be transmitted, but will cannot. (Bk. II, chap. I)

the ‘general will’ is not the same thing as the will of all

There is often a great difference between the will of all and the general will; the latter regards only the common interest, the other regards private interests and is only the sum of particular wills: but remove from these will the pluses and minuses which cancel each other out and the general will remains the same as the sum of the differences. (Bk. II, chap. III)

the difference here is that the ‘general will’ considers only common interests  
the ‘will of all’ considers private interest, and is nothing more than the sum of particular wills

for Rousseau the ‘general will’ is always right

though the resolutions of people may be bad since we may be mistaken about the common good:

It follows from what proceeds that the general will is always upright and always tends toward the public utility; but it does not follow that the deliberations of the people always have the same rectitude. One wishes always his own good, but does not always discern it. The people is never corrupted, though often deceived, and then only does it seem to will that which is bad. (Bk. II, chap. III)

By itself the people always wants the good, but by itself does not always discern it. The general will is always upright, but the judgment that guides it is not always enlightened. (Bk. II, chap. VI)

thus, for Rousseau, sovereignty is the exercise of the general will  
this will is expressed by majority vote  
except in the case of the original contract which must be unanimous

the sovereign is always the general will, that is, “the people”  
the legislator acts on behalf of the sovereign  
and has the task of figuring out what the general will is  
and then expressing that in the form of law

the prince, or “government” is the agent who executes laws under the direction of the general will

What then is the Government? An intermediate body established between the subjects and the Sovereign for their mutual correspondence, charged with the execution of the laws, and to the maintenance of liberty, both civil and political. (Bk. III, chap.I)

the main problem with Rousseau’s notion of the general will is the practical problem of finding out what the general will is

as Rousseau held that the general will is always right

if any person wants something other than the general will,

in other words, other than what the people ‘really’ want

such persons do not really know what is in their own best interests or what they really want

it is not really a matter of compelling everyone to submit to the general will

as it is a problem of determining what the general will really is  
 who has the authority and power to ascertain what the true will of the people is?  
 some would even question whether all individual desires really coincide in *one* general will  
 Rousseau did not well enough explain how, *institutionally*  
 the general will is determined  
 when it is unclear how the general will is to be determined we run the risk  
 that arbitrary rulers will impose their will as the general will

in a small, local community it may be easier to determine through direct democracy a general will  
 in some ways Rousseau's theory really worked for the small city-state like his native Geneva  
 for the large nation state the lack of an adequate theory to practically determine the general will  
 has led critics of Rousseau to find in his social contract a forerunner to totalitarianism

what underlies Rousseau's conception of the general will  
 is the conviction that a society based solely on the calculative reasoning of self-interested individuals  
 which is to some extent the view of both Hobbes and Locke  
 is necessarily bound to become corrupt and repressive

at the end of the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*  
 Rousseau's description of the state of society which developed through the divisions of private property  
 reads like a parody of the Lockean contract  
 once the separation of private property began to distinguish rich and poor:

The wealthy, on their part, had no sooner begun to taste the pleasure of command, than they  
 disdained all others, and, using their old slaves to acquire new, thought nothing but subduing and  
 enslaving their neighbors; like ravenous wolves, which, having once tasted human flesh, despise  
 every other food and thenceforth seek only men to devour. (*DOI*, 291)

the division of society into rich and poor leads to another state of war:

Thus, as the most powerful or the most miserable considered their might or misery as a kind of  
 right to the possession of others, equivalent, in their opinion, to that of property, the destruction of  
 equality was attended by the most terrible disorders. Usurpations by the rich, robbery by the poor,  
 and the unbridled passions of both, suppressed the cries of natural compassion and the still feeble  
 voice of justice, and filled men with avarice, ambition, and vice. Between the tide of the strongest  
 and that of the first occupier, there arose perpetual conflicts, which never ended but in battles and  
 bloodshed. The new-born state of society thus gave rise to a horrible state of war. . . . (*DOI*, 291)

this leads to a situation in which the rich are insecure and the poor feel cheated  
 and this leads to the Lockean contract  
 which, for Rousseau, is something of a great swindle pulled off by the rich and powerful  
 who obviously have the most to gain from a civil contract  
 “. . . the rich man, thus urged by necessity, conceived at length the profoundest plan that ever entered the  
 mind of man. . . .”

promising to benefit all through an act of common benevolence the rich man's plan unfolds:

‘Let us join,’ said he, ‘to guard the weak from oppression, to restrain the ambitious, and secure to  
 every man the possession of what belongs to him: let us institute rules of justice and peace, to  
 which all without exception may be obliged to conform. . . .’ (*DOI*, 291)

thus the inequalities between rich and poor already established by hook or crook  
 become, by social contract, entitlements protected by law—and thus:  
 “All ran headlong to their chains, in hopes of securing their liberty” (*DOI*, 292)

a society based solely on self-interest leaves man still in chains:

Such, was, or may well have been, the origin of society and law, which bound new fetters on the poor, and gave new powers to the rich; which irretrievably destroyed natural liberty, eternally fixed the law of property and inequality, converted clever usurpation into unalterable right, and, for the advantage of a few ambitious individuals, subjected all mankind to perpetual labor, slavery, and wretchedness. (*DOI*, 292)

Rousseau's response to this problem is to found society not on self-interest but on civic virtue  
the individual is conceived, then, not as with Hobbes and Locke, already complete but as yet undetermined, capable of being transformed  
from individuals concerned only with securing their own narrow self-interest into citizens guided by civic virtue  
by submitting their individual will to the higher power of a 'general will'

Rousseau's vision of a society molded together by the general will  
by a common faith (see the last chapter of *The Social Contract*)  
is a nightmare to many  
and is thus a vision that is practically unrealizable  
especially if force is not to make right  
if we are really to put the law over ourselves, instead of having it forced upon us

but that the overall vision cannot be sustained  
does not necessarily undermine the insights of his analysis  
Rousseau's thought still leaves us today with much to consider

### **Influence**

the popularity of Rousseau's political philosophy  
first expressed itself in the French support of the American Revolution  
Thomas Jefferson was very much influenced by Rousseau's thought  
Rousseau's thought also had a profound influence shaping the French Revolution  
his doctrine of the sovereignty of the people became very popular in the years leading up to 1789  
parts of *The Social Contract* were read aloud in the streets of Paris and met with enthusiastic applause  
according to the conservative English political thinker Edmund Burke  
the French Revolutionary Constituent Assembly (1789-1791) almost worshiped Rousseau's thought  
Rousseau's thought would have a decided influence on shaping the French  
*Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*

when the revolution began it was decidedly atheistic because of the influence of Voltaire and other antireligious Enlightenment thinkers  
Robespierre, however, was convinced by Rousseau's writings to support religious belief and he persuaded the National Convention in 1793 to adopt an article of faith based on Rousseau  
Napoleon also agreed with Rousseau on the importance of religion  
and thus, ironically, the survival of the Church in France depended largely on Rousseau who was banished for heresy in his lifetime

Kant was also inspired by Rousseau's emphasis on human free will  
Kant accepted Rousseau characterization of liberty as obedience to self-prescribed laws which is evident in Kant's argument that free will consists in the ability to follow moral law  
Kant was also influenced by Rousseau in his claim that the ability to obey moral law

requires that a person master his or her own desires  
and his claim that freedom finds full expression only in a civil society  
where people are regarded equally as ends

Rousseau was to some extent a part of the French Enlightenment  
but was also critical of some Enlightenment assumptions—the emphasis on rationality and the optimistic  
assumption that civilization meant progress  
these aspects of Rousseau’s thought had then a deep influence on Romanticism  
which celebrated aesthetic feeling over reason and idealized man in the state of nature  
the *Confessions* became recognized as a founding document of Romanticism  
not only because it praised feeling and sentiments  
but also because it offered a way of understanding the human psyche  
that did not reduce the person to a mere machine

through the Romantic movement

Rousseau had an enormous influence on 19<sup>th</sup> century literature and thought  
in Germany he inspired Goethe and Friedrich Schiller  
in England the poets Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats  
in Russia both Aleksandr Pushkin and Leo Tolstoy  
Rousseau inspired Romanticism also shaped art and popular taste in the 19<sup>th</sup> century  
a shift toward simpler clothing, love of the countryside, and the expression of romantic love

Rousseau’s views on education also had a lasting impact  
shaping the views of the Swiss educator Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827)  
and Americans, John Dewey (1859-1952) and Maria Montessori (1870-1952)  
another pioneer of Rousseau’s progressive view of education was  
Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), the founder of the kindergarten