



On the Social Contract or Principles of Political Right

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

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Long hailed as one of the most original, controversial, and influential works of modern political theory, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *On the Social Contract or Principles of Political Right* (1762) sets out to address an apparently insoluble

difficulty: how can we organize a political community so as to guarantee its members the complete physical and emotional freedom given to them by nature, while at the same time ensuring peaceful order and cooperation within the state. How can we "find a form of association which defends and protects with full communal force the person and the possessions of each member and in which each person, by uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before."

Rousseau's solution to this problem offers a vision of a republican constitution in which the citizens are free because, as rational beings, they choose to live in a state where they all have an equal share in the sovereign power and are all equally subject to the laws established by the general will of all. No matter what the form of government, in order to be legitimate, it must be subject to the sovereignty of the people.

On the Social Contract is justly famous as a collectivist response to the more individualistic liberalism of Hobbes and Locke. For Rousseau true freedom in the modern state can only be realized if the citizens, as rational individuals, subordinate their selfish personal desires to the laws enacted by the general will of all—citizens, he states in one of his best known and most paradoxical sayings "must be forced to be free." Only then can they realize their full potential as free moral beings.

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