

## Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *The Social Contract* (1763)

### Excerpts

#### Origin and Terms of the Social Contract

Man was born free, but everywhere he is in chains. This man believes that he is the master of others, and still he is more of a slave than they are. How did that transformation take place? I don't know. How may the restraints on man become legitimate? I do believe I can answer that question....

At a point in the state of nature when the obstacles to human preservation have become greater than each individual with his own strength can cope with . . . , an adequate combination of forces must be the result of men coming together. Still, each man's power and freedom are his main means of selfpreservation. How is he to put them under the control of others without damaging himself . . . ?

This question might be rephrased: "How is a method of associating to be found which will defend and protect-using the power of all-the person and property of each member and still enable each member of the group to obey only himself and to remain as free as before?" This is the fundamental problem; the social contract offers a solution to it.

The very scope of the action dictates the terms of this contract and renders the least modification of them inadmissible, something making them null and void. Thus, although perhaps they have never been stated in so many words, they are the same everywhere and tacitly conceded and recognized everywhere. And so it follows that each individual immediately recovers his primitive rights and natural liberties whenever any violation of the social contract occurs and thereby loses the contractual freedom for which he renounced them.

The social contract's terms, when they are well understood, can be reduced to a single stipulation: the individual member alienates himself totally to the whole community together with all his rights. This is first because conditions will be the same for everyone when each individual gives himself totally, and secondly, because no one will be tempted to make that condition of shared equality worse for other men....

Once this multitude is united this way into a body, an offense against one of its members is an offense against the body politic. It would be even less possible to injure the body without its members feeling it. Duty and interest thus equally require the two contracting parties to aid each other mutually. The individual people should be motivated from their double roles as individuals and members of the body, to combine all the advantages which mutual aid offers them....

## Individual Wills and the General Will

In reality, each individual may have one particular will as a man that is different from-or contrary to-the general will which he has as a citizen. His own particular interest may suggest other things to him than the common interest does. His separate, naturally independent existence may make him imagine that what he owes to the common cause is an incidental contribution - a contribution which will cost him more to give than their failure to receive it would harm the others. He may also regard the moral person of the State as an imaginary being since it is not a man, and wish to enjoy the rights of a citizen without performing the duties of a subject. This unjust attitude could cause the ruin of the body politic if it became widespread enough.

So that the social pact will not become meaningless words, it tacitly includes this commitment, which alone gives power to the others: Whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be forced to obey it by the whole body politic, which means nothing else but that he will be forced to be free. This condition is indeed the one which by dedicating each citizen to the fatherland gives him a guarantee against being personally dependent on other individuals. It is the condition which all political machinery depends on and which alone makes political undertakings legitimate. Without it, political actions become absurd, tyrannical, and subject to the most outrageous abuses.

Whatever benefits he had in the state of nature but lost in the civil state, a man gains more than enough new ones to make up for them. His capabilities are put to good use and developed; his ideas are enriched, his sentiments made more noble, and his soul elevated to the extent that-if the abuses in this new condition did not often degrade him to a condition lower than the one he left behind-he would have to keep blessing this happy moment which snatched him away from his previous state and which made an intelligent being and a man out of a stupid and very limited animal....