



The Social Contract: and Discourses (Jean Jacques Rousseau)

Jean Jacques Rousseau

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The Social Contract & Discourses

By Jean Jacques Rousseau

Edited By Ernest Rhys

Philosophy and Theology

Rousseau's Social Contract

Translated With Introduction BY G. D. H. Cole

Of The Social Contract, Or Principles of Political Right (Du contrat social ou Principes du droit politique; 1762) by Jean-Jacques Rousseau is a book in which Rousseau theorized about the best way to establish a political community in the face of the problems of commercial society, which he had already identified in his Discourse on Inequality (1754).

The Social Contract helped inspire political reforms or revolutions in Europe, especially in France. The Social Contract argued against the idea that monarchs were divinely empowered to legislate; as Rousseau asserts, only the people, who are sovereign, have that all-powerful right.

The stated aim of The Social Contract is to determine whether there can be a legitimate political authority, since people's interactions he saw at his time seemed to put them in a state far worse than the good one they were at the state of nature, even though living in isolation.

In this desired social contract, everyone will be free because they all forfeit the same amount of rights and impose the same duties on all. Rousseau argues that it is illogical for a man to surrender his freedom for slavery; thus, the participants must have a right to choose the laws under which they live. Although the contract imposes new laws, including those safeguarding and regulating property, a person can exit it at any time (except in a time of need, for this is desertion), and is again as free as when he was born.

Rousseau posits that the political aspects of a society should be divided into two parts. First, there must be a sovereign consisting of the whole population, women included, that represents the general will and is the

legislative power within the state. The second division is that of the government, being distinct from the sovereign. This division is necessary because the sovereign cannot deal with particular matters like applications of the law. Doing so would undermine its generality, and therefore damage its legitimacy. Thus, government must remain a separate institution from the sovereign body. When the government exceeds the boundaries set in place by the people, it is the mission of the people to abolish such government, and begin anew.

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