

Jean Jacques Rousseau: Excerpt from *The Social Contract* (1762)

I assume, for the sake of argument, that mankind at some time reached a point when the disadvantages of remaining in a state of nature outweighed the advantages. Under these conditions, the original state of nature could no longer endure. The human race would have perished if it had not changed its ways.

Men, being human, cannot develop new powers. But they can unite and control the powers they already have. Men in the state of nature could get together, pooling their strength in a way that would permit them to meet any challenge. They had to learn to work together under central directions.

A real concentration of human powers could be brought about only as the result of an agreement among individual men. But each individual man relies on his own strength and his own freedom of action to protect and preserve himself. How can he limit his strength and his freedom of action without injuring himself and neglecting to care for his own affairs?

Some form of association must be found which can rally the whole community for the protection of the person and property of each of its citizens in such a way that each man, because he is a voluntary member of the association, renders obedience to his own will and hence remains as free as he was before. That is the basic problem solved by the social contract.

The provisions of the social contract are determined by the nature of the act [*of association*] in such a way that the least modification will render them invalid. Even though the terms of association may never have been formally accepted in open meeting, they are everywhere the same and universally recognized. If the social contract were in any way broken by anyone, then each individual could at once resume all the rights which were his in the state of nature. He would regain his natural liberty by losing the liberty of the social contract for which he originally gave up his freedom of action.

The essence of the social contract can be stated simply: each individual surrenders all his rights to the community. Since each man surrenders his rights without reservation, all are equal. And because all are equal, it is to everyone's interest to make life pleasant for his fellows.

Since all rights have been surrendered to the community without reservation, no one has any claim against the group. If any rights were left to individuals and no one was given authority to decide between individual rights and the public good, then each man would try to extend the scope of those rights he had reserved for himself. This situation would mean that a state of nature still existed. All rights must be surrendered; none may be reserved. . . .

The heart of the idea of the social contract may be stated simply: Each of us places his person and authority under the supreme direction of the general will: and the group receives each individual as an indivisible part of the whole. . . .

In order that the social contract may not be a mere empty formula, everyone must understand that any individual who refuses to obey the general will must be forced by his fellows to do so. This is a way of saying that it may be necessary to force a man to be free; freedom in this case being obedience to the will of all.

Name _____ Date _____ Period _____

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1. Why does man leave the state of nature?

2. How do men in the state of nature gain strength?

3. If a man agrees voluntarily to be part of a government in exchange for protection of his self and property, this is called what?

4. a. What happens to the individual if he breaks the social contract?

- b. What happens if government breaks the social contract?

5. Why are men all equal under a social contract?

6. What happens if people want to give up only certain rights, but keep certain ones for themselves?

7. Who is the general will? Is it strong or weak?