

**MAN WAS BORN**

**FREE**

**YET EVERYWHERE HE  
IS IN CHAINS**

**JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU (1712–1778)**

**IN CONTEXT****BRANCH****Political philosophy****APPROACH****Social contract theory****BEFORE**

**1651** Thomas Hobbes puts forward the idea of a social contract in his book *Leviathan*.

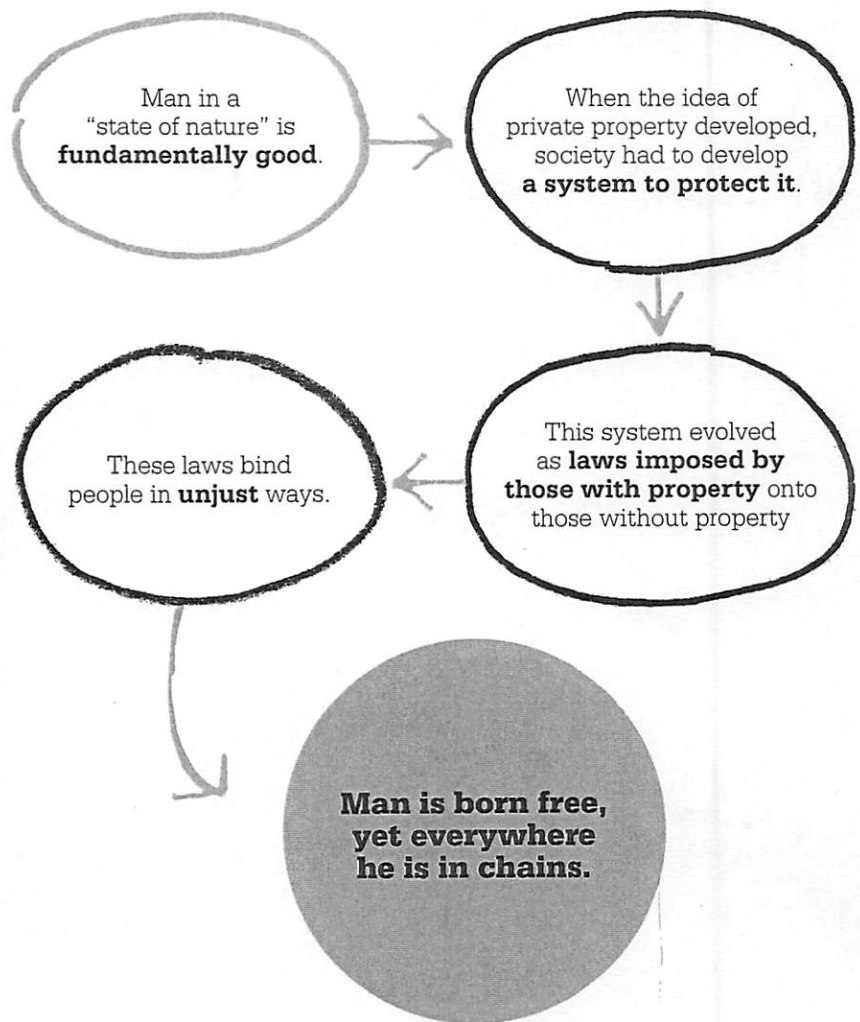
**1689** John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* asserts a human's natural right to defend "life, health, liberty, or possessions."

**AFTER**

**1791** Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* argues that government's only purpose is to safeguard the rights of the individual.

**1848** Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels publish *The Communist Manifesto*.

**1971** John Rawls develops the idea of "Justice as Fairness" in his book *A Theory of Justice*.



**R**ousseau was very much a product of the mid- to late-18th-century period known as the Enlightenment, and an embodiment of the continental European philosophy of the time. As a young man he tried to make his name as both a musician and composer, but in 1740 he met Denis Diderot and Jean d'Alembert, the philosopher compilers of the new *Encyclopédie*, and became interested in philosophy. The political mood in France at this time was uneasy. Enlightenment thinkers in France and England had

begun to question the status quo, undermining the authority of both the Church and the aristocracy, and advocates of social reform such as Voltaire continually fell foul of the overbearing censorship of the establishment. Unsurprisingly in this context, Rousseau's main area of interest became political philosophy. His thinking was influenced not only by his French contemporaries, but also by the work of English philosophers—and in particular the idea of a social contract as proposed by Thomas Hobbes and refined by John Locke.

Like them, Rousseau compared an idea of humanity in a hypothetical "natural state" with how people actually live in a civil society. But he took such a radically different view of this natural state and the way it is affected by society, that it could be considered a form of "counter-Enlightenment" thinking. It held within it the seeds of the next great movement, Romanticism.

**Science and art corrupt**

Hobbes had envisaged life in the natural state as "solitary, poor,



**See also:** Thomas Hobbes 112–15 ■ John Locke 130–33 ■ Edmund Burke 172–73 ■ John Stuart Mill 190–93 ■ Karl Marx 196–203 ■ John Rawls 294–95

nasty, brutish, and short." In his view humanity is instinctively self-interested and self-serving, and that civilization is necessary to place restrictions on these instincts. Rousseau, however, looks more kindly on human nature, and sees civil society as a much less benevolent force.

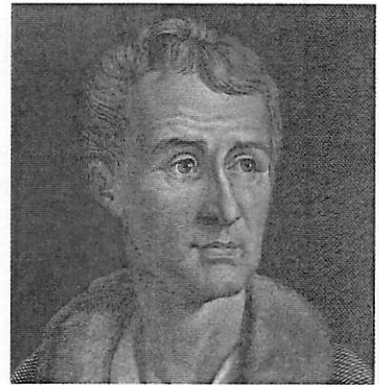
The idea that society might be a harmful influence first occurred to Rousseau when he wrote an essay for a competition organized by the Academy of Dijon, answering the question: "Has the restoration of the sciences and the arts contributed to refining moral practices?" The expected answer from thinkers of the time, and especially from a musician such as Rousseau, was an enthusiastic affirmative, but in fact Rousseau argued the opposite case. His *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, which won him first prize,

controversially puts forward the idea that the arts and sciences corrupt and erode morals. He argues that far from improving minds and lives, the arts and sciences decrease human virtue and happiness.

### The inequality of laws

Having broken with established thinking in his prize-winning and publicly acclaimed essay, Rousseau took the idea a stage further in a second essay, the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*. The subject matter chimed with the mood of the time, echoing the calls for social reform from writers such as Voltaire, but »

**The Romantic movement** in art and literature that dominated the late 18th and early 19th centuries reflected Rousseau's vision of the state of nature as one of beauty, innocence, and virtue.



### Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born to a Calvinist family in Geneva. His mother died only a few days after his birth, and his father fled home following a duel a few years later, leaving him in the care of an uncle.

Aged 16, he left for France and converted to Catholicism. While trying to make his name as a composer, he worked as a civil servant and was posted to Venice for two years, but on his return he began to write philosophy. His controversial views led to his books being banned in Switzerland and France, and warrants being issued for his arrest. He was forced to accept David Hume's invitation to live in England for a short time, but after they quarrelled he returned to France under a false name. He was later allowed to return to Paris, where he lived until his death at the age of 66.

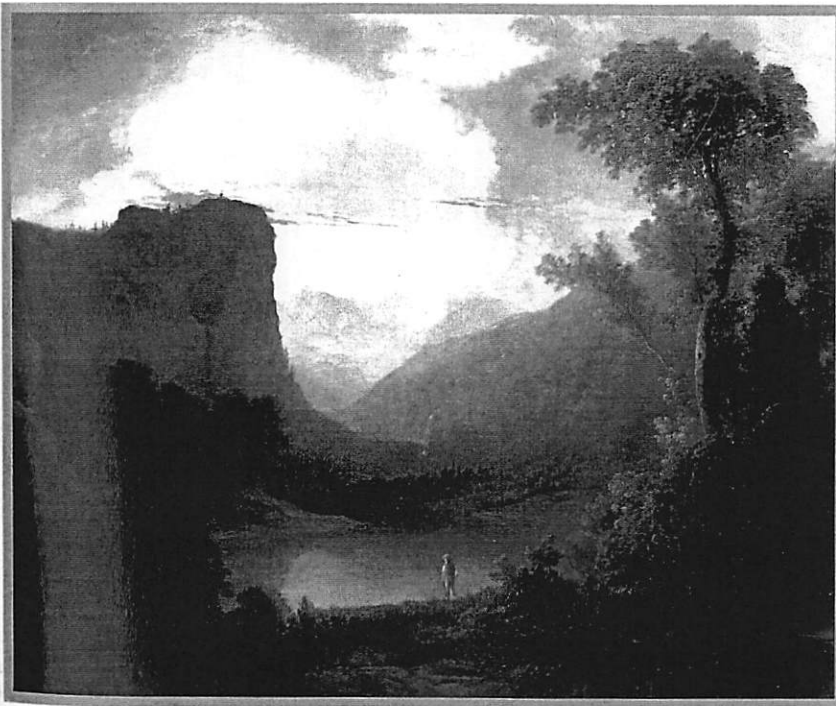
### Key works

1750 *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*

1755 *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*

1755 *Discourse on Political Economy*

1762 *The Social Contract*



once again Rousseau contradicted conventional thinking with his analysis. The selfish, savage, and unjust state of nature depicted by Hobbes is, for Rousseau, a description not of "natural man", but of "civilized man". In fact he claims that it is civil society that induces this savage state. Humanity's natural state, he argues, is innocent, happy, and independent: man is born free.

### Society corrupts

The state of nature that Rousseau describes is a pastoral idyll, where people in their natural state are fundamentally good. (The English wrongly interpreted Rousseau's idea of natural man as a "noble savage", but this was due to a mistranslation of the French *sauvage*, which means simply "natural", not brutish.) People are endowed with innate virtue and, more importantly, the attributes of compassion and empathy. But



**Adam and Eve** represent the kind of perfect "natural" humans that Rousseau thought predated society. He said that we, like them, are corrupted by knowledge, becoming ever more selfish and unhappy.

once this state of innocence is disrupted, and the power of reason begins to separate humankind from the rest of nature, people become detached from their natural virtues. The imposition of civil society on the state of nature therefore entails a move away from virtue toward vice, and from idyllic happiness toward misery.

Rousseau sees the fall from a state of nature and the establishment of civil society as regrettable but inevitable, because it resulted from the human capacity for reason. The process began, he thought, the first time that a man enclosed a piece of land for himself, so introducing the notion of property. As groups of people began to live side by side like this, they formed societies, which could only be maintained though a system of laws. But Rousseau claims that every society loses touch with humanity's natural virtues, including empathy, and so imposes laws that are not just, but selfish. They are designed to protect property, and they are inflicted on the poor by the rich. The move from a natural to a civilized state therefore brought about a move not only from virtue to vice, Rousseau points out, but also from innocence and freedom to injustice and enslavement. Although humanity is naturally virtuous, it is corrupted by society; and although man is born free, the laws imposed by society condemn him to a life "in chains."

### The Social Contract

Rousseau's second *Discourse* ruffled even more feathers than his first, but it gained him a reputation and quite a following. His portrayal of the state of nature as desirable and not brutal formed a vital part of the emerging Romantic movement in literature. Rousseau's rallying cry of

“Tranquility is found also in dungeons; but is that enough to make them desirable places to live in?”

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau**

“back to nature!” and his pessimistic analysis of modern society as full of inequalities and injustices sat well with the growing social unrest of the 1750s, especially in France. Not content with merely stating the problem, Rousseau went on to offer a solution, in what is seen as perhaps his most influential work, *The Social Contract*.

Rousseau opens his book with the challenging declaration “Man is born free, yet everywhere he is in chains”, which was considered such a call for radical change that it was adopted as a slogan during the French Revolution 27 years later. Having issued his challenge, Rousseau then sets out his vision of an alternative civil society, run not by aristocrats, the monarchy, and the Church, but by all citizens, who participate in the business of legislation. Modelled on Classical republican ideas of democracy, Rousseau imagines the citizen body operating as a unit, prescribing laws according to the *volonté générale*, or general will. The laws would arise from all and apply to all—everyone would be considered equal. In contrast with the social contract envisaged by Locke, which was designed to



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The general will  
should come from all  
to apply to all.

**Jean-Jacques  
Rousseau**  
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protect the rights and property of individuals, Rousseau advocates giving legislative power to the people as a whole, for the benefit of all, administered by the general will. He believes that the freedom to take part in the legislative process would lead to an elimination of inequality and injustice, and that it would promote a feeling of belonging to society—that it would inevitably lead to the *liberté, égalité, fraternité* (liberty, equality, fraternity) that became the motto of the new French Republic.

### The evils of education

In another book written in the same year, entitled *Emile, or On Education*, Rousseau expanded on his theme, explaining that education was responsible for corrupting the state of nature and perpetuating the evils of modern society. In other books and essays he concentrated on the adverse effects of both conventional religion and atheism. At the center of all his works lay the idea that

**The French Revolution**, which began 11 years after Rousseau's death, was inspired by his claim that it was unjust for the rich few to rule over the effectively voiceless, powerless poor.

reason threatens human innocence and, in turn, freedom and happiness. Instead of the education of the intellect, he proposes an education of the senses, and he suggests that our religious faith should be guided by the heart, not the head.

### Political influence

Most of Rousseau's writings were immediately banned in France, gaining him both notoriety and a large following. By the time of his death in 1778, revolution in France and elsewhere was imminent, and his idea of a social contract in which the general will of the citizen body controlled the legislative process offered the revolutionaries a viable alternative to the corrupt system as it stood. But his philosophy was at odds with contemporary thinking, and his insistence that a state of nature was superior to civilization led him to fall out with fellow reformers such as Voltaire and Hume.

Rousseau's political influence was felt most strongly during the period of revolution immediately after his death, but his influence on philosophy, and political philosophy in particular, emerged to a greater extent in the 19th century. Georg Hegel integrated Rousseau's ideas of social contract into his own philosophical system. Later and more importantly, Karl Marx was particularly struck by some of Rousseau's work on inequality and injustice. Unlike Robespierre, one of the leaders of the French Revolution, who had appropriated Rousseau's philosophy for his own ends during the Reign of Terror, Marx fully understood and developed Rousseau's analysis of capitalist society and the revolutionary means of replacing it. Marx's *Communist Manifesto* ends with a nod to Rousseau, encouraging the proletarians (workers) have “nothing to lose but their chains.” ■

