

PRIMARY SOURCE FROM
The Social Contract
By Jean-Jacques Rousseau

In *The Social Contract*, published in 1762, the philosophe—a writer during the 18th century French Enlightenment—Jean-Jacques Rousseau outlined his ideas about individual freedom and obedience to authority. As you read this excerpt, think about Rousseau's argument against the use of force as a means of governing the people.

Chapter I—Subject of the First Book

Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains. One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave than they. How did this change come about? I do not know. What can make it legitimate? That question I think I can answer.

If I took into account only force, and the effects derived from it, I should say: "As long as a people is compelled to obey, and obeys, it does well; as soon as it can shake off the yoke, and shakes it off, it does still better; for, regaining its liberty by the same right as took it away, either it is justified in resuming it or there was no justification for those who took it away." But the social order is a sacred right which is the basis of all rights. Nevertheless, this right does not come from nature, and must therefore be founded on conventions. Before coming to that, I have to prove what I have just asserted.

Chapter III—The Right of the Strongest

The strongest is never strong enough to be always the master, unless he transforms strength into right, and obedience into duty. Hence the right of the strongest, which, though to all seeming meant ironically, is really laid down as a fundamental principle. But are we never to have an explanation of this phrase? Force is a physical power, and I fail to see what moral effect it can have. To yield to force is an act of necessity, not of will—at the most, an act of prudence. In what sense can it be a duty?

Suppose for a moment that this so-called "right" exists. I maintain that the sole result is a mass of inexplicable nonsense. For, if force creates right, the effect changes with the cause: every force that is greater than the first succeeds to its right. As soon as

it is possible to disobey with impunity (no harm), disobedience is legitimate; and, the strongest being always in the right, the only thing that matters is to act so as to become the strongest. But what kind of right is that which perishes when force fails? If we must obey perforce, there is no need to obey because we ought; and if we are not forced to obey, we are under no obligation to do so. Clearly, the word "right" adds nothing to force: in this connection, it means absolutely nothing.

Obey the powers that be. If this means yield to force, it is a good precept, but superfluous (unnecessary): I can answer for its never being violated. All power comes from God, I admit; but so does all sickness: does that mean that we are forbidden to call in the doctor? A brigand [bandit] surprises me at the edge of a wood: must I not merely surrender my purse on compulsion, but, even if I could withhold it, am I in conscience bound to give it up? For certainly the pistol he holds is also a power.

Let us then admit that force does not create right, and that we are obliged to obey only legitimate powers. In that case, my original question recurs.

from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Social Contract and Discourses and Other Essays, trans. by G.D.H. Cole (E.P. Dutton & Company, Inc., 1950). Reprinted in Peter Gay, ed., The Enlightenment: A Comprehensive Anthology (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 322-325.

Name: _____

Date: _____

The Social Contract

1. What is a philosophe?
2. What is the ironic statement in the first line of “Chapter I?”
3. What is the basis of all rights?
4. How will the master always be able to be “strong enough?” (Two ways)
5. Why do rulers yield to force? (AKA: Why do they use force?)
6. What would happen with impunity to disobedience?
7. What is the only thing that matters according to Rousseau?
8. Why is there no need to obey?
9. What are two things that come from God?
10. What analogy does Rousseau make about individual freedom and obedience?
11. What does not create right (correct)?
12. What are people obliged to obey?