

SUMMARY ANALYSIS

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THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

Rousseau's principal aim in writing *The Social Contract* is to determine how freedom may be possible in civil society, and we might do well to pause briefly and understand what he means by "freedom." In the state of nature we enjoy the physical freedom of having no restraints on our behavior. By entering into the social contract, we place restraints on our behavior, which make it possible to live in a community. By giving up our physical freedom, however, we gain the civil freedom of being able to think rationally. We can put a check on our impulses and desires, and thus learn to think morally. The term "morality" only has significance within the confines of civil society, according to Rousseau.

Not just freedom, then, but also rationality and morality, are only possible within civil society. And civil society, says Rousseau, is only possible if we agree to the social contract. Thus, we do not only have to thank society for the mutual protection and peace it affords us; we also owe our rationality and morality to civil society. In short, we would not be human if we were not active participants in society.

This last step determines the heavily communitarian perspective that Rousseau adopts. If we can only be fully human under the auspices of the social contract, then that contract is more important than the individuals that agree to it. After all, those individuals only have value because they agree to that contract. The contract is not affirmed by each individual separately so much as it is affirmed by the group collectively. Thus, the group collectively is more important than each individual that makes it up. The sovereign and the general will are more important than its subjects and their particular wills. Rousseau goes so far as to speak of the sovereign as a distinct individual that can act of its own accord.

We might react to these arguments with serious reservations, and indeed, Rousseau has been accused of endorsing totalitarianism. We live in an age where individual rights are considered vitally important, and it is insulting to think that we are just small parts of a greater whole. Rather than make freedom possible, it would seem to us that Rousseau's system revokes freedom.

Rousseau would not take these charges lying down, however. Looking at us in the new millennium, he might suggest that we are not free at all. On the whole, we may lack any kind of personal agency or initiative. We often have difficulty interacting with one another in any meaningful way, and it could be argued that our decisions and behavior are largely dictated to us by a consumer culture that discourages individual thought.

His system, he might claim, only seems unattractive to us because we have totally lost the community spirit that makes people want to be together. Citizens in his ideal republic are not forced into a community: they agree to it for their mutual benefit. He might argue that the citizens of ancient Greece and Rome were very active and capable of achievements that we have not come close to emulating since. The community spirit that united them did not intrude upon their individuality; rather, it gave individuality an outlet for its fullest expression.

The best response to Rousseau (aside from pointing out that those societies relied on slavery and exploitation) might be to say that the world has changed since then. We could borrow from social theorist Jurgen Habermas the distinction between the public sphere and the private sphere, and suggest that Rousseau does not give careful enough attention to the latter. Though Rousseau does permit citizens to do whatever they please so long as it does not interfere with public interests, he still seems to assume that human personality is in some way public. He doesn't seem to perceive a distinction between who we are in public and what we are in private. By demanding such active citizenship, he is demanding that our public persona take precedence over our private self.

** Taken from Sparknotes*