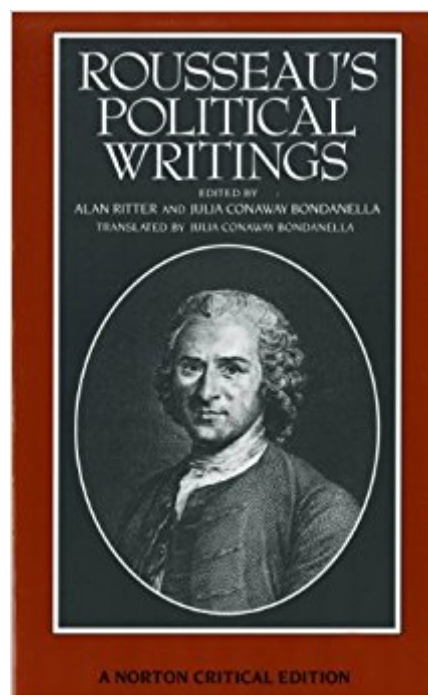


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Rousseau's Political Writings: Discourse On Inequality, Discourse On Political Economy, On Social Contract (Norton Critical Editions)



Synopsis

This Norton Critical Edition includes the three most important of Rousseau's political writings: *Discourse on Inequality*, *Discourse on Political Economy*, and *On Social Contract*. Each piece is fully annotated. Backgrounds includes a sketch of Rousseau's life, selections from his *Confessions*, and comments on Rousseau's work and character from such illustrious contemporaries and early critics as Voltaire, Hume, Boswell and Johnson, Paine, Kant, and Proudhon. Commentaries includes assessments of Rousseau's political thought by a wide variety of scholars and critics including Judith Shklar, Robert Nisbet, Simone Weil, and Benjamin R. Barber.

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My wife needed this book for school

As one of the founders of what we now refer to as the Romantic period or the Romantic movement, we can also see in Rousseau one of the earliest critics of the what we are pleased to call the Enlightenment. When Rousseau claims, in brilliant aphoristic style, that "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains," he is critiquing the Enlightenment project of reason and progress. His claim is that civilization has not, and cannot, live up to its promises. Instead of reason and progress, Rousseau finds ignorance and greed. Rousseau does not see the even darker side of the Enlightenment heritage, utilitarianism and nihilism, but this will come later. As valid as Rousseau's critique of the alienation emanating from our technology dependent progress driven civilization is, he, like Marx, provides a solution that is worse than the problem. Rousseau's critical error in reasoning is in believing that the family is scalable to society. The family unit does not provide a model of or for society. The technical error in reasoning is that of reasoning by analogy. Analogy is the weakest form of argument. Such arguments are weak at best and become progressively weaker as the points of similarity become fewer. Argument by analogy asks us to accept the argument based on one thing being like some other thing. This ultimately relies on an appeal to intuition. We are asked to substitute intuition for reason. This is a very seductive appeal of argument by analogy. Stronger arguments are made with direct argumentation via deduction, induction, abduction in conjunction with the verifiable facts of experience. Contrary to Rousseau's claim, the family is not the oldest and only natural form of government. In the family, it is precisely government which is not needed because the members of the family are personally known to each other. Government is needed to regulate, regularize and maintain non-personal relationships between autonomous societal actors possessing, at least in theory, equal legal and political rights. For Rousseau, the family is a patriarchal structure. As an aside, it would be interesting to know how Rousseau's views would have been different, if at all, if he accepted a matriarchal structure. All the same, each member of the family does not possess equal authority, in practice or in theory. In society, where all members are presumed equal, at least in theory before the law, government is needed to maintain this equilibrium. Rousseau's notion that "Every man has naturally a right to everything he needs" is perfectly sensible given the small scale, intimate

nature, and hierarchical structure of the family unit. This unit however, as well as the natural right to everything one needs, is not scalable to the heterogeneous, broad based, opportunity seeking and equality desiring impersonal nature of society. To this, Rousseau adds that the rights of individual owners to property must give way to the rights of the community in general. In the family, where parents provide for their children, this is feasible and in fact necessary. When applied to mass society, it creates the freeloader problem. Children are of course freeloaders and we do not mind for reasons that are too obvious to be stated. In keeping with Rousseau's style, to say nothing of my admiration of his flair, originality, wit, and sheer panache, I will pay him the greatest compliment by attempting to imitate him in terms of pithy aphorisms, I humbly offer: 1. Everywhere the benefits of liberty are praised, yet nowhere is it practiced. Or 2. Everywhere the failure of government is evident, yet everywhere the intervention of government is demanded. By number 1, I mean that liberty, in its various forms, is desirable as a universal theory though its practice is just as fraught with trouble and unintended consequences as is the equally noble notion of equality in its various incarnations. By number 2, I simply mean that ignorance is the mother of authority.

I have a personal favorite list of the five greatest philosophers to read from a strictly literary perspective. They are: Plato, Fredrick Neitzsche, Rene Descartes, John Stuart Mill, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.* Thus, we may fairly expect *Rousseau's Political Writings* (1988) to contain some lively writing, regardless of what you may think of the contents. And they do. They do. The book (edited by Alan Ritter and Julia Bondanella and translated by Julia Bondanella) is a Norton Critical Edition. It consists of three main parts: A. Original Political Writings by Rousseau, B. Backgrounds (contemporary writings by and on Rousseau), and C. Commentaries (modern critiques of Rousseau). Ordinarily, the main value of a Norton Critical Edition is the third section. But in this book, it proves to be a mild disappointment. The Original Writings are: "The Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality Among Men" (1755), "Discourse on Political Economy" (1755), and *On Social Contract* (1762). The two essays lay the groundwork for the longer work that followed, giving a detailed picture of Rousseau's theory of man's place in the original state of nature. He does not exactly portray such a man as a "noble savage," but his view of man in this state is more positive than that of many other philosophers. Some readers have assumed that Rousseau wants to recapture this state of nature. Not so. Rousseau is mildly nostalgic about it, but he says that it is a long time past. We can't go home again. In these essays, Rousseau develops a remarkable (some would say "preposterous") theme: that ever since the concept of property was invented, man has been headed downward on a slippery slope of inequality and corruption. Most

developments in science, art, and music have added to this corruption and enslavement. Rousseau's ideal state for turning away from all this corruption is Sparta. (I am more of an Athens man myself.) There is, however, in the first essay a marvelous argument for the humane treatment of animals that Rousseau must have just tossed off. We should treat other people humanely, Rousseau argues, not because they are especially rational but because they are creatures of feeling and sensibility. If this is so, then we should treat animals in a similar manner. It could still be used by animal rights activists today. *On Social Contract* was written at the same time as Rousseau's novel *Emile*, and they were published the same year (1762). They were in many ways drastically different books. In *Emile*, Rousseau seemed to be saying, "Sentiment is everything! Feeling is everything! Away with reason!" Yet with *On Social Contract*, Rousseau was writing a tightly reasoned work of political philosophy. Both works managed to offend French Catholics, Genevan Protestants, and materialists all at once. His books were burned. Warrants were sworn out for his arrest in both Paris and Geneva. Rousseau had to seek sanctuary first from Frederick the Great of Prussia and later in England at the invitation of David Hume. The earlier essays were a kind of looking backward: How did we get the way we are? *On Social Contract* is a kind of looking forward: What is the best form of government for mankind today? We should keep in mind that Rousseau's plan was for a fairly small government-- something akin to a Greek city-state or to his home city of Geneva. And while it was for a kind of democracy, it was not for a representative democracy. Rousseau believed that citizens in a representative democracy would surrender all of their rights and abdicate all of their responsibilities. (Looking at our democracy today, I'm inclined to think that Rousseau may have had a point.) *On Social Contract* is divided into four main parts: Book One on the rights of man and an overview of government; Book Two on a discussion of Sovereignty; Book Three on the various forms of existing government; and Book Four on the General Will (which runs Rousseau's Contract form of government and which Rousseau considers almost inviolate). Readers taking a close look at Rousseau's democracy may be surprised. It is a democracy, sure enough. But it is a strangely *authoritarian* democracy. Rousseau's famous words early in the work are: "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains" (85). One would expect Rousseau to be advocating a mellow, anarchistic, do-as-you-will sort of government. No such thing. In practice, Rousseau offers a government that offers more in the way of equality than freedom. Perhaps he felt that that was the best that we could do. The Backgrounds section contains a biography of Rousseau, excerpts from his *Confessions*, and comments (positive and negative) by Voltaire, David Hume, Samuel Johnson, Casanova, Adam Smith, Thomas Paine, Immanuel Kant, Joseph de Maistre, John Adams, Benjamin Constant,

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and Leo Tolstoy. One senses that these men were some of Rousseau's sharpest observers. The modern commentaries are all well-written and thoughtful. But they are all much-of-a-much. They all tend to be democratic, generally positive toward Rousseau, and fairly narrow in their range of interpretations. We could have used an anti-democratic essay, or an anti-Rousseau essay, or an off-trail interpretive essay. We needed more variety among the modern interpreters. Jean Starobinski has a good general study of Rousseau's politics, and Robert Wolff has an excellent critique of part four. Simone Weil's article is interesting, but her plea that we all need to get rid of political parties seems a bit impractical to me. On the balance, though, this remains an excellent introduction to the political writings of one of the major political thinkers of all time.* The absolute worst philosopher from a literary perspective is G.W.F. Hegel. Hands down.

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