



## Teaching Modern Political Philosophy with Joshua Gibbs

Lesson 2: The Social  
Contract by Jean-  
Jacques Rousseau, Pt. 1

### Outline:

#### Jean-Jacques Rousseau

- Born in 1712 in Geneva, a robustly Calvinist city. He lives until 1778.
- Rousseau is not enlightened through and through, but torn between romanticism and enlightened ideas.
  - He believes that reason, not religion, is necessary to found a society.
  - He doesn't believe that secular society has been terribly helpful.
  - He believes that there are still a lot of problems with government.

#### *The Ox Cart Man*, by Donald Hall

- This is a charming story of an isolated agrarian family.
- Ask students if there is anything that does not sit entirely right with them about the story?
- There is nothing pertaining to religion in *The Ox Cart Man*. Religion is wholly absent from the story.
- This is a great depiction of Rousseau thinks of as the good life. This is more of a Romantic way of living the good life.
- The enlightened vision of the good life is about dominance over nature.

#### Rousseau and the Modern Age

- The Modern Age is torn between a Romantic worship of nature and an enlightened desire to dominate and control nature.
  - Obliviating drugs verses drugs to control reason
- Rousseau is never so given to reason so as to set aside nature, but he is never so given to nature so as to set aside reason.
  - Rousseau has Romantic and enlightened tendencies.
- You want to know a little bit about Rousseau, the introduction in the Penguin classics book is sufficient.
- Rousseau converts between Calvinism and Catholicism as it is easy for him.
- He does not seek out fame and fortune but lives according to a moral code.
- He is a great proverbial writer.

#### The Social Contract

- Read every word of the book out loud with the class.



- Read and discuss the book together.
- It is best for the teacher to do the reading (loudly).
- Ask students to pay attention to what Rousseau's philosophy of time is (time, nature, and will).
- If you assign reading for homework, try to assign chapters of less importance. Read more difficult chapters together in class.
- Chapter 1
  - Where does law come from? **Laws come from covenants.** A covenant is a sacred agreement between two parties. Law exists because of consensual agreements.
  - Rousseau is going to argue against a monarchist position.
- Chapter 2
  - Finding the origin of a thing gives us a knowledge of its nature. A knowledge of its nature helps us know what makes a thing thrive.
  - Is it true that the oldest of all societies is that of the family? The first society is not even human, but the society of the triune persons, or the angels, or that shared by Adam and God, or that shared by Adam and Eve and God.
    - What would Rousseau say to that? We need to conceive of government in a way that leaves scripture out of it (a godless government).
    - To have a fair debate about government, everyone has to come to the table as an equal. Set the Bible and religion aside and deal with this on an earthly level.
  - Rousseau is a profoundly consistent philosopher, everything he says is true if this point is true.
  - The family is a natural institution only for a while. What is natural about the state of the family graduates into to the realm of the will.
    - As soon as the child shakes of the yoke of its parents it does better.
  - Rousseau suggests that society can mature and take on greater levels of responsibility.
  - Society has grown up to want to be the government itself. We used to be the toys of the King but we want the kingly power ourselves.
  - In the progressive view of time, society grows up in the way a man grows up. This is the idea that things get better over time. The passage of time confers greater degrees of maturity on people.
    - This argument is sound if the first society is merely human.
  - If the first society is that of God and the angels or God and Adam and Eve, then society has not been always improving. Man is meant to deepen communion with God over time. Dependence on God never goes away.
  - Rousseau sees man's orientation in time as towards the future. The more conservative (ancient) approach is that we don't know what future holds.



- Everything unfolds from this one basic disagreement of whether the first societies are human or are they human and divine.