

The Social Contract Summary

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1-Sentence-Summary: *The Social Contract* is a political piece of writing that serves as a pylon for the democracies of today, as it theorizes the elements of a free state where people agree to coexist with each other under the rules of a common body that represents the general will.

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



In 1762, Rousseau wrote a political piece that set the foundation of modern Western nations. *The Social Contract* theorizes a series of concepts about democracy and the authority of the state which represents the will of the people. If we look around us today, we can see how the majority of states have fulfilled this vision of Rousseau.

However, the representatives are the ones making the decisions, rather than the people. Although popular choice elects them, the power is still in the hands of a few. That is because people are comfortable with sitting on the sidelines, as long as their basic needs are covered.

This is a common issue in our society, as politicians end up having a huge level of power and authority in their hands. When nations reach this state of affairs, it is not the electives who work for the people, but vice-versa. At that point, states are at risk of becoming highly corrupt or even disintegrating.

Therefore, it is crucial that all citizens engage in elections and improve their civic spirit by adopting a more proactive attitude towards their local, regional, and national campaigns. The lessons from this book are invaluable from this point of view, as they help people understand democracy and the power of our collective choices.

Here are my three favorite ones:

1. A state becomes legitimate only if its citizens accept to live in it.
2. The general will of the people should be the law of any legitimate state.
3. People should meet often to express their will and communicate more for better governance.

Lesson 1: A state is legitimate only when its citizens freely accept to live under the rules and policies that come with it.

Rousseau opens his book by criticizing the Europe of his day. He claims that people did not choose where to be born and if they wish to live under the rules and laws of their time and their states. Back then, states were absolute monarchies, and they held the power in their hands.

Nowadays, we can see how although the legal framework of these states has changed, their citizens still aren't completely free. **Our public lives are still regulated by social and legal norms that are meant to keep us civilized and living in harmony.** And more often than not, they are designed to favor the elite rich of our society.

So when is it worth it to give up on some of your liberties and accept living under the imposed law? Expecting something in return is only natural. So we receive lawful order and the protection of a state. Throughout history, leaders gained their power just like a parent over a child, like a law of nature, argued Rousseau.

However, he rejected this presumption and proceeded to think about how leaders had their powers simply because they were the most powerful in their societies. Again, he rejected this hypothesis. Finally, he realized that for a state to have legitimacy and power, the citizens must submit to it freely. Therefore, they engage into a social contract.

Lesson 2: A legitimate state is characterized by the common will of the people.

Rousseau insists on the idea that the sovereign, or the monarchs, should exercise their authority as an expression of the general will of the people. This is where the idea of the social contract originated from. Moreover, the people should be sovereign over the monarchs, and not the opposite.

In a legitimate state, the authority is there to serve the people, because the people name their representatives. Ideally, the people would have to agree with the laws imposed by their elected representatives, as they are there to serve their best interests.

A legitimate state is governed by laws that benefit everybody by preserving their rights, freedoms, and their security as civilians. We are governed by such laws today and we count on them for our safety in society. By passing them, we as a community are enforcing the collective good.

For Rousseau, any state that applies these principles and represents its citizens by enforcing the general will is legitimate. Therefore not only republics but also monarchies can achieve this state. However, monarchies usually have the power, which we should avoid. Ideally, the state should split the power to avoid conflicts of interest.

Lesson 3: Popular assemblies are a good way to express the general will.

In a legitimate state, authoritative bodies split the power. The sovereign and the government have separate roles. The sovereign determines what is the law and the government is responsible for its application.

However, the two are into a competitive relationship, rather than a collaborative one. This is because power can turn around people's intentions and create conflict. This puts the social contract in danger. Protecting the general will does not interest the authorities anymore. They would rather protect their own.

For this reason, it is crucial that the people constantly evaluate their electives and monitor their objectives. For starters, they can meet in assemblies and discuss their ideas in a democratic way. Rousseau advocated for these collective meetings and says they are necessary for a state's well-being.

When people meet, they can discuss proposals, new laws, and their new objectives. Every citizen should be more proactive and participate in their local assemblies, take action in these meetings and become a factor of change.

The Social Contract Review

The political philosophy of Rousseau is an evergreen piece, being as actual today as it was almost three hundred years ago. The concepts presented in the book can empower any citizen to believe in democracy and expand their knowledge of the principles that created it. This book is a must-read for all of us, as it highlights the essential aspects of a free state, which all of us should know and implement in our daily lives.

Who would I recommend The Social Contract summary to?

The preoccupied citizen that wants to learn more about the politics of the democratic states, the person passionate about philosophy and history, or the student who wishes to expand their knowledge in these domains.

