

Montesquieu and Rousseau on the Passions and Politics

Author: Timothy A. Lehmann

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MONTESQUIEU AND ROUSSEAU ON THE PASSIONS AND POLITICS

Timothy A. Lehmann

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Timothy A. Lehmann

Advisor: Christopher Kelly, Ph.D.

The question my dissertation addresses is the relationship between human passions and politics. It attempts to try to understand whether or not there is a standard in nature for judging how human passions ought to be ordered, if at all, taking as guides Montesquieu and Rousseau. I try to see if we can know this standard by reason, and if so, how? And I try to understand whether or not any natural passions might be preserved and ordered well in society. In addition, I try to investigate how society, or various forms of government, modify or transform the natural passions, for good and ill.

In *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu produces an ambitious yet politically practical vision of the best form of government. After evaluating and rejecting ancient republics animated by political virtue, monarchies animated by honor, and despotisms animated by fear as possible candidates for the best form of government, Montesquieu thinks he has found the best form of government in the modern English form of liberal commercial republicanism, rooted in political freedom, commerce, and a moderate and tolerant if diluted form of religion, which might triumph over the globe as the final rational and most humanly satisfying form of government. And according to Montesquieu, the principles of the modern commercial republic adhere to the political standards that have been rationally discovered through the final and correct understanding of men's passions in the state of nature.

Against this confident assertion and the ambitious scope of Montesquieu's goals, nothing less than universal peace and prosperity, and the apparently true knowledge of the best form of government, Rousseau launches a no less ambitious critique of the early modern vision, casting doubt on its political feasibility, and on its awareness of the true core of human nature and happiness. Rousseau ultimately thinks that we cannot order the passions to create a best and enduring government, since human self-interest, irrationality, and corrupt social passions ultimately tend toward oppression, despotism, and universal misery. And according to Rousseau a return to nature is for virtually everyone impossible. I consider Rousseau's account of the same passions that Montesquieu evaluates, which he examines primarily in the *Second Discourse*, *Emile*, *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, and *Political Economy*.

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INTRODUCTION

The question my dissertation addresses is the relationship between human passions and politics. It attempts to try to understand whether or not there is a standard in nature for judging how human passions ought to be ordered, if at all, taking as guides Montesquieu and Rousseau. I try to see if we can know this standard by reason, and if so, how? And I try to understand whether or not any natural passions might be preserved and ordered well in society. In addition, I try to investigate how society, or various forms of government, modify or transform the natural passions, for good and ill. This is a theme that is treated in various ways in the history of political philosophy from Socrates to Hobbes, but according to the two political philosophers whose thought I examine, Montesquieu and Rousseau, it is a theme that has been inadequately understood until their new discoveries. According to Socrates' provisional account of the well-ordered tripartite soul in *The Republic*, the passions are base and irrational and significant effort must be exerted for the higher spirited and rational parts of our souls to rule over our passions. Yet as *The Republic* progresses this provisional account is subjected to a more rigorous examination and by the end of *The Republic* Socrates is skeptical that he can adequately know the nature of the soul and its correct ordering. In contrast to the account in *The Republic*, in *The Symposium* Socrates sets out to examine the nature of the passion of Eros. In that dialogue Socrates claims to know the nature of Eros, a claim in tension

with his paradoxical claim in *The Apology* that he knows nothing. Yet despite his bold claim in *The Symposium*, Socrates seems to think that he dwells in ignorance about the true nature of the soul as a whole, and how the soul's parts, if we can know what they are, might be correctly ordered.

The first modern political philosopher to make knowledge of the passions a main theme of his political philosophy is Hobbes. And in *The Leviathan* Hobbes claims to have discovered the definitive correct understanding of men's natural passions. Hobbes thinks that by the method of "reading" oneself men are capable of discovering an extensive list of passions common to all of humanity, and in *The Leviathan* Hobbes articulates what he thinks these passions are. For Hobbes, all reasonable human beings can feel and know these passions, and the apparent discovery of this rational standard can provide useful guidance for human beings who might find some degree of relative contentment, if not happiness, both individually and in the kind of government that Hobbes prescribes. According to Hobbes, by taking our bearings from a new understanding of human nature, reason can help us order the passions and know how best to satisfy men's most pressing desire—namely, the desire to flee death until it inevitably consumes us. For Hobbes, the passions are ultimately what drive all men—as he puts it, reason is in the end the "scout and spy" of the passions—and a man without passions is effectively dead. Needless to say, Hobbes' account is very far from Socrates' tripartite soul and the soul that longs for virtue and eternity, understandings which profoundly influenced the ancient, medieval, and monotheistic traditions' conceptions of morality and the good life. According to the older traditions, and following the lead of the Socratic teaching, the passions are low,

bad, and often sinful, and must be mastered and domineered over by the better parts of our souls.

Although Machiavelli, the founder of modern political philosophy, does not speak as explicitly of the passions as other philosophers, he effectively begins the critique of the older traditions' view of the passions, especially, in my view, in *The Prince*, in chapter 18, where Machiavelli outspokenly speaks of the naturalness and the amorality of men's beastlike nature. According to Machiavelli, ancient philosophers may have subtly and guardedly alluded to this truth—e.g., Socrates' taming of the beastlike, semi-rational, and passionately indignant Thrasymachus in Book I of *The Republic*. But Machiavelli brings this theme to the fore and in the open, for his heirs to examine more fully, heirs such as Hobbes, Montesquieu, and Rousseau.

Montesquieu takes his bearings from Hobbes' starting point and his method, but he judges that Hobbes got some important things about the passions wrong. According to Montesquieu, while Hobbes got some things right, such as men naturally fearing death and not naturally loving virtue, he was ultimately wrong about the state of nature, about the possible forms of government, and about the best form of government outside the state of nature. In particular, Montesquieu thinks that Hobbes underestimated how much political freedom is in fact compatible with security and political stability. Rousseau, too, thinks Hobbes got some things right while getting much wrong, but Rousseau also thinks Montesquieu got some important things wrong, both about the passions of the natural man, and about how successfully human passions might be directed in society, outside the state of nature.

This is an important theme because it is an important and eternally vexing problem for human self-knowledge. Solving well this problem is potentially the key to human happiness and contentment. However, if we miss the mark or are too easily satisfied with facile or false perspectives, we expose ourselves to illusion and misery, perhaps without being aware of it. And in Montesquieu's conception, at least, solving this question provides the key to knowledge of *the* best form of government, the guiding question of political philosophy since its Socratic origins. And while Rousseau is considerably less hopeful than Montesquieu about the practicability of the best form of government—to say nothing about the goodness of its content—he agrees that knowledge of the original natural passions and the way they are transformed in society is the key to self-knowledge, and to knowing how we might preserve or recover happiness, despite the immense and perhaps insurmountable obstacles to doing so.

My theme has been dealt with to some degree by other scholars, but in my view it has not yet been given adequate treatment. Pierre Manent, in *The City of Man* calls attention to the psychological aspect of Montesquieu's account of human nature and the passions, and in particular Montesquieu's account of virtue, and he helpfully points to Montesquieu's paradoxical equation of virtue with the behavior of monks, and the subtle ambiguities and implications of this understanding. Manent is also insightful in linking Montesquieu's conception of virtue with that of Rousseau. However, while Montesquieu seeks to unmask how horrible and unnaturally painful virtue is, and to persuade legislators to be partisans of new commercial republics in which such painful sacrifices are dispensed with or at least minimized, Rousseau seeks to promote some attachment to virtue in *Emile*. Yet while Manent's analysis of the passion of virtue is penetrating and

thought-provoking, Manent does not give a comparable account of the other natural and social passions that Montesquieu and Rousseau both consider the primary passions. I try to show both how and why Rousseau wants Emile to be attached to virtue, as well as the quasi-natural basis for his attachment, and to give an account of the other primary passions.

Thomas Pangle's two books on Montesquieu's political philosophy, *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism* and *The Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity in Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws* are profound reflections on Montesquieu's political philosophy, and are especially useful in uncovering Montesquieu's subtle and complicated account of human nature and pre-political natural man. But while Pangle's books are useful for understanding Montesquieu's new political science as a whole and offer a number of thought-provoking reflections on Montesquieu's understanding of the passions in *The Spirit of the Laws*, I try to provide a more systematic reflection on the passions than Pangle does.

Paul Rahe's *Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville, and the Modern Prospect* is an especially ambitious book that provides much 18th and 19th century political history. Like Manent and Pangle, Rahe also notes the importance of what he calls the "political psychology" of Montesquieu and Rousseau and the explicit focus on the passions in the projects of Montesquieu and Rousseau. But Rahe takes his bearings in his interpretation of Rousseau from *The Social Contract*, a book in which Rousseau pays comparatively little attention to the passions, and he does not give the kind of comprehensive analysis of the passions that Rousseau elsewhere provides, especially in *The Second Discourse* and *Emile*. I think a fuller treatment of the debate

over the passions between Montesquieu and Rousseau can be made more explicit, and a more adequate treatment of Montesquieu's natural man and Emile's political psychology is needed than Rahe offers.

John T. Scott's *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Critical Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers* contains essays on various aspects of Rousseau's thought, the most important of which, for my purposes, are Eve Grace's "The restlessness of 'being': Rousseau's protean sentiment of existence" and Timothy O'Hagan's "One Six Facets of *Amour-Propre*." Grace's essay is particularly helpful for the way it treats Rousseau's concept of the sentiment of existence, a central but difficult and ambiguous concept in Rousseau's thought. Building on Grace's analysis, I try to show that according to Rousseau Emile will feel the sentiment of existence throughout his life, a sentiment that inhabitants of Montesquieu's various forms of government, Rousseau argues, are almost certainly incapable of feeling. I try to show why and how Emile will feel it, both in nature and in society. O'Hagan's essay is helpful in showing the psychological ambiguities with regard to *amour-propre*, the way in which *amour-propre* can be developed and managed in healthy and unhealthy ways, and the way in which, as O'Hagan argues, *amour-propre* is the "key" to Emile's socialization. I attempt to supply a fuller treatment of Rousseau's account of *amour-propre*, both in *Emile* and in Rousseau's practical recommendations to Polish legislators. Anne Cohler's *Rousseau and Nationalism* offers an extended reflection on Rousseau's defense of a kind of nationalism. However, her book devotes only a relatively small section to Rousseau's advice to Polish legislators, and in any case she does not focus as much on the importance of the passions for this project as I try to do.

Among other books devoted to Rousseau, several are especially germane to my project. Laurence Cooper, in his book *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*, tries to figure out what Rousseau's answer to the question of the best life really is. In Cooper's account, Rousseau's final answer is ambiguous, since he gives his readers three models of the best life, each of which can plausibly claim to be the best—the exemplary citizen (for instance, a model Roman citizen who submits all to the good of the city), the natural man who lives relatively independently yet well in society (i.e., Emile), and the rare solitary dreamer who through his genius manages to liberate himself from social illusions and return to nature (i.e., Rousseau himself). While Cooper's book is a helpful aid to understanding the paradoxes and implications of Rousseau's moral psychology, I try to give a fuller treatment of Emile's passions than Cooper does. In particular, I think Cooper misses the mark at times with regard to Rousseau's understanding of *amour-propre*, and he does not always pay sufficient attention to the importance of the first three books of *Emile* in his interpretation of the final two books of *Emile*. In *Frail Happiness*, Tzvetan Todorov, like Cooper, argues that Rousseau sees three human types as possible candidates for the best life—the good and dutiful citizen, the cosmopolitan and solitary individual, and the healthiest possible “moral individual,” i.e., Emile. While Todorov's analysis is a helpful beginning point, his book is quite small, and he does not say as much about how Emile's initially natural passions are developed into those of a “moral being” as I think the subject warrants. Arthur Melzer's book *The Natural Goodness of Man* effectively lays out Rousseau's argument for men's “natural goodness,” and he follows this account with a discussion of the ways in which men become corrupted in society. Yet while Melzer rightly claims that Emile is a “true masterpiece of psychological

engineering,” and thus offers a potential solution to the near-impossible task of maintaining natural goodness within society, in my view Melzer does not spend enough time explaining precisely how this solution comes about. I try to say more about the ordering of Emile’s passions than the few pages that Melzer devotes to the topic.

The preceding books and articles come closest in intention to my project of all the scholarly material that I consulted. It was in considering them as a whole that I became persuaded that my project may be useful. I consulted many other helpful sources, which are listed in my bibliography.

A comparison of Montesquieu and Rousseau on the passions in particular is worth considering, I think, because with Montesquieu the principles of the early modern political project are refined perhaps as much as they can be. Modifying the political principles of Hobbes, and Locke, Montesquieu produces an ambitious yet politically practical vision of the best form of government. Using modern England as his model and blueprint, Montesquieu thinks that the modern English form of liberal commercial republicanism, rooted in political freedom, commerce, and a moderate and diluted form of religion, might triumph over the globe as the final rational and most humanly satisfying form of government. And according to Montesquieu, these principles adhere to the political standards that have been rationally discovered through the final and correct understanding of men’s passions in the state of nature.

Against this confident assertion and the ambitious scope of Montesquieu’s goals, nothing less than universal peace and prosperity, and the apparently true knowledge of the best form of government, Rousseau launches a no less ambitious critique of the early modern vision, casting doubt on its political feasibility, and on its awareness of the true

core of human nature and happiness. Rousseau ultimately thinks that we cannot order the passions to create a best and enduring government, since human self-interest, irrationality, and corrupt social passions ultimately tend toward oppression, despotism, and universal misery. And according to Rousseau a return to nature is for virtually everyone impossible.

But the comparison of Montesquieu and Rousseau is also particularly worth doing because they both start at very similar starting points. They both insist on returning to the state of nature, they agree on the method for discovering or recovering natural man, and they agree to some extent about the content of our natural passions. But while they identify many of the same or similar passions as intrinsic to human nature, or to social human beings, they often come to radically different conclusions regarding the goodness or badness of these passions. To give just one brief example here with far-reaching implications, Montesquieu thinks that honor or the desire to be esteemed highly by others has almost exclusively positive social and political consequences. Rousseau strongly disagrees with this evaluation of human pride, to say the least.

This comparison is worth doing, too, at a more personal level, for the insights it provides to those of us concerned with living our lives well. After all, both Montesquieu and Rousseau are united in arguing that these passions are somehow universal components of the human soul, and to be human is to feel them. To know them well and to put them potentially in their correct place may be the key to our happiness, the ignorance of which may keep us unwittingly enchained to misery.

I see the argument of my dissertation unfolding in the following way. I begin by examining the way in which Montesquieu recurs to the state of nature—Hobbes' starting

point for knowledge of the natural passions—to try to understand Montesquieu’s account of the correct rational standard for men’s psychological-political satisfaction.

Montesquieu modifies Hobbes’ account, but he appropriates Hobbes’ method, an inference into one’s own core passions. Yet Montesquieu fundamentally disagrees with Hobbes’ and ancient philosophy’s understanding of men’s natural state, especially regarding the origins of competitiveness and bellicosity.

After offering a new standard for the satisfaction for men’s psychological-political needs, Montesquieu proceeds to investigate a few fundamental political alternatives as solutions to those needs, which, in contrast to the Aristotelian view, for example, according to Montesquieu exhaust all possible forms of government. And his investigation, I try to argue, is driven by a quest to find the one best rational form of government that can best satisfy men’s psychological-political needs. Montesquieu attempts to uncover the degree to which the possible forms of government satisfy or fail to satisfy men’s basic needs—and in particular, as Montesquieu shows, the desire for security against death. I follow Montesquieu’s systematic examination of the possible forms of government.

The first form of government that Montesquieu examines, the ancient republic best exemplified by Sparta, is animated by the passion of virtue, an artificial passion that compels devotion to the common good and demands a painful and near-total renunciation of private goods. As Montesquieu obliquely suggests, the ancient republic’s promotion of painful self-repression is highly unnatural and a perversion of our original nature. Next, Montesquieu examines monarchy, the animating passion of which is honor. Montesquieu has a generally favorable view of monarchy, and though according to his original

standard honor is unnatural, monarchy is capable of producing politically attractive results, especially security and stability, through a government-wide boost in self-regard. Montesquieu next examines despotism. According to Montesquieu it is the form of government that naturally follows from unenlightened human nature. For this reason it is an extremely common form of government historically, and it is also a perhaps unavoidable form of government if certain conditions are present, despite knowledge of good political principles. In a despotism fear is the passion that animates the government, both the people and even the ruler and his administrators. Yet because naturally men want to flee fear, despotism fails to satisfy human nature. The final possible form of government that Montesquieu evaluates is the modern, liberal, commercial republic, best exemplified by modern England, which according to Montesquieu is the best and most rational form of government possible, even if it seems to have arisen as if by historical accident. The commercial republic, Montesquieu suggests, is the best and most rational form of government since it allows the greatest amount of natural freedom, pleasure, security, and political stability. In Montesquieu's view, the commercial republic allows men to be free to the greatest extent that is compatible with stable political institutions, and in his view Hobbes significantly underestimated the degree to which political freedom is compatible with security and stability. And furthermore Montesquieu argues that commercial republics might be founded in far more parts of the world than might be expected, even if there are perhaps some insurmountable constraints to that project.

Just as Montesquieu was making this powerful and politically influential argument, Rousseau offered a powerful critique of Montesquieu's argument, as well as of all previous political philosophers. Rousseau begins with Hobbes and Montesquieu by

recurring to the state of nature, but Rousseau modifies their accounts by focusing on a new understanding of two core passions, *amour de soi* and compassion. *Amour de soi* has to do with an instinctive desire for self-preservation and well-being, without regard to the well-being of others, and compassion has to do with an instinctive desire not to see other similar sentient beings suffer, and to help them preserve themselves and relieve them from suffering as long as this does not prevent one's own preservation and well-being.

I turn then to Rousseau's account of the same passions that Montesquieu examines in roughly the same order, in an effort to better understand Rousseau's critique of Montesquieu's analysis of these passions. Broadly speaking, Rousseau is skeptical of Montesquieu's judgment that reason can establish the principles of the best form of government, order each individual's passions in a socially healthy way, and bring the best regime into existence on a near-worldwide scale. Instead of correcting Montesquieu's project on the level of the best form of government, Rousseau turns to the experimental project of raising an individual, Emile, a natural man raised for himself and who will eventually live in society, more or less the kind of society that Montesquieu thinks is best, and which Rousseau thinks is not especially good. Rousseau's fundamental question in embarking on this project is the following: What might a man raised entirely for himself, according to nature, be for others? As I try to show, Rousseau foresees far more tensions and difficulties than Montesquieu does regarding the question of the degree to which individuals might find satisfaction and contentment in society. In tracing the same passions that Montesquieu examines, I begin by considering Rousseau's account of the transformation of Emile's natural virtue into a quasi-political virtue. I try to give an account of the paradox of Emilian virtue, which turns out to be a concern for others

constructed on the basis of natural strength and somewhat natural familial affections. Next, I consider Rousseau's treatment of *amour-propre*, which corresponds closely with Montesquieu's analysis of honor. Rousseau has an ambiguous evaluation of *amour-propre*, since while it is an inevitable social passion, it has both positive and negative features. In Rousseau's view while it has mostly negative social consequences and can never be fully satisfied, it has a positive role in romantic love and can be used to help foster a healthy patriotism. I consider next Rousseau's treatment of fear. For Rousseau, fear is a negative passion that can to some degree be overcome through experience and knowledge. I consider how Rousseau manages and defuses Emile's nascent fear, and I also consider Rousseau's critique of the tendency of modern politics toward a fear-based despotism, which Rousseau thinks Montesquieu failed to understand adequately.

According to Rousseau, modern politics, which bases itself on natural self-interest, inevitably tends toward promoting force and fear. In Rousseau's view, the natural desire to advance one's interest leads to the desire for unrestrained power and the manipulation of others. This situation demands an ever-stronger, fear-based despotism, that keeps order but at the expense of natural independence. A powerful government must prevent a return to the violent Hobbesian state of nature, and the ruling class naturally finds its interest in power and exploitation.

Finally, I consider Rousseau's analysis of compassion, a passion that Montesquieu and other early modern political philosophers largely overlooked. Rousseau thinks that the modern commercial societies promoted by Montesquieu are most likely here to stay, and that their nature promotes wildly fluctuating fortunes for the men who live in them. Compassion, a passion men feel strongly in the state of nature, can help

foster greater concern for the well-being of others, and to induce them to be less cruel to each other. In Rousseau's view compassion is a pre-rational passion that can be preserved to some degree in society, and which can help form the basis of a healthy morality. However, without consciously fostering it, compassion gradually tends to lose force in the souls of social men.

By evaluating all the passions that Montesquieu does, Rousseau offers a point by point response to Montesquieu's argument. Ultimately, as I try to show, Rousseau is far more pessimistic about preserving the natural passions in a well-ordered society than the more hopeful Montesquieu.

1.0 MONTESQUIEU ON THE NATURAL PASSIONS

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of political thought there has been a general consensus that understanding human passions is important in helping us understand what it means to be human. However, opinions regarding the relative goodness of the passions have diverged sharply. Although in some cases their treatment of the goodness of the passions is ambiguous (for instance, in Plato's *Symposium* where Socrates speaks generally positively of *eros*, which he claims is the only being he genuinely knows), classical political philosophers—at least at first blush—seem to regard the passions as parts of the human soul that must be overcome or tamed in order for a soul to be healthy and fully human. For instance, in Plato's *Republic*, Socrates succeeds in persuading Glaucon to accept the thesis that a healthy human soul ought to be governed by reason, which is in turn aided by spiritedness (*thymos*) in harnessing men's base passions.¹ And in Socrates' account, when vicious passions rule, the soul is ill ordered and there is a “sickness, ugliness, and weakness” to the soul.² Aristotle, although his ultimate stance too is ambiguous, generally follows Plato's lead in looking down on the passions as parts of our nature that must be subdued in order for a human soul to be healthy. For instance, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle claims that “the person lacking self-restraint, knowing that what he does is base, acts on account of his *passion*, while the self-restrained person,

¹ Plato, *Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 441d-445e.

² Plato, *Republic*, 444d.

knowing his desires are base, does not follow them, on account of his reason”.³ And in the Christian tradition, inspired at least in part by the classics, Augustine, for one, reviles men’s “wicked passions,”⁴ which purportedly keep men from divinely sanctioned ways of life.

By contrast, modern thinkers do not criticize the passions so harshly as did the classics. Indeed, modern thinkers even see the passions as parts of our nature that ought to be treated matter-of-factly without being unnaturally constrained or beaten down. Hobbes, for instance, offers a long list of passions,⁵ and bases his political theory on unleashing and ordering the passions in a peaceful manner.⁶ As I will show below, Montesquieu, like other modern thinkers, looks favorably on the passions. And this is pertinent to my broader purpose, which is to show that, as we will see, various governments are judged by Montesquieu according to whether or not they fulfill certain basic needs of human nature, as they relate to the passions. Yet before giving an account of Montesquieu’s views on the passions, I will first turn to what, according to Montesquieu, is the best way to begin to understand the passions, as well as indicate some significant obstacles to that endeavor.

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1145b10; my emphasis.

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 38.

⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 37-46.

⁶ Hobbes even treats courage, a virtue according to the classics, as if it were only a passion. Consider Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 41.

1.2 MONTESQUIEU'S METHOD AND SOME OBSTACLES TO UNDERSTANDING OUR NATURE

One of the most striking aspects of Montesquieu's thought is its analysis of nature and in particular human nature. Yet Montesquieu also emphasizes the difficulty involved in understanding precisely what human nature at bottom consists in. That Montesquieu thinks there is such a thing as human nature is clear—as he puts it in the preface to *The Spirit of the Laws*, “Every man has a nature.”⁷ Yet while Montesquieu is hardly the first political philosopher to argue on behalf of some understanding of human nature, he seems to have a peculiar method for understanding it, which to some degree overlaps with his predecessors (in particular Hobbes, and the way in which Hobbes claimed to have discovered the nature of man via an “inference from the passions”⁸) and to some degree diverges with them in their conclusions about human nature.

In trying to understand Montesquieu's method, I will begin where Montesquieu begins. In the preface to *The Spirit of the Laws* Montesquieu describes his beginning point for his project in these terms: “I began by examining men, and I believed that, amidst the infinite diversity of laws and mores, they were not led by their fancies alone”.⁹ That is, Montesquieu concedes that while men are often led (or misled) by irrational fancies, there is something higher and possibly more solid by which man can be guided. What that something seems to be are the rational “principles” that Montesquieu has discovered and described in his book, and which can serve the reader as a kind of guide

⁷ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), preface.

⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 89.

⁹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, preface.

to Montesquieu's understanding of human nature and the various forms of government that he analyzes in this book.

While most men are indeed led by their "fancies," Montesquieu himself claims to be guided by a singular rational understanding rooted in nature itself: "I did not draw my principles from my *prejudices* but from the *nature* of things."¹⁰ Nature as Montesquieu describes it seems to be something both fixed and also something by which we might take our bearings in understanding ourselves, and the world around us. And Montesquieu focuses on the need for self-knowledge by defining prejudice in the following way: "Here I call prejudices not what makes one unaware of certain things but what makes one unaware of *oneself*".¹¹

To be sure, Montesquieu is not the first political philosopher to argue that there is a fixed nature of things that transcends our mere prejudices or fancies and can serve as a standard or guide in understanding the world. In *The Republic*, Socrates likens the philosophic quest to a dialectical ascent via our ordinary moral and political opinions to an understanding of the natures of things as they truly are, which transcend convention or "the cave," which, in Montesquieu's language, is full of prejudices or "fancies."¹² Yet Montesquieu's method and means of verifying his principles seem more akin to Hobbes and other modern thinkers than to that of Socrates and other classical thinkers. For Montesquieu emphasizes inner sentiment in verifying his principles. As he puts it in the Preface, "Many of the truths will make themselves *felt* here only when one sees the chain

¹⁰ Ibid.; my emphasis.

¹¹ Ibid.; my emphasis.

¹² Plato, *Republic*, 514a-515c.

connecting them with the others.”¹³ In his emphasis on inner sentiment in addition to rationally observing the world by drawing connections and conclusions based on reason, Montesquieu seems close to Hobbes, who urges his readers to “Read thyself,” that is, read one’s inner sentiments in order to know what the nature of man truly is.¹⁴ According to both Hobbes and Montesquieu, men’s nature can be known through an introspective “inference from the passions.” This is to say that Montesquieu thinks his truths will be *felt* via introspective sentiment by observing his principles and then engaging in a kind of self-interrogation of our inner sentiments. We need reason to understand the exterior world rationally but in addition we need our inner sentiments to understand that world—or to put it another way we need both our heads and our hearts in order fully to evaluate Montesquieu’s novel teaching and the world around us.

This is certainly an extraordinarily difficult undertaking. Hobbes had argued that full knowledge of the principles of human nature is extremely difficult to acquire—it is, according to Hobbes, “hard to do, harder to do than to learn any Language, or Science.”¹⁵ Yet in order to begin to understand Montesquieu’s teaching, which is meant to supercede Hobbes’, we must be able to follow his rational arguments and principles, observe the world around us, interrogate our interior sentiments via a kind of introspective reasoning, and attempt to overcome our own prejudices to the degree that we are capable—all while bearing in mind that we cannot simply defer to Montesquieu’s judgment on the weightiest of matters. Indeed, we must be alert to the possibility that Montesquieu

¹³ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, preface.

¹⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 10. Cf. Bertrand Binoche, *Introduction à De l’esprit des lois de Montesquieu*, pp. 32-33.

¹⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 11.

himself may have been unable, in the last analysis, to overcome his own prejudices and fancies. Yet however difficult the task, I, like Montesquieu, seek to overcome my own prejudices and understand human nature and the nature of political life as they really are, and to do so following Montesquieu's lead.

According to Montesquieu, the task of knowing human nature as it really is is an extraordinarily difficult undertaking because man has a certain protean quality about him, and he is difficult to pin down and know at bottom. As Montesquieu puts it in the Preface, "Man, that flexible being, who adapts himself in society to the thoughts and impressions of others, is equally capable of *knowing his own nature* when it is *shown to him*, and of losing even the *feeling* of it when it is concealed from him."¹⁶ Montesquieu thus claims to be able to understand our selves better, and more precisely to know the core of human nature better than any previous thinker. The great danger, however, is that it is so easy to be mistaken or misled about these matters—we so easily defer to others' opinions and prejudices (especially the opinions and prejudices of those who surround and form us in society), and perhaps most dangerously, we too easily lose the *feeling* of human nature, which, according to Montesquieu, is the most palpable way to understanding human nature.

Given these dangers and obstacles that Montesquieu describes at the outset, what practical guidance does he offer for the reader who wants to know his account of human nature and politics? Montesquieu counsels careful reading and reflection as the most trustworthy way both to understand both his ideas and the truth: "The more one *reflects*

¹⁶ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, preface.

on the details, the more one will *feel certainty of the principles*.”¹⁷ Careful reading and reflection combined with careful introspection and interrogation of our inner sentiments are thus, in Montesquieu’s account, the best training in understanding Montesquieu’s principles of human nature and politics. And Montesquieu is emphatic about the truth of his observations in this work, which took him twenty years to finish¹⁸—in Montesquieu’s view if one understands his work and our selves correctly one will have *the key* to understanding the core of human nature and political life: “I have set down the principles [of human nature and political life] and I have seen particular cases conform to them as if by themselves.” Furthermore, “the histories of *all nations*”¹⁹ are merely the consequences of Montesquieu’s principles.

Before turning to Montesquieu’s analysis of men living within society, I will first consider Montesquieu’s account of pre-political natural man, bearing in mind the hints and guidance that Montesquieu has given the reader about how to read his book. If he is correct in his principles and observations, as he argues, we will be in possession of nothing less than the truth about human nature and the nature of politics.

1.3 HUMAN NATURE, NATURAL LAW, AND NATURAL MAN’S PSYCHOLOGY

In chapter one of the first book of *The Spirit of the Laws*, titled “On laws in their relation with the various beings,” Montesquieu begins his account of human nature by

¹⁷ Ibid.; my emphasis.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.; my emphasis.

situating man within the whole of things or the universe. And he begins his account of the whole by an account of laws that are driven by necessity—“Laws, taken in their broadest meaning, are the *necessary* relations deriving from the *nature of things*, and in this sense, all beings have their laws”.²⁰ Montesquieu thus calls attention to necessity at work in the universe.²¹ All the beings, furthermore, have their own necessary laws and he divides beings here into five types—the divine beings, “intelligences superior to man,” beings of

²⁰ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.1.1; my emphasis. The following works provide useful commentaries on the first book: David Lowenthal, “Book I of Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws*,” *American Political Science Review* 53 (June 1959): 485–98; Thomas Pangle, *Montesquieu’s Philosophy of Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 20–47; Michael Zuckert, “Natural Law, Natural Rights, and Classical Liberalism: On Montesquieu’s Critique of Hobbes,” in *Natural Law and Modern Moral Philosophy*, ed. Ellen Frankel, Fred D. Miller, Jr., and Jeffrey Paul (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press); Stuart D. Warner, “Montesquieu’s Prelude: An Interpretation of Book I of *The Spirit of the Laws*,” in *Enlightening Revolutions: Essays in Honor of Ralph Lerner*, ed. Svetozar Minkov (Lanham, MD: Lexington, Books, 2006); Stanley Rosen, “Politics and Nature in Montesquieu,” in *The Elusiveness of the Ordinary: Essays in the Possibility of Philosophy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 14–53; George Klosko, “Montesquieu’s Science of Politics: Absolute Values and Ethical Relativism in *L’Esprit des lois*,” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 189 (1980): 153–77; Sharon R. Krause, “History and the Human Soul in Montesquieu,” *History of Political Thought* 24 (Summer 2003): 235–61; Sharon R. Krause, “Laws, Passion, and the Attractions of Right Action in Montesquieu,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 32, no. 2 (2006): 211–30; Bertrand Binoche, *Introduction à De l’esprit des lois de Montesquieu* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1988), 31–71; Mark H. Waddicor, *Montesquieu and the Philosophy of Natural Law* (New York: Springer, 1970), 65–99; Pierre Rétat, “Les Ambiguités de la Notion de Loi chez Montesquieu: Analyse du Livre I de *L’Esprit des Lois*,” in *De la Tyrannie au Totalitarisme : Recherches sur les Ambiguités de la Philosophie Politique*, ed. Marie Cariou (Lyon : L’Hermès, 1986), 125–135; Jean Goldzink, “Sur le chapitre 1, du livre 1, de l’*Esprit des lois* de Montesquieu,” in *Analyses et Réflexions sur Montesquieu, De L’Esprit des Lois : la Nature et la Loi* (Paris : Ellipses, 1987), 107–119.

²¹ In doing so, Montesquieu drew the charge of Spinozism. Montesquieu, « *Défense de L’Esprit des Lois* » in *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris : Gallimard/Bibliothèque De La Pléiade, 1951), première partie.

the material world, beasts, and finally man.²² What is most important in this chapter for my purpose is the fact that, according to Montesquieu, there is a kind of natural justice in the world, even if it is not always in existence. As he says, “Before laws were made, there were *possible relations of justice*.”²³ Montesquieu argues that if one claims that there is nothing intrinsically just except for what positive laws claim to be just, it would be (to use the geometrical metaphor that Montesquieu uses) to say that before a circle was drawn its radii were unequal. This is to say that political justice—akin to geometry—exists in the world; a certain true understanding of justice exists by nature. Montesquieu’s account as to what this natural justice consists in is oblique at this point in the book. His examples here of natural justice are that if an intelligent being receives a kindness it ought to be grateful for it; if an intelligent being “creates” another intelligent being the latter ought to remain in its original dependence to the former; and an intelligent being who does harm to another intelligent being deserves the same harm in return.

In this chapter, furthermore, Montesquieu divides the beings another way, into two kinds—physical and intelligent—and in his account man seems to partake of aspects of both physical and intelligent beings. Man is thus a kind of compound being of the physical world and its laws and the intelligent world and its laws.²⁴ And Montesquieu begins to articulate the core of human nature in describing the nature of intelligent beings. In Montesquieu’s view, “*Particular* [i.e., individual] intelligent beings [e.g.,

²² As Pangle notes, Montesquieu never again mentions “intelligences superior to man,” i.e. presumably angels, after this single time. Pangle, *Montesquieu’s Philosophy of Liberalism*, 25.

²³ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.1.1.; my emphasis.

²⁴ Binoche observes that men are less subject to necessity in Montesquieu’s account than any other beings are. See Binoche, *Introduction à De l’esprit des lois de Montesquieu*, 37.

humans] are limited in their nature and are consequently subject to error.”²⁵ That is, even intelligent beings such as humans lack perfection—they are fundamentally limited (e.g., in the extent of their knowledge) and because of this limitation are prone to errors. In addition, by nature intelligent beings “act by themselves.”²⁶

In addition to being an intelligent being, man seems to share some things by nature with beasts—for instance both men and beasts desire to preserve themselves and desire pleasure. Men are like beasts who “by the attraction of pleasure...preserve their particular being and their species.”²⁷ However, Montesquieu draws some telling comparisons between beasts and men. Beasts in some ways have advantages that humans do not have. For instance, they do not have men’s natural fears and irrational “expectations” or “hopes”: “*espoirs*.”²⁸ And although they too by necessity die, it is without “recognizing” the fact of death as men do. Most beasts also “preserve themselves” better than men do and notably “don’t make such bad use of their passions.”²⁹ This is the first mention in *The Spirit of the Laws* of “passions,” a book one of the major themes of which is “the passions.” Although Montesquieu is silent here as to which passions he has in mind, it seems that beasts have a carefree existence from birth to death, and they lack men’s anxiety about impending death. By contrast, human beings, with their limited intelligence, are complex and self-conscious beings, and because of their intelligence are easily subject to error, including the error of using their passions badly. In this context, Montesquieu seems to turn the traditional animus that classical

²⁵ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.1.1; my emphasis.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

philosophers and traditional religious thinkers had against the passions on its head. Whereas classical philosophy and traditional religious thinkers looked down on the passions as something beast-like within us that must be overcome or destroyed, Montesquieu elevates the beasts *above* men when it comes to the use of the passions—the passions are not things to be kept under control or possibly destroyed, but things which must be used well and which the beasts actually do a better job of managing than men do.

Yet it is as an intelligent being that Montesquieu describes human nature in a way that is particularly revealing, and in a way that helps potential legislators who want to know what the core of human nature is. Montesquieu's account of human nature, is, viewed from a traditional standpoint, rather “low”—for instance, Montesquieu notes how men constantly violate “the laws god has established” (this could mean both the rational laws of nature³⁰ or established religious laws which claim to originate in god's will) and constantly change the laws that men themselves establish.³¹ In this account of human nature Montesquieu points to something in men that chafes at living under difficult or unnecessary laws, and even under established reasonable laws: men simply want to follow their interest as they conceive of it and do as they please without being constrained by what they consider unnecessary laws, which men always seek to change. There is also something in men that seeks novel laws—men seek to change the laws that have already been established in the hopes that new laws will be more advantageous to them. And men are “compelled to guide themselves” in the world—i.e., they receive no

³⁰ As Pangle notes, Montesquieu identifies “god” not with the Biblical god but apparently with “primitive reason.” Thomas Pangle, *The Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity in Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws*, 17–18.

³¹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.1.1.

benefit of divine assistance in guidance but must guide themselves—and yet, as we have seen, men are “limited beings” who are not particularly good at guiding themselves. Montesquieu is emphatic that men are subject to error due to their limited intelligence, and thus men are prone to losing even the finite intelligence that they possess.

As we have already seen, men make bad use of their passions, and because man is a “feeling creature” he “falls subject to a thousand passions.”³² Montesquieu’s tone here at first glance seems to be negative or critical toward the passions and in line with the traditional critique of the passions as aspects of our nature that are “low” and need to be conquered. Yet Montesquieu never suggests that men’s passions must be overcome or subdued by something purportedly higher in the human soul. In Montesquieu’s view of it, legislators and those interested in what it means to be human must know the passions and how they fit into an account of what it means to be human. In addition to being subject to “a thousand passions,” men are so prone to ignorance and error that “at any moment” a man could “forget himself.” Men are prone to a forgetfulness of their nature that can strike literally at any moment. Even with knowledge of what human nature is and what its needs are, men are capable of forgetting and disregarding what their nature consists in and what it requires for its satisfaction. The problem for men at bottom, then, is their forgetfulness of their own nature, and not the viciousness of their passions.

Yet despite men’s individual and apolitical nature at its core (Montesquieu follows both Hobbes and Locke in this regard), man is also “made for living in society.”³³ In other words, men become social beings, but they do not find their

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

perfection in political life. This statement amounts to, when combined with the fact of man's natural individualism, a kind of "asocial sociability," as Kant described the phenomenon.³⁴ Although man is fundamentally an individual, individual men outside the state of nature must live together in some way. Yet because men are fundamentally self-interested individuals, within any society an individual man can easily "forget his fellows,"³⁵ or can regard his own self-interest as paramount and regard the interests of his fellow men as less important or even forgettable compared to his own.³⁶ Because of this deeply ingrained individualism, it is up to legislators to try to "return" men to their duties by political and civil laws. Montesquieu is silent here as to what such duties must or should consist in, yet because man is made for living in society, following some kind of political duties seems to be an intrinsic part of political and thus human life, at least as Montesquieu presents the matter at this early stage in the book. To what degree duties should constrain men is a question to which Montesquieu will recur throughout the book.

Prior to these more general laws of the universe are what Montesquieu calls the "laws of nature" that derive directly "from the constitution of our being," or from human nature.³⁷ This section, chapter two of the first book of the first part, helps articulate what

³⁴ Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim," in *Kant's Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty and James Schmidt (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 44.

³⁵ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.1.1.

³⁶ Some commentators fail to appreciate how radical Montesquieu's teaching on natural man is, and attempt to situate Montesquieu within a "natural law tradition." See, for instance, C.P. Courtney, "Montesquieu and Natural Law," in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on the Spirit of Laws*, ed. By David W. Carrithers, Michael A. Mosher, and Paul A. Rahe, 41–67. Cf. Zuckert, "Natural Law, Natural Rights, and Classical Liberalism: On Montesquieu's Critique of Hobbes," 230.

³⁷ Given the relative compression of Montesquieu's treatment of man in the state of nature, it is easy to be misled, like Merry, into thinking that this treatment does not form a "substantive part of [Montesquieu's] teaching" which in Merry's view only begins with

the earlier account of natural justice hinted at, and it is particularly useful to potential legislators because it digs deeply into what man's original psychological make-up really consists in. In order to know men truly well, one must consider a man (i.e., an individual in the state of nature) before the establishment of societies. And as Montesquieu articulates them, natural man's first ideas are not speculative or theoretical; rather, an individual man (like the beasts) "would think of the preservation of his being before seeking the origin of his being."³⁸ Man's first ideas (and passions) are practical rather than theoretical—men originally just want to stay alive. And man seeks to preserve his existence almost as if by instinct. Unlike beasts, men know that death exists and they know that they are subject to eventually dying; because of this state, they seek to avoid death and secure their existence. Like Hobbes' man in the state of nature, Montesquieu's natural man wants to preserve his life and avoid his death. Although Montesquieu uses the more positive-sounding phrase "preserve life" to describe what his natural man wants rather than Hobbes' rather grim emphasis on the desire to avoid violent death, the true motive of both Hobbes' and Montesquieu's original men is the same: avoiding painful death and preserving life is what man first and foremost wants and needs to do. Yet there is also an important difference between Hobbes and Montesquieu on this score. Hobbes's emphasis on avoiding death seems to imply that life is good only as a precondition for

Books II and IV. Henry J. Merry, *Montesquieu's System of Natural Government* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1970), 2.

³⁸ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.1.2. Montesquieu follows Machiavelli in thinking that men have far more in common with beasts than with gods, a point of great importance for potential legislators. See, in this context, Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), ch. 18.

pursuing our desires rather than in itself.³⁹ By contrast Montesquieu seems closer to Rousseau in portraying life as intrinsically good or pleasant.⁴⁰

Montesquieu's original man is also similar to Hobbes' in that he first feels "only his weakness."⁴¹ Whereas in Hobbes' state of nature (or of war) *all* men (i.e., even the naturally strongest man) are subject to violent death at the hands of their fellows (and are so because of their weakness), Montesquieu's natural man too feels his weakness yet does not have any motivation to join with other men to secure their existence due to the aggression of others. Whereas Hobbes' natural man is naturally inclined to war and aggression if only to preserve his own existence, Montesquieu's natural man is inclined toward peace and has no motive to join with others to secure his own existence.⁴² Rather than thinking of banding together with others in order potentially to increase their strength through a primitive community, Montesquieu's natural man is characterized by his *timidity*, and reluctance, at first, to engage with other men in any way when he comes face to face with them. The timidity of such men would be "extreme."⁴³

To try to prove this controversial thought experiment Montesquieu goes beyond imagining natural man and points to empirical evidence of natural men's timidity: according to Montesquieu, savages (who come as close to natural men as we are likely to find in the real world) have been found, and "everything makes them tremble; everything

³⁹ For example see Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 13.

⁴⁰ For example see Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: or On Education (Includes Emile and Sophie, or the Solitaries)*, trans. Christopher Kelly and Allan Bloom (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2009), 161.

⁴¹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.1.2.

⁴² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 87.

⁴³ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.1.2.

makes them flee.”⁴⁴ Although these men are fundamentally equals, each man on the one hand “feels inferior” to the others and on the other “*scarcely* feels himself an equal.”⁴⁵ Men might have some vague recognition of equality in the face of other beings similar to themselves; yet without knowledge that these other men are fundamentally similar to themselves they naturally feel inferior due to their natural timidity. Given this state in which equal men naturally fear each other and yet each poses no intrinsic threat to others, “Peace would be the first natural law,” which they originally follow as if by instinct.⁴⁶

Montesquieu here explicitly attacks Hobbes’ conception of the state of nature (or war) by naming Hobbes and arguing that the “idea of empire and domination is so complex and depends on so many other ideas, that it would not be the one that [men] would first have”.⁴⁷ Men first desire (and live in) peace because of their extreme timidity and initial and basic desire to preserve their lives. Intrinsically men have no desire for glory or domineering over others; they have instead a misguided sense of their inferiority compared to other men (with whom they are moral equals). Rather than attack others even in the name of defense and security, Montesquieu’s natural men are simply individuals who want to preserve their lives in peace.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.; my emphasis.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid. The idea of empire or domination is complex, for instance, in that Hobbes thinks that some men are naturally timid, yet are compelled to be violent out of self-defense because of the pride of others. For a useful discussion of Montesquieu’s critique of Hobbes, see Zuckert, “Natural Law, Natural Rights, and Classical Liberalism: On Montesquieu’s Critique of Hobbes,” 227-251.

Montesquieu rejects Hobbes' account of the state of nature because it is *really* an account of how men *become* violent and warlike once they enter a civilized state.⁴⁸ Montesquieu challenges Hobbes' account on Hobbes' own terms—i.e, via a thought experiment—to undermine Hobbes' account of men's purportedly original fear of other men's aggression. In Hobbes' view, his account of the state of nature is vindicated by the fact that men carry weapons to defend themselves when alone in a dangerous location, and have locks on their doors to prevent harmful intruders from entering their homes.⁴⁹ Yet in Montesquieu's view, men would only have these motives *after* the establishment of societies and not in men's original state of nature. In the true original state men are fearful of each other, yet have no ambition for domineering over others or harming them. And it is important to note here that Montesquieu's proof against Hobbes isn't empirical; rather it relies on Hobbes' own kind of thought experiment—it takes on Hobbes on his own terms. The evidence of any such proof relies on a thought experiment of each individual reader, and his introspective sentiment—according to Montesquieu, one “feels” that Hobbes does not go far enough back, to know men's nature. And if peace is man's first natural law (which men follow as if by instinct or inclination), the second law—to seek nourishment—is due to natural man's “*feeling* his needs.”⁵⁰ Men desire

⁴⁸ For a discussion of Montesquieu's state of nature teaching as a kind of transition from Hobbes' state of nature teaching to Rousseau's state of nature teaching, see Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism*, 33–40. See also Paul Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty: War, Religion, Commerce, Climate, Terrain Technology, Uneasiness of Mind, the Spirit of Political Vigilance, and the Foundations of the Modern Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 307 n. 29.

⁴⁹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 89.

⁵⁰ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.1.2; my emphasis.

food as an extension of their desire to preserve their lives. Without nourishment men cannot secure their precarious existence.

In Montesquieu's account, then, like Hobbes', natural men are characterized by natural fear, but in Montesquieu it is a fear more akin to mutual shyness due to ungrounded ignorance than to a fear of a violent death at the hands of men who aggressively want to kill in order to preserve their own lives. In Montesquieu's account, eventually men's natural fear of each other (or rather, tellingly, the *marks* of mutual fear)⁵¹ would soon "persuade" (presupposing a primitive language) men to approach each other. Natural fear does not lead to violent impulses toward others but rather to a primitive but peaceful sociability. Montesquieu's account of natural mutual fear, then, shows that it induces men to interact with each other peacefully. In so doing men gain a degree of knowledge about their similarities, overcome their natural fear, and come to see that each individual man is not an inferior to others who originally seemed to potentially threaten him, but rather that all men are at bottom moral equals with natural similarities. In approaching and interacting with each other, men see and come to know that they are similar to each other as human beings. In thus discovering others' similarities, Montesquieu's natural men are "inclined by pleasure" to approach each other in a way that an animal would feel when seeing another animal of its own kind approach.⁵²

The third law of nature is the attraction between the two sexes and the "natural entreaty" (*prière*) that the sexes make to each other. While Montesquieu, like Hobbes,

⁵¹ In Hobbes' view, men use "marks" as a kind of primitive language. Consider Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 25.

⁵² Goldzinck perceives a general connection between pleasure and the desire to conserve oneself throughout the first book. See Goldzinck, « Sur le chapitre 1, du livre 1, de l'Esprit des lois de Montesquieu, » 116.

emphasizes a certain moral equality of all men (insofar as they recognize the similarities they share as members of the same species), he emphasizes also the natural *differences* between the sexes, which “inspire” a kind of “charm,” which “increases the pleasure” of natural men and women. It seems that whereas men were originally extremely timid when it came to approaching each other, the pleasure that men and women have in seeing each other would lead men to be much less timid in approaching the other sex.

The fourth (and final) natural law is the desire to live in society, the motive of which is the desire to gain knowledge together with other men—i.e., to develop their rational capabilities and gain enlightenment about the world. Montesquieu draws a distinction between gaining knowledge and the possession of “feelings,” “which belong to man from the outset.”⁵³ Men thus eventually join each other in society in order to gain knowledge (a distinctively human trait), but what belongs to men most primarily and originally are sub-rational “feelings.”⁵⁴

Yet once men have lost their initial fearfulness of each other and joined society, all is not well. For as Montesquieu explains in the third chapter, “On positive laws,” men outside the state of nature and in society lose their feeling of weakness, the state of equality between individual men ends, and a natural competition between social men starts and the “state of war” then begins. This is a state that at first seems particularly close to Hobbes’ state of war. However, the difference between Montesquieu and Hobbes

⁵³ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.1.2.

⁵⁴ Rétat notes that Montesquieu’s laws of nature do not contain norms that contradict men’s natural inclinations. In other words, there is an easy transition from the state of nature—in which men freely follow their inclinations—to the state of society. Rétat, “Les Ambiguïtés de la Notion de Loi chez Montesquieu: Analyse du Livre I de *L’Esprit des Loïs*,” 131.

with respect to the state of war is that whereas Montesquieu says little here as to the threat that each individual poses to other individual men within society and focuses instead on the hostile relations between political states where men feel their collective strength, in Hobbes' account the state of war everyone is a threat to everyone from the very beginning, which then induces men to covenant with each other to gain security under the sovereign in the commonwealth. According to Montesquieu, the state of war begins only *after* the establishment of societies, which leads to the establishment of laws to keep men's social competition with each other from harming their security.

Montesquieu de-emphasizes the state of war between individual men and emphasizes the states of war between states. In such a state each individual loses his feeling of weakness and gains a sense of strength by *identifying* with the combined strength of his political community, which in turn leads to war between political states, each of which tries to increase both the strength and the security of the state through conquering other states.⁵⁵

How, then, can we sum up men's nature, which is easily obscured by prejudice? To begin with, men are individuals with individual needs; they are thus fundamentally self-interested beings, interested first of all in preserving or securing their lives. Moreover, they are driven by passions, both for good and ill, but passions which are central to any understanding of humanity and which political thinkers and legislators much take account of. And while we can know man's original state (i.e., his beginning natural state) through a thought experiment, Montesquieu gives no indication of a natural end or *telos* (or *summum bonum*) toward which man's nature points. Montesquieu thus discards any notion of virtue or perfection as a natural goal for men, against all classical

⁵⁵ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.1.3.

political philosophers and all traditional religious teachings. Men's fundamental needs, by contrast, are shown in the four natural laws that Montesquieu describes in the state of nature. Any political order that men might create and set in motion, then, must satisfy men's four fundamental needs and passions, which constitute the core of men's natural and original state. These are men's true needs, in Montesquieu's view, and these are the aspects of men's nature that must be satisfied by any successful political legislation.

1.4 MONTESQUIEU'S RHETORICAL DE-EMPHASIS OF THE STATE OF NATURE

One of the most striking features of Hobbes' *Leviathan* and Locke's *Second Treatise* is the emphasis each places on the state of nature and what it is meant to achieve politically. Locke's teaching, for instance, provides both a universally applicable standard for legitimate government as well as a ready-made justification for political revolution. In Locke's view, if the government (or "prince") fails to fulfill the "trust" agreed to between it and the people—the trust being the government's duty to guarantee the safety and security of the people and their property—the people may justifiably "appeal to heaven" (i.e., revolt) and install a new government that does satisfy the people's legitimate needs.⁵⁶ Hobbes' teaching too provides a universally applicable standard for political life. Yet while Montesquieu like Hobbes and Locke provides a novel teaching on the state of nature that is meant to provide a standard for judging human nature and all political

⁵⁶ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), 197-208.

orders, Montesquieu's teaching is not meant to be quite so universally applicable or to justify political revolutions.

What Montesquieu's teaching does, in fact, is give an account of man's pre-political psychology so as to guide men (and in particular potential legislators) when judging the degree to which their governments conform to a natural standard. It gives them an account of what man, stripped down to his core, is really like, and helps them judge the degree to which their current governments can *satisfy* men's natural needs or not, without encouraging or justifying potentially violent and bloody political revolutions.

In addition, Montesquieu takes into consideration the variability of different types of peoples in different regions of the world, and the way in which human nature is in some ways fixed, but also, in important ways, malleable.⁵⁷ This point is in sharp contrast to the teachings of Hobbes and Locke. Hobbes and Locke both give portraits of man stripped down to his core that are meant to provide a legitimate standard for all governments in all places throughout the world. That is, what applies in England, for instance, is meant to be politically valid in South America or China. By contrast, Montesquieu gives a portrait of natural man that is meant to be universally applicable politically, but he also takes into account the variety of peoples when considering the appropriate political prescription for a particular people. In sum, Montesquieu emphasizes both the permanent and the variable in human nature, and in his view legislators must take into account both the permanent and the variable.

⁵⁷ See Zuckert, "Natural Law, Natural Rights, and Classical Liberalism: On Montesquieu's Critique of Hobbes," 242-243.

The major difference between Hobbes and Locke, on the one hand, and Montesquieu, on the other, is that the former two thinkers provide a kind of “one-size-fits-all” standard for legitimate political life. And while Montesquieu, like Hobbes and Locke, provides a universal or quasi-universal standard for good or healthy politics (as I will demonstrate below), it is a universal standard that gives the contingencies of men’s lives their due—i.e., due recognition is given to the particulars of time, place, and circumstance that legislators must take into account as they found, maintain, or reform their political communities. In this way Montesquieu takes into consideration what belongs to human nature permanently but also what in human nature is politically variable. As Montesquieu puts it, “The government *most in conformity with nature* is the one whose particular arrangement best relates to the *disposition* of the people for whom it is established” (SL 1.1.3, my emphasis).⁵⁸ And as he also puts it, “Laws should be so appropriate to the people for whom they are made that it is very unlikely that the laws of one nation can suit another.” Legislators cannot apply a strictly universal standard for politics but must be guided not only by Montesquieu’s standard of human nature but also by the particular needs and characteristics of the people for whom they are legislating, taking into consideration a country’s physical aspect, its climate, the way of life of a people, the degree of liberty a constitution can sustain, the people’s religion, their inclinations, wealth, number, commerce, mores, manners, the laws’ relations to each other, the laws’ origin, the purpose of the legislator himself, and the order on which the laws are established.⁵⁹ In short, wise legislators are needed who can apply a particular set

⁵⁸ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.1.3.

⁵⁹ Ibid. Lowenthal notes that Montesquieu’s emphasis on “statesmanship” is akin to the classics, despite Montesquieu basing his political philosophy on modern cosmology:

of laws to a particular people, and the legislator must have a thorough knowledge both of human nature and the particulars contingencies of the people for whom he legislates.⁶⁰

Montesquieu's account of man's natural psychology in the state of nature, then, provides a clearly articulated, if not boldly proclaimed standard for legislators in helping them to judge political life and in particular what man's true nature and needs are.

Whereas Hobbes boldly proclaims men's violent nature and the universally applicable conditions for legitimate government and Locke brazenly calls for potentially violent revolution if certain political goals are not met, Montesquieu more quietly and gently calls for reform in the direction of political communities that conform as much as possible to his account of man's natural psychology and natural laws, while giving the contingencies of political life their due.

Following Montesquieu, I now turn to the first political alternative, that of ancient republicanism, to see to what degree such governments conform to and satisfy men's original nature, and to see to what degree they diverge from and constrain men's original nature. As we will see, Montesquieu's account of the first political alternative, the ancient republic, provides a particularly sharp contrast with his account in Book I of the core of human nature. While Book I provides a standard for the ways in which human nature and its core passions might be satisfied politically, and is Montesquieu's starting point for his

"From the ancients Montesquieu...adopted the principle of statesmanship whereby political prescriptions are aimed at suiting the particularities of each society. Yet his application of classical principles is peculiarly modern." David Lowenthal, "Book I of Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*," 485-498.

⁶⁰ As Pangle puts it, "The principles of justice deducible from the natural law describing man's fundamental needs must be adjusted or diluted, often dramatically, before they can be applied to civilized political life. This thought in all its profound ramifications is the key to Montesquieu's philosophy." Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism*, 43.

search for the best form of government, the ancient republican alternative is illuminating in the way that it shows how much man's original nature can be denatured in an extreme and inhumane way, a way that is far more unnatural than any of the political alternatives that follow it.

2.0 ANCIENT REPUBLICS AND VIRTUE

Much of the beginning sections of *The Spirit of the Laws* is devoted to an explication of Montesquieu's understanding of ancient republicanism—both its strengths and its weaknesses. And one of the very first things Montesquieu does, in the author's foreword, is define the animating passion of ancient republics, "virtue." Yet, as we shall see, Montesquieu's understanding of virtue is singularly unorthodox: "What I call virtue in a republic is love of the homeland, that is, love of equality. It is not a moral virtue or a Christian virtue; it is a *political* virtue, and this is the spring that makes republican government move" (SL, author's foreword). One thing that is striking about this passage is his emphasis on virtue in the singular; he does not enumerate virtues in the plural. That is, in Montesquieu's understanding of ancient republicanism, what counts is virtue understood as a certain love of the homeland and of equality only. This is in sharp contrast to the differing conceptions of virtue that both classical philosophers and theologians of all stripes put forth. As we shall see, Montesquieu almost completely avoids formulations of this kind: he all but disregards the moral and Christian virtues as important for political virtue.

Yet Montesquieu's most penetrating statement regarding the passion of virtue in *The Spirit of the Laws* equates membership in a republican government with membership in an order of monks. In Montesquieu's telling, republican love of the homeland is similar in kind to a monk's love for his particular order:

"The less we satisfy our particular passion, the more we give ourselves up to the general order. Why do monks so love their order? Their love comes from the same thing that

makes their order intolerable to them. Their rule deprives them of everything upon which ordinary passions rest; what remains, therefore, is the passion for the very rule that afflicts them. The more austere it is, the more it curtails their inclinations, the more force it gives to those that remain.”⁶¹

Virtue, in this view, demands the most painful deprivation of our nature. Whereas we, like the beasts, are naturally inclined toward pleasure and repelled by pain, virtue requires us to face and to accept painful self-renunciation and self-sacrifice for the good of our community, a pain which by nature we abhor. Yet according to Montesquieu, the more our natural inclinations are constrained, the more powerfully and passionately (by a subtle paradox) we give ourselves up to the common good of the community, and the more powerful our remaining passions become. This is because even at the height of the most severe and painful self-renunciation there is, Montesquieu suggests, a kind of residue of pleasure and strength. This pleasure and strength, as unnatural as they may be, are the source of the passion that republics rely on to give them force.⁶²

The key to understanding Montesquieu’s radical revision of the definition of virtue is that virtue is now no longer viewed as a philosophic or divine end. It is now understood as a passion that men—all men—feel or are capable of feeling, even if they do not recognize it as such. Virtue is now understood as a powerful and ambiguous *sentiment*. The traditional understanding, that of classical philosophers and theologians,

⁶¹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.5.2. Schaub notes the similarity between the French words for “less” (*moins*) and “monks” (*moines*). Diana Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), 76.

⁶² My understanding of Montesquieu’s conception of virtue follows the penetrating analysis of Pierre Manent. Manent provides a useful discussion of Montesquieu’s understanding of virtue as monastic self-deprivation and comparing this understanding to the traditional Christian and in particular Augustinian understanding of the soul. Pierre Manent, *Les Métamorphoses de la Cité* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), 96-98.

was that we need virtue to be prevented from being ruled by our ignoble or sinful passions, and that in order to do so we should pursue higher things—e.g., the perfection of the soul, or its salvation. In Montesquieu’s view, the understanding of the classics and the theologians with regard to virtue is incorrect. Aiming at the perfection of the soul is not the essential element of virtue; the most important thing is the passion or sentiment that one feels when one believes one is attempting to perfect one’s soul. The disputes over the ends that we should virtuously pursue, the disputes seriously pursued by philosophers and theologians, effectively miss the point. It is the effectual truth of the *sentiment* that counts. Montesquieu in effect claims to have discovered the true ground of virtue as a peculiar psychological and physiological phenomenon. There is something ferociously inhuman about virtue, in Montesquieu’s account, yet there is also something genuinely awe-inspiring about it and its political effects, past and present. In sum, in Montesquieu’s account, virtue is a passion that is fundamentally self-denying yet that nonetheless results in a feeling of one’s own strength. It is fundamentally a painful sentiment but one that is also from a certain perspective pleasant and forceful.

I have mentioned that classical philosophers and theologians are at odds as to the true content of virtue. This is significant for Montesquieu’s analysis of virtue because Montesquieu found a variety of sharply diverging accounts of virtue. For instance, in the classical tradition, Aristotle’s influential *Nicomachean Ethics* lays out the case for eleven different moral virtues; in Plato’s *Meno*, Socrates is perplexed as to the true content of virtue in the midst of so many contradictory opinions about it; and in Montesquieu’s time Christian theologians put forth the virtues of faith, hope, and charity as somehow—and ambiguously—complementing classical accounts of virtue. As Pierre Manent

perceptively notes, virtue in Montesquieu's account presents itself as a kind of common denominator of classical and Christian understandings of virtue or the virtues.⁶³ At bottom, Montesquieu's account of virtue is a response to the ongoing disagreement about the best way of life. All parties—philosophers and theologians—agree as to the importance of virtue for the best way of life, yet there is sharp disagreement as to what virtue truly is. Montesquieu's understanding of virtue as self-repression is put forth as *the* common element—or common denominator—of which all proponents of virtue are unaware. Rather than focusing on the supposed “ends” of virtue, Montesquieu focuses on the psychological-physiological *mechanism* of virtue. Both philosophers and theologians think they are getting at the essence of virtue, but according to Montesquieu, they lack genuine self-awareness. The “ends” of virtue are superficial opinions; what truly counts is the sentiment of virtue. In any case it cannot be underestimated how radical Montesquieu's understanding of virtue truly is—in his definition Montesquieu brushes aside classical and theological conceptions of morality and virtue as irrelevant to his definition, and emphasizes his new understanding of political virtue as paramount.

Although initially Montesquieu claims that he does not regard his conception of virtue as a moral virtue, Montesquieu provides an important revision to his original definition of virtue in the author's foreword. Montesquieu now says that his understanding of political virtue is in effect a moral virtue, albeit according to a novel standard: “I speak here about political virtue, which is moral virtue in the sense that it

⁶³ According to Manent, “The virtue Montesquieu speaks of is a truly strange thing that has never yet been met with, in this world or the next. It is an amalgam of ancient political and Christian virtue, in which each element loses its specific traits and takes on colors that denature it.” Pierre Manent, *The City of Man*, trans. Marc A. LePain (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 24.

points to the general good, very little about individual virtues, and not at all about that virtue which relates to revealed truths.”⁶⁴ This revision suggests that the “effectual truth,” as Machiavelli would have it, of political virtue is that it is indeed a kind of moral virtue because it leads to the common good, and, having to do with the common good, it perforce has to do with morality, albeit an unorthodox morality. That is to say, political virtue has moral effects, since it leads to the good of all.⁶⁵ Still, Montesquieu is steadfast in the basic content of his original definition: traditional morality or moralities are not the foundation of healthy republics, nor is traditional religion. And another important point that Montesquieu makes with regard to his original definition of political virtue is that virtue does not always come into being among all citizens in regimes for which virtue is the animating force or passion: as he puts it: “This does not mean that in a certain republic one is virtuous but that one *ought* to be.”⁶⁶ There are significant and sometimes severe duties and obligations that need to be met in republics, but these high standards are difficult to live up to, and men are not always capable of living up to such demanding

⁶⁴ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.3.5 n. 9.

⁶⁵ Pangle provides a useful discussion of the way in which Montesquieu breaks from the perspective of Aristotle in his *Politics* in identifying the common good with the good of the many, a view which Aristotle denied. Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism*, 50. Lowenthal makes a similar point especially well and succinctly when he notes, “Democracy and virtue are mutually antipathetic to Socrates and his followers; yet Montesquieu unites them.” See David Lowenthal, « Montesquieu and the Classics: Republican Government in *The Spirit of the Laws*, » in *Ancients and Moderns: Essays on the Tradition of Political Philosophy in Honor of Leo Strauss*, ed. Joseph Cropsey (New York, Basic Books, 1964), 259. And as Spector astutely puts it, Montesquieu “democratizes” virtue: “*L'Esprit des Lois* ne se contente donc pas de faire de la vertu le principe de la démocratie, il démocratise la vertu elle-même afin de la décerner au peuple tout entier, et non plus aux meilleurs—à une aristocratie de l'excellence. Ainsi se poursuit la trajectoire amorcée par Machiavel ou même par Hobbes, qui dénonçait les philosophes antiques voyant dans la vertu la «fin ultime» de la vie humaine.” Céline Spector, *Montesquieu: Liberté, Droit, et Histoire* (Paris: Michaelon, 2010), 125.

⁶⁶ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.3.11; my emphasis.

requirements. Regimes dedicated to Montesquieu's understanding of virtue in effect ask or demand of men to live *above*, so to speak, their base natures, and men who try to fulfill the standards of virtue must constantly strive toward the self-overcoming of their base natures.

Yet there are a number of other definitions of virtue or rather additions to the original definition of virtue that help fill out Montesquieu's picture of what virtue consists of. For one thing, in the author's foreword, Montesquieu seems to needlessly repeat himself by again explaining that "I have called love of the homeland and of equality, *political virtue*."⁶⁷ Yet on reflection it seems that this apparently needless repetition—italicized no less—serves a useful purpose. Since Montesquieu's definition of virtue is so novel, he repeats himself for effect, to make absolutely sure that his readers fully understand what he is getting at, and that he is not simply rehashing old understandings of virtue. Indeed, Montesquieu also powerfully emphasizes the novelty of his definition of virtue when he makes clear that he has had "new ideas" and that "new words have had to be found or new meanings given to old ones" in order for him to define virtue in this new way.

According to Montesquieu, virtue can be defined as "love of the laws," in addition to love of the homeland, and this love, which requires a continuous preference for the common good over one's particular self-interest, "produces all the individual virtues: they are only that preference."⁶⁸ Stated in this way, it appears as if virtue is relatively easy to achieve, in that it is merely a simple preference or choice. And

⁶⁷ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, author's foreword.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.4.5.

Montesquieu describes the awe-inspiring results of virtue in this way: “Most of the ancient peoples lived in government that had virtue for their principle, and when that virtue was in full force, things were done in those governments that we no longer see and that astonish our small souls.”⁶⁹ Montesquieu here is silent as to the precise nature of those achievements that were accomplished under republican governments, but he makes a tacit distinction between ancient virtue and modern decrepitude. Despite its impressive results and its apparent status as a mere choice, however, virtue is fundamentally “a renunciation of oneself,” which can cause great pain.⁷⁰ Here Montesquieu points to the way in which a certain “denaturing,” as Rousseau would call it, is required of those who hold themselves to the standard of virtue, as well as a kind of continual triumph over one’s inclinations, as men experience them naturally. At bottom, then, virtue as Montesquieu conceives of it is a standard that can be extraordinarily difficult to achieve and to continue to live up to.

Montesquieu also defines or describes virtue in republican government as “a very simple thing: it is love of the republic; it is a feeling and not the result of knowledge; the lowest man in the state, like the first can have this feeling.”⁷¹ Montesquieu emphasizes the egalitarian character of virtue and the way in which virtue is a feeling or sentiment (rooted in men’s passions) rather than a rational calculation or something of which only an elite may partake. This sentiment is so simple and easy to access that even the lowest, simplest, and least intelligent member of the republic is capable of feeling it.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 1.4.4.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 1.4.5.

⁷¹ Ibid., 1.5.2.

Montesquieu defines the government in which virtue is the motivating passion as republican or democratic government—that is, that government in which the people as a body, or a part of the people, have sovereign power.⁷² In this way republican government can be understood as a democracy if the people “as a body” have sovereign power, and republican government is also consistent and compatible with aristocratic government if only a part of the people have sovereign power. And Montesquieu shows how virtue or love of the common good “is singularly connected with democracies. In them alone, government is entrusted to each citizen. Now government is like all things in the world; in order to preserve it one must love it.”⁷³ A political community, Montesquieu seems to suggest, is like a large individual and has its particular needs. Just as an individual man in the state of nature possessed the desire for self-preservation, so too communities require self-preservation, and therefore love of the community is needed to achieve the preservation of the community. In order to do so, individual citizens of the political community must transfer their natural desire to preserve themselves to the community. In this way a kind of artificially manufactured love of the community is created, and men identify with the good of and the preservation of their community.

Another striking aspect of Montesquieu’s understanding of virtue is the way in which he explicitly connects virtue as a passion to an understanding, however ambiguous, of the human soul. Montesquieu claims that what makes governments move is a certain quality or modification of the soul,⁷⁴ which in the case of republics is, as we have seen,

⁷² Ibid., 1.2.1.

⁷³ Ibid., 1.4.5.

⁷⁴ Ibid., author’s foreword.

virtue.⁷⁵ What is most noteworthy about this statement, however, is that the human “soul” was never discussed in Book I, in which Montesquieu described man in the state of nature. Furthermore, Montesquieu never defines what the soul actually is, here or elsewhere. In any case, Montesquieu’s understanding of the soul, even if he never makes this case explicitly, somehow seems to arise *outside* the primitive state of nature and within society—perhaps through enlightened speculation or introspection. In addition, Montesquieu defines his understanding of “the good man” in a republic in a striking manner—the good man, in Montesquieu’s view, is not the good Christian, but rather “the political good man,” who has *political* virtue. He is the man who loves the laws of his country and who acts from love of the laws of his country.⁷⁶ In Montesquieu’s view Christianity divides men’s souls insofar as the praiseworthy Christian, from a Christian’s perspective, prefers his own salvation to the good of his city. As I will show below, in contrast to Christianity, ancient republics and their religions produced citizens with more unified souls than Christians, insofar as the good of the ancient city was in harmony with ancient religions and there was no desire for individual salvation in conflict with the good of the city.

I will now turn to a closer examination of Montesquieu’s understanding of the nature of ancient republics, in order to understand the modification of the passions of citizens in republics. To begin with, Montesquieu links republics with democracies, and he explicitly claims that love of the republic in a democracy is love of democracy, and

⁷⁵ Virtue as a passion makes republican government move because virtue is the “spring” of republican government.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, author’s foreword.

that love of democracy is love of equality.⁷⁷ In so doing Montesquieu emphasizes a particular egalitarian tone to republican government, which is compatible with human nature at its core, since, as Montesquieu argued in Book I, all men are moral equals in the state of nature. In addition to the egalitarian tone of democratic republics, there is also an austerity to republics. The passion for virtue is unleashed and utilized in republics, and there is a sentiment of strength associated with it, but virtue can also be understood as a kind of austere constraint on the passions. In Montesquieu's view, republicanism also has to do with love of frugality, and "as each one there shall have the same happiness and advantages, each should taste the same pleasures and form the same expectations; there is something that can be anticipated only from the common frugality."⁷⁸ In this view of republics austerity clearly rules, and in republics there is to be no ostentation, luxury, or superfluous goods. Everyone receives the same proportions of goods, to the extent that this is practically possible: all members of the community have the same "anticipations" or expectations with regard to material goods and there are no distinctions or inequalities with regard to material well-being. Men may enjoy some pleasures, but no one will enjoy more than others, and because of the austere tone that pervades republics, there will not be much pleasure to be enjoyed to begin with.

Montesquieu also points to the importance of the duties that each member of the community owes to the community. In Montesquieu's view love of equality in a democratic republic limits ambition to the sole desire and happiness of giving greater services to one's homeland than other citizens. Because men have unequal faculties, they

⁷⁷ Ibid., 1.5.3.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

may be unable to render the community equal services, “but they should equally render it services. At birth one contracts an immense debt to [the homeland] that can never be repaid.”⁷⁹ In republics, then, one takes on duties to the community from the very moment of one’s birth. In the state of nature men have inclinations from the moment of their birth and follow only those inclinations. There are no duties at all in the pure state of nature, and presumably very few duties in the first primitive societies. In republics men have duties from the second that they are born, and are required to severely curtail their inclinations throughout their entire lives. This statement moreover recognizes the fact of natural inequalities insofar as men possess unequal faculties and cannot give the community equal services, yet there is also a distinct spirit of equality insofar as all members of the community ought to give the community services. In addition, self-interest and ambition are channeled toward the common good insofar as one is in competition with one’s fellows and each man desires to render greater services to the homeland than other citizens.

Montesquieu had made clear earlier that virtue is a passion that every man can feel and be aware of. He also briefly alludes to the dangerous nature of irrational passions that fuels republics when he claims that “[t]he people act from impetuosity and not from design.”⁸⁰ Strong passions, and not rational knowledge or “design,” rule men in republics. Yet Montesquieu also points to the way in which republican virtue is a positive *desire* and a healthy motive to satisfy one’s self-interest: “In a republic under the reign of virtue, a motive that suffices in itself, and excludes all others, the state rewards only with

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 1.2.3.

testimonies to that virtue.”⁸¹ In this arrangement or system of sacrifice and reward a kind of Kantian heteronomy emerges: virtue is the motive to pursue virtue, but rewards of testimonies to individual virtue—rewards that satisfy individual self-interest and ambition—are required for virtue truly to “reign.”

It is in the nature of republican governments, furthermore, to resemble—but no more than resemble—natural families. According to Montesquieu, republics should be established in small states, “where one can educate the general populace and raise a whole people like a family.”⁸² In this view, however, it is important to note that the republic can never be exactly like a natural family; it can never hope to be more than a reasonably convincing facsimile of a natural family. This is because the republican citizens’ attachments to each other are artificial attachments—the citizens are habituated into thinking of other citizens as part of their family, but they lack the more solid biological attachments of natural families. Still, Montesquieu emphasizes the importance of education in habituating the citizens into feeling and thinking of each other as family: the legislators of the community must educate and “raise the people” like a natural family. One way to make it easy or at least easier for the republic to be like a family is for the extent of the territory to be limited, and Montesquieu notes an important aspect of the nature of republics when he argues that “[i]t is in the nature of a republic to have only a small territory.”⁸³ It is important for the republic to possess only a small territory where it is easy for the citizens to more closely resemble a natural family. By contrast, with an extended territory republican citizens will necessarily know less about each other, will

⁸¹ Ibid., 1.5.18.

⁸² Ibid., 1.4.7.

⁸³ Ibid., 1.8.16.

feel more removed from the affairs of others, and will therefore care less about the fate of their fellow citizens. In addition, Montesquieu praises small republics because in small republics, as opposed to large republics, the public good is “better felt, better known, and is nearer to each citizen; abuses are less extensive there.”⁸⁴ Republics, as we have seen, rely on citizens’ devotion to the common good, and because all men, as we have also seen, naturally care more about their own well-being than the well-being of others, it is important to keep men’s conception of the common good as close to their immediate self-interest as possible. And in small republics men are capable of having a more acute “feeling” for the common good than they would otherwise have in a large, extended republic. In small republics there are also fewer abuses, and more broadly, fewer conflicting and clashing interests. In sum, large republics are less desirable than small republics because they have conceptions of the common good that are more remote from the individual members of the community than those of small republics.

With regard to the nature of republics concerning matters of war and peace, Montesquieu claims that whereas the spirit of monarchy is war and expansion, the spirit of republics is peace and moderation.⁸⁵ While this statement on the surface seems forthright and clear, things become more complicated when one considers Montesquieu’s statement, elsewhere in the book, that with regard to the Spartan republic in particular, “The purpose of Lacedaemonia [i.e., Sparta] is war.”⁸⁶ This latter statement seems to suggest that either Sparta is not a pure republic in some way—which would be strange, considering Montesquieu puts forth Sparta as a kind of archetypal republic at so many

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 2.9.2.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 2.11.5.

points throughout the book—or the former statement regarding republican peace and moderation must be qualified in some important way. In my view, the former statement must be qualified in some way, and Montesquieu indeed helps to clarify this statement (albeit with a statement earlier in the book) with his statement that “One takes up arms, in the republic, *only to defend the laws and the homeland*; it is because one is a citizen that one becomes, *for a time*, a soldier.”⁸⁷ There is then an apparent contradiction between the Spartan “warrior” spirit and the spirit of republics as such, which purportedly have a peaceful spirit. Yet this seeming contradiction can be resolved if one understands Sparta’s warrior spirit as in the service of assuring the safety, security, and ultimately the peace and well-being of the Spartan republic. Sparta’s aim may be war, but this was with a view to defensive and not offensive wars (or offensive wars “of expansion”). In this way Sparta can be understood as a moderate republic whose defensive warrior spirit guaranteed the preservation of its small territory. If it engaged in war, it was in defensive war only; the Spartan republic lacked the ambition for offensive wars of expansion that Montesquieu claims are the mark of a monarchy.⁸⁸ What helped preserve Sparta most of all, however, was its policy of moderation—as Montesquieu argues: “What made Lacedaemonia last so long is that, after all its wars, it always remained within its territory. Lacedaemonia’s only goal was liberty; the only advantage of its liberty was

⁸⁷ Ibid., 1.5.19; my emphasis.

⁸⁸ My interpretation of Montesquieu’s views on ancient republics’ relationship to war and peace differs from that of Rahe. According to Rahe, the idea that the spirit of republics is peace “can hardly be advanced with regard to...virtuous republics” and Montesquieu’s formulation of peaceful republics applies only to commercial republics. Rahe’s interpretation fails to pay close enough attention to the way in which all of Montesquieu’s statements on ancient republics’ relationship to war and peace fit together. See Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty*, 224-25.

glory” (SL 1.8.5).⁸⁹ Moderation was thus an important policy for Sparta and its practical effect was to ensure that Sparta remain within its territory. There is a distinct lack of ambition for imperial gain in Spartan policy. Elsewhere, as we have seen, Montesquieu says that Sparta’s principal aim was war, so it seems that the ultimate goals of both liberty and defensive wars are compatible. For all that, though, it is notable that Montesquieu names only *one* advantage of Sparta’s here, which does not seem particularly impressive for a regime that is supposed to be such a model of excellence. I will expand upon Montesquieu’s more explicit critique of Sparta’s corruption later on.

Montesquieu also links men in the state of nature and men in society—and especially those living under republican regimes: “In the state of nature, men are born in equality, but they cannot remain so. Society makes them lose their equality, and they become equal again only through laws.”⁹⁰ This statement is a useful supplement to Montesquieu’s understanding of natural man, as well as of the nature of society as such. What was implicitly stated in Book I—that all men are fundamentally equal in an important sense, that is, that they are “born equal” and are thus morally equal to each other as human beings—is stated explicitly here. While men are born in moral equality, conventional inequalities arise within society that obscure men’s fundamental equality, and equality is only re-established by laws. An important feature of the nature of republics is that men are equal before the laws, and even those who command or authoritatively interpret the laws are equal to other citizens with regard to established laws. Most fundamentally, since men are born equal and since the principle of

⁸⁹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.8.5.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.8.3.

republicanism is equality, republics are in an important way the regimes that are closest to the original state of human nature and thus to the description of natural man that we examined in Book I.

Besides providing numerous statements that help clarify his understanding of classical republics, Montesquieu seems to throw his rhetorical support behind such governments. He even appears at first blush to come across as a partisan cheerleader for republics. To begin with, Montesquieu boldly claims that what he says—to be sure, not simply about republics but about the nature of political life—is confirmed by *the entire body of history*, and is in complete conformity with the nature of things.⁹¹ And what we are led to believe, at least on first reading, is that classical republican government is simply *the* exemplary form of government and ought to be emulated wherever possible due to its impressive political results. In Montesquieu's view, ancient republics as opposed to modern monarchies possessed “love of the homeland, desire for truly glory [that is, the glory of one's country and not individual glory], self-renunciation, sacrifice one one's dearest interests, and all those heroic virtues we find in the ancients and know only by hearsay.”⁹² Montesquieu thus presents a kind of division in history between ancient greatness and modern mediocrity or worse. Montesquieu in doing so paints a portrait of ancient greatness, heroism, and excellence that is opposed to the new horizon of base, narrow souls in modernity.⁹³ There seems almost to have been a kind of

⁹¹ Ibid., 1.3.2.

⁹² Ibid., 1.3.5.

⁹³ Montesquieu's account of republican virtue as self-repression seems akin to Nietzsche's account of asceticism. While both thinkers' stances toward such phenomena are ambiguous, they are both in some ways very impressed with such phenomena. Montesquieu is impressed by the awe-inspiring political results of virtue, while Nietzsche suggests self-denial and self-sacrifice can lead to ideals of beauty. In this context, see

transformation of human nature and its capacities between the days of ancient Greece and the unimpressive political world of Montesquieu's contemporaries. What is perhaps the most striking aspect of those citizens who lived under ancient republics was their strength. The notion of their strength is corroborated, in another instance, when Montesquieu claims: "It was always as easy to triumph over the forces of Athens as it was difficult to triumph over its virtue."⁹⁴ Because of this passionate love of virtue, the military strength of the Athenians was considerably greater than it otherwise would have been—than it would have been in men's uninspired natural state, for example. And it was particularly difficult to destroy the Athenian attachment to virtue. These statements would seem to apply even more to the Spartans' attachment to virtue than to the Athenian attachment to virtue, given what Montesquieu says elsewhere about the toughness of the Spartan republic. Without quite appearing as a political conservative who longs to return to the olden days, Montesquieu nonetheless seems to suggest that the political results of ancient republicanism are extremely impressive. His perspective is akin to that of a museum visitor observing a rare and beautiful artifact, who comes away profoundly moved by an experience of such splendor, yet who realizes nonetheless that we moderns can no longer be animated to scale the rarefied heights of antiquity. Montesquieu continues his praise of the ancients and his apparent lamentation of the odious effects of modernity when he writes: "The political men of Greece who lived under popular government recognized no other force to sustain it than virtue: those of today speak to us

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), third essay, aph. 18.

⁹⁴ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.3.3. This is a particularly strange compliment for Athens, given its reputation of being a less demanding democracy than Sparta.

only of manufacturing, commerce, finance, wealth, and even luxury.”⁹⁵ The political concerns of the past were elevated and impressive, whereas those of the contemporary world are crass and vulgar. Simply put, what Montesquieu tries to persuade his reader in this beginning part of the book that what ancient republics achieved justifiably leaves us awestruck in comparison to contemporary achievements. Because of the apparent modification of human nature that has occurred between ancient times and the modern political world, the lowly modern English, for instance, have “no virtue at all.” There has been decay throughout history, culminating in modern political impotence. The contemporary English impotently attempted to establish democracy, yet “as their ambition was excited by the success of the most audacious one, and the spirit of one faction was repressed by the spirit of another, the government was constantly changing; the people, stunned, sought democracy and found it nowhere.”⁹⁶ Here too Montesquieu cultivates the opinion of the impotence of the modern world, compared to the strength and greatness of the ancients; in this account, individual ambition resulted in political inequality, contrary to the spirit of ancient democratic republicanism. The factious nature of the lowly English government is incompatible with the devotion to the true virtue of the ancients.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

2.1 REPUBLICAN EDUCATION AND LEGISLATION

Having given an account of Montesquieu's view on the nature of ancient republicanism, I will now turn to Montesquieu's views on the importance of education for ancient republicanism, as well as the particular institutional arrangements that were created so that ancient government could be founded and maintained. This will, I hope, shed light on the way that men's natural passions are modified and redirected within republican governments. And as I will try to show, it was because of the institutions created by Sparta's founder, Lycurgus, that the Spartans were so passionately attached and devoted to their city and to virtue. To begin with, Montesquieu emphasizes the unity that was at the heart of the ancients' conception of education—as he puts it, “The ancients' education had [an] advantage over ours; it was never contradicted.”⁹⁷ By contrast, there are many contradictions and a fundamental disunity at the heart of contemporary education. This state of disharmony and inconsistency of modern education is lamentable. In Montesquieu's view, the problem with contemporary education is that in the modern world men receive three different and opposing educations—first, from their fathers; second, from their schoolmasters; and third, from the world. And there is a fundamental tension between what we learn from the world, on the one hand, and what we learn from our fathers and schoolmasters, on the other. In addition, Montesquieu locates a major source of this tension when he argues: “This comes partly from the opposition there is for us between the ties of religion and those of the world, a thing unknown among the ancients.”⁹⁸ In Montesquieu's view, then,

⁹⁷ Ibid., 1.4.4.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

contemporary education divides men's souls. The souls of the ancients, by contrast, were unified because of the unity of their education. In mentioning the noxious effect of religion on contemporary education, Montesquieu points to Christianity as the main culprit in dividing modern education. Christianity teaches men to care more about the salvation of their souls than for the well-being of their cities. The ancients' unified education made the well-being of men's souls and the well-being of their cities compatible.⁹⁹ This consistent civic and religious education was created by legislators like Lycurgus, and handed down from fathers to sons.

In "On education in republican government," Montesquieu makes clear that it is in republican governments that the "full power" of education is needed. The power of education is needed in republican governments in particular because republics must stifle and redirect men's natural passions and inclinations for the good of the community. What must be created or manufactured through an educational program is a passionate love for the republic. In Montesquieu's view, moreover, in a republic everything depends on establishing this love, and education should be devoted to inspiring it. However, there is a sure way, in Montesquieu's view, for children to have this love; that is for men's fathers to have this love of the community first, and to pass it on to their children.¹⁰⁰ It is necessary to "inspire" this love because it is unnatural—men in the state of nature lack any attachment much less passionate devotion to a political community. And republics

⁹⁹ Because Montesquieu does not make this point explicitly, it is easy to miss the fact that Montesquieu's ultimate critique of divided or inconsistent education is Christianity. See, for example, David W. Carrithers, "Democratic and Aristocratic Republics: Ancient and Modern," in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on the Spirit of Laws*, ed. David W. Carrithers, Michael A. Mosher, and Paul A. Rahe (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 126-27.

¹⁰⁰ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.4.5.

rely on paternal authority and tradition to pass down this love once it is cultivated. Without conventional paternal authority, this love, because it is unnatural, would be lost. One must additionally, then, inculcate the belief that what is oldest is trustworthy and in fact the best model to be followed or emulated. Furthermore, in republics one is generally in charge of educating one's children and even more in charge of transmitting to one's children one's passions. If this fails to happen, "it is because what was done in the father's house is destroyed by impressions from the outside."¹⁰¹ There is a need in republics, then, to maintain an internal purity from external corruption. There is a need for a kind of "closed society" in republics.

In order for republican education to have its full effect, the Greeks, such as Sparta's founder Lycurgus, created "singular institutions" to inspire virtue. Republics had to count on well-crafted institutions because virtue is not naturally possessed. Republican institutions are then a kind of "improvement" on nature, from the perspective of the city. Republican educational institutions make people, or claim to make people, better than they are naturally. Institutions must be created because one cannot rely on exhortations simply to inspire virtue. Good institutions are able to direct the passions successfully to virtue. In addition, in founding his institutions Montesquieu claims that Lycurgus "confused" all the traditional virtues, yet he also possessed wisdom. Montesquieu, then, conflates politics and wisdom in the example of Lycurgus. This view is in sharp contrast with the view of classical political philosophy in which politics and wisdom must perforce be separate unless by chance philosophers rule and are indeed compelled to rule, since by nature the philosophers prefer to be free to philosophize, rather than take up the

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

onerous duty of ruling—and serving—cities. Montesquieu, in effect, lowers the bar for the possession of wisdom: like Lycurgus, you do not have to be a philosopher to unite politics and wisdom, and indeed the successful coincidence of politics and wisdom is much easier to achieve than the classical philosophers thought it was. In confusing the virtues in his own way, Lycurgus mixed “larceny, with the spirit of justice, the harshest slavery with extreme liberty, the most heinous feelings with the greatest moderation, and successfully gave stability to his town.”¹⁰² Thus larceny and slavery are clearly not considered traditional virtues. In the case of Lycurgus what Montesquieu mixes traditional virtues and vices and shows how such a mixture can produce the greatest political goods, for instance, political stability.¹⁰³ Montesquieu does not say how Lycurgus used larceny politically, but it could be an allusion to the fact that Spartan children were encouraged to steal food. Moderation and justice are the only traditional virtues mentioned here, and Montesquieu is silent as to how these virtues are used by Lycurgus, yet Lycurgus’ political justice seems to consist of founding and maintaining Sparta, and his moderation is in giving Sparta moderate policies. Montesquieu seems to imply, then, by omitting courage and prudence from his list of Lycurgus’ virtues, that Lycurgus managed to do without these virtues in founding Sparta. Stability, at bottom, is the greatest political good here—and it does not seem to matter if traditional vices are made use of as long as political stability and the common good are achieved.

¹⁰² Ibid., 1.4.6.

¹⁰³ In mixing virtues and vices to produce political stability, Montesquieu follows the lead of Machiavelli. See Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 15: “And furthermore one should not care about incurring the fame of those vices without which it is difficult to save one’s state; for if one considers everything well, one will find something appears to be virtue, which if pursued would be one’s ruin, and something else appears to be vice, which if pursued results in one’s security and well-being.”

In addition, Lycurgus' statesmanship was noteworthy because Lycurgus removed all Sparta's "resources, arts, commerce, silver."¹⁰⁴ Lycurgus gave a certain austere tone to the Spartans' existence—in his view Spartan citizens needed to do without base luxuries, which inevitably corrupt citizens. And Lycurgus' statesmanship was impressive for the way in which he was able to transform men's natural inclinations and redirect them so that they could be useful for the common good of the city. In Sparta, "one had ambition there without the expectation of bettering oneself" and "one had natural feelings but was neither child, husband, nor father."¹⁰⁵ Natural individual self-interest, then, is still made use of in republics. Individual ambition, in particular, is used in trying to achieve the common good. Human nature still exists but it is molded—in perhaps inhumane ways—such that one becomes not primarily part of a family (which is a kind of natural community and has a basis in nature, as was made clear in Book I) but rather one is primarily a citizen of Sparta (which seems to be an unnatural community but from the perspective of the city a healthy community). By arranging Spartan institutions in the way that he did, Lycurgus led Sparta "to greatness and glory, with such an infallibility in its institutions that nothing was gained by winning battles against it until its police [i.e., its institutional administration] was taken away."¹⁰⁶ Not individual greatness and glory but the greatness and glory, that is, the *distinction* of the community was Lycurgus' goal. The desire, goal, and ultimate political standard, moreover, is a particular understanding of infallible perfection. What Lycurgus aimed for was a kind of super-human, error-free legislation, which placed a particular importance on the institutional police or

¹⁰⁴ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.4.6.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

administration of Sparta. And Lycurgus also aimed at giving a certain tone of bellicosity and harshness to the souls of Spartan citizens: “Lycurgus, whose institutions were harsh, did not have civility as an object when he formed manners; he had in view the bellicose spirit he wanted to give his people. Always correcting or being corrected, always instructing and being instructed, as simple as they were rigid, these people practiced virtue for each other, rather than showing them regard.”¹⁰⁷ Montesquieu makes explicit here that Lycurgus’ practices were inhumane and unnatural, since showing regard to other human beings seems implicitly to be the humane standard. Lacking humanity, the Spartans were warlike and inhumanly rigid and tough. In sum, Lycurgus’ principles required a continual overcoming and twisting of human nature as well as a continual education and reeducation when men fell short of such high and difficult standards.

However, successful republican legislation—as in Sparta—is not confined to the ancients. According to Montesquieu, in the “dregs of corruption of modern times we can see an example of legislation comparable to that of Lycurgus: that of Mr. Penn in America.”¹⁰⁸ Penn overcame horribly degrading circumstances—the dregs of corruption of modernity—to found a republic akin to Sparta, although Montesquieu is clear that there are important differences between the two cases. To begin with, Montesquieu calls Penn an *honnête homme*, and claims that he founded a people in whom integrity was as natural as bravery was among the Spartans. The major difference between Lycurgus and Penn, then, is the difference in their artificial (although seemingly natural) goals. Though both goals require a difficult kind of virtue, Sparta is clearly tougher and rougher than

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 3.19.16. Merry notes that in Sparta fathers had the right to correct other men’s children. Merry, *Montesquieu’s System of Natural Government*, 217.

¹⁰⁸ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.4.6.

Penn's republic, and there is no emphasis on war in the case of Penn. Rather, Penn's republic emphasizes honesty and moral uprightness. Penn shows that it is possible in some cases to dispense with the kind of rough bellicosity that seemed so intrinsic to Lycurgus' Sparta, which seemed as if it were possibly a part of the nature of republicanism as such. Yet despite their differences, Montesquieu claims that in sum Penn is a "true Lycurgus": "though [Penn] had peace for his object as Lycurgus as Lycurgus had war, they are alike in the unique path on which they have set their people, in the ascendancy over free men, in the prejudices they have vanquished [i.e., they both brought a kind of enlightenment to their republics], and in the passions they have subdued."¹⁰⁹ Despite their significant differences, then, Montesquieu claims that both legislators had two "modern" goals—that is, freedom and enlightenment—and one "traditional" goal, that is, subduing men's passions. In this analysis, Lycurgus is revealed, at least in one of his aims, to be a kind of groundbreaking proto-modern legislator.

Another example of praiseworthy republican legislation inspired by the ancients in the modern world is that of the Jesuits in Paraguay, where the Jesuits in governing men made men "happier," "a fine thing," in Montesquieu's judgment. To be sure, happiness as a legitimate political goal is dissimilar to Lycurgus' political aims. As we shall see, happiness as a political goal is a novel introduction to political life that in Montesquieu's view can only come about through humane industriousness. And as we shall also see throughout the book, Montesquieu perceives a significant transformation in the nature of republics that has taken place in the modern world. In the case of the Jesuits in Paraguay, they have succeeded in bringing dispersed peoples out of the woods—this allusion to

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

men living in the woods is deliberately meant to make us think of the natural men or savages of Book I—they have clothed these primitive men, and if, in Montesquieu’s view, the Jesuits had done no more than increase industry among men (another goal that is distinctively different than Lycurgus’ political goals), the Jesuits “would have accomplished much.”¹¹⁰ In this view, what the Jesuits accomplished is similar to one of Locke’s political goals, in the *Second Treatise*—that is, to transform natural or primitive men into rational and industrious rather than lazy, quarrelsome, and contentious men.¹¹¹ In Montesquieu’s view, because of industry, the Paraguayans were transformed into men who have, if not the potential material abundance of Locke’s day laborers in England, at least a life that satisfies their material necessities. This, then, is a significant difference between the Paraguayans and Locke’s rhetorical goal: the Paraguayans’ material well-being is limited to satisfying material necessity, whereas Locke’s rhetorical goal is to seduce men into pursuing industry in order to acquire what is in principle *unlimited* abundance and ease of life.

One of the key differences between Locke’s aim and the Jesuits’ policy is that the Jesuits placed a ban on silver, “whose effect is to fatten the fortune of men beyond the limits nature has set for it, to teach men to preserve vainly what has been amassed vainly, to multiply desires infinitely, and to supplement nature, which has given us very limited means to excite our passions and to corrupt one another.”¹¹² Unlike Locke’s vision, Montesquieu’s view (at least here) is still very traditional-sounding and in line with classical republicanism’s general aims, since it calls for a suppression of illegitimate

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 114.

¹¹² Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.4.6.

passions. The Jesuits proscribed silver because it excites the passions in a way that is unhealthy for republican government. Silver is unhealthy for republics because it multiplies unnatural desires endlessly; by contrast, nature gives us very limited desires. In this view, then, republican government is similar to natural men in that they both lack (or prevent) unlimited material desires. Legislators who would imitate the Jesuits, then, will “produce our arts without our luxury and our needs without our desires.”¹¹³ The Jesuits’ legislation satisfies men’s natural necessities but not any unnatural and superfluous desires. Whereas Locke’s goal is to encourage men to continually chase material prosperity in order to procure as easy and comfortable a life as possible, the Jesuits want men to pursue industry simply in order for them to procure their sustenance and their clothing—this much and no more is enough to make men happier than they were in their previous primitive state. The Jesuits’ ban on silver, in addition, was an example of an important institutional feature of their republicanism—a rather extreme internal economic regulation. There was no free market in Paraguay. The Jesuits had commerce directed by the authorities of the city, and not by the citizens themselves, and also had an economic “separation from strangers” that limited the extent of commerce and thereby prevented the emergence of limitless desires. This is another example of a kind of republican “closed society,” which attempted to prevent the corruption of a healthy society. In this respect Paraguay is clearly similar to ancient republics like Sparta.

In the examples of Lycurgus’ Sparta, Penn’s republic in America, and the Jesuits’ Paraguay, Montesquieu also suggests that all republics have religious bases. Because they require such difficult and painful renunciation of natural desires and passions (especially

¹¹³ Ibid.

in the case of Sparta), they all cultivate belief in a consolatory afterlife. As I indicated earlier, there is a major difference between ancient religions and Christianity, which has a bearing on the nature of ancient and more modern republicanism. Ancient republics and their religious codes conflated this-worldly goods with other-worldly rewards, and in this way produced unified souls that were devoted to the good of the city.¹¹⁴ Christianity, by contrast, divides souls, since according to Christianity the good of the earthly city is divorced from other-worldly goods and from the Christian believer's standpoint the good of the earthly city is vastly inferior to the goods of the heavenly city. Yet Penn and the Jesuits combine this-worldly and other-worldly goods in their own way, in a modification of traditional Christianity. In the case of the Jesuits' Paraguay in particular, the satisfactions that result from dedication to the republic's internal industry (to be sure, a less painful devotion than is required by the Spartans' devotion to their city) are combined with the salvation of the citizens' souls. A certain kind of unity of soul—or at least a certain reduction in the soul's division—is in this case and in this way restored or resolved. One must simply work industriously and obey the new political and religious code and one will have both a pleasant this-worldly life and a pleasant place in the afterlife. In this way Montesquieu also points to the modern attachment to commerce, with its revolutionary consequences, and its potential compatibility with certain newer kinds of religions, which he explains more fully later, and which I will consider in my

¹¹⁴ As Pangle formulates this point: "So long as the republican principles prevailed, the people in healthy republics heard from the gods—whom they feared and whom they needed to fear—only commandments that were conducive to the republic's collective, worldly security. To borrow an expression from Montesquieu's successor Rousseau: ancient religion was purely 'civil religion.'" Pangle, *The Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity*, 57.

chapter on commercial republicanism. For now, it is sufficient to note both the kinship between Penn's and the Jesuits' modern republics on the one hand, and Sparta on the other (i.e., their religious bases), and the difference between the Jesuits' republic in particular and Sparta (i.e., the introduction of industry and commerce in Paraguay and the contempt for commerce in Sparta).

Having considered Penn's and the Jesuits' newer republics, Montesquieu returns to a more extended treatment of ancient republics. Having seen something of the nature of the newer republics that engage in (highly regulated) commerce, we can see more clearly how much ancient republics opposed commerce. According to Montesquieu, all commerce was "disgraceful" to the Greeks: "Commerce ran counter to the spirit of Greek liberty; thus Plato in his *Laws* wants any citizen who engages in commerce to be punished."¹¹⁵ The conception of liberty of the ancients and its compatibility with commercial activity is considerably different from the spirit of the Jesuits' liberty. The Jesuits accepted and praised a limited and regulated industry and commerce as a source of material production and even of a certain kind of happiness. The Greeks, by contrast, looked down on *any* commercial activity as an abomination and as a source of corruption of good mores, deserving of reproach and punishment. Ancient republics were also more dedicated to equality than even the Jesuits with their commerce were, since wealth, in Montesquieu's account, is a kind of "power," leading to social inequality. Wealth gives citizens unequal "powers," and it also "procures delights that [a citizen] should not enjoy, because these would likewise run counter to equality."¹¹⁶ Money, then, creates

¹¹⁵ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.4.8.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.5.3.

inequalities that are incompatible with “pure” egalitarian republics. It also produces pleasures and “delights” that one can enjoy, yet which one *shouldn’t* enjoy if pure mores and a devotion to virtue are to be preserved. To be sure, in the state of nature men and beasts were attracted to a limited number of pleasures and delights (and satisfied them if they could), yet for a republic to remain pure and incorrupt the pleasures associated with wealth must be repressed. With their contempt for commerce and wealth, ancient republics also reject luxury. There is a clear link between luxury and inequality, since “Luxury is always proportionate to the inequality of fortunes.” In addition, “If wealth is equally divided in a state, there will be no luxury, for luxury is founded on the comforts one can give oneself from the work of others.”¹¹⁷ Republics need to prevent luxury from entering their cities and in order to do this they must divide the city’s wealth equally among the citizens. If this is done, they will be able to prevent the emergence of inequality. In order to do this, one must always work and provide for oneself only. One should not enjoy the comforts that result from the labor of others, which produces not only dependence on others, but also inequality and forbidden comforts. In sum, the absence of commerce and luxury is associated with the peculiar understanding of perfection of ancient republics—“The less luxury is in a republic, the more perfect it is.”¹¹⁸ Just as the individual citizens of a republic must aim at a perfection of soul, the republic as a whole aims at a standard of perfection.

In his later treatment of ancient republics, Montesquieu also gives a fuller picture of ancient republics’ relation to war, and the way in which war affected the passions of

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 1.7.1.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 1.7.2.

republican citizens. The Greeks, according to Montesquieu, occupied themselves with exercises related to gymnastics and war. Greek institutions gave them no other exercises, and because of this, “One must regard the Greeks as a society of athletes and fighters.” Their exercises made the Greeks “harsh and savage” and the Greeks needed the counterbalance of music in order to soften their harsh mores.¹¹⁹ These exercises and the warlike toughness that resulted from them distinguish the Greeks from the natural men described in Book I. Natural men were timid and fearful of everything; the Greeks are “harsh” and seem almost eager to fight anyone. Their exercises also give the Greeks a kind of collective strength that natural men in their isolation and weakness lacked. And their exercises produce a kind of modification of the soul or of the passions in the Greeks. According to Montesquieu, the Greeks’ exercises “aroused in them only one type of passion: roughness, cruelty, and anger.”¹²⁰ The Spartans’ exercises, originating in Spartan institutions, create the artificial passion of roughness, cruelty, and anger, which is useful in war. There is no roughness, cruelty, or anger in natural man, but such toughness—directed both toward oneself and potentially toward others—is required for Spartan institutions to thrive.

One of the difficulties ancient republics face is the task of persuading or compelling their citizens to adhere to such a difficult way of life. Montesquieu suggests one way that this is done in a chapter entitled “How love of equality and frugality are inspired.”¹²¹ In Montesquieu’s view, equality and frugality are “strongly aroused” simply by equality and frugality themselves, if one lives in a republic where they are established

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 1.4.8.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., 1.5.4.

by laws. In order to inspire equality and frugality one must simply establish them by law, prevent corrupt external influences from entering the city, and the citizens like monks will love equality and frugality. The form of the government and its principles influence and shape the character of the citizens who inhabit the government; they follow its tone. In addition, in order to love frugality one must simply practice it. Montesquieu makes loving frugality appear to be a very simple task—one merely has to practice it in order for love of frugality to arise. By practicing frugality, though, the citizens also acquire a new *taste* for frugality. While by nature men lack this taste for frugality, nature can be modified and men given a taste for the practice of frugality. Frugality, then, requires discipline and inculcation, but by practicing it men will gain a taste for it and it will become easier to love because of that. Moreover, equality and frugality are examples of good mores, and Montesquieu suggests how good mores—which are difficult to maintain—can be maintained. With respect to mores, in Montesquieu’s view, “much is gained by keeping the old customs.”¹²² Stated differently, conservatism is the best policy in republics. This view relies on the presupposition that what is oldest politically and morally is what is best and most praiseworthy, and there ought to be no innovation politically or morally from what is established. There can only be a decline or decay from what is highest and best. Montesquieu also suggests how such a policy can be applied to republican mores. Mores are best maintained, in this view, by the “extreme” subordination of the young to the old. Both the young and the old “are contained, the former by the respect they have for the elderly, the latter by the respect they have for

¹²² Ibid., 1.5.7.

themselves.”¹²³ In republics, in order to preserve good mores there is a hierarchy and inequality as the young are subordinated to the old. Men’s natural passions are modified, in this regard, by the respect that the young have for the old and which the old have for themselves. This respect is a species of pride that the old possess. As we will see later in the book, it is in monarchies that pride and honor play the biggest part in forming and shaping a political community, but in republics too we see the way in which honor and pride shape the passions and mores of the community. This inegalitarian respect and honor, moreover, is according to Montesquieu completely compatible with republics’ fundamental principle of equality.

Finally, Montesquieu indicates the relation between self-renouncing and artificial virtue, and liberty, this latter a concept that Montesquieu has yet to adequately define. According to Montesquieu, “The natural place of virtue is with liberty, but virtue can no more be found with extreme liberty than with servitude.”¹²⁴ Virtue then is in principle compatible with liberty, whatever that may mean precisely, yet virtue is incompatible with extreme liberty, or rather genuine natural independence outside of a political community. Montesquieu’s statement here on the relation between virtue and liberty, however, is provisional, and Montesquieu will revise it in important ways as the book progresses.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 1.8.3.

2.2 THE CORRUPTION OF REPUBLICS AND THE RETURN TO NATURE

One of the things that republics in particular have to fear is the corruption of their principles. And in Montesquieu's view the danger of corruption in republics is always at the door: ambition, avarice, illegitimate desires, and other kinds of vice are all grave threats that republics must be constantly vigilant against. Virtue in particular needs to be maintained in republics, since when virtue is destroyed, "ambition enters those hearts that can admit it, and avarice enters them all. Desires change their objects: that which one used to love, one loves no longer. One was free under the laws, one wants to be free against them. Each citizen is like a slave who has escaped from his master's house. What was a *maxim* is now called *severity*; what was a *rule* is now called a *constraint*; what was *vigilance* is now called *fear*."¹²⁵ Because republics demand such an extreme modification of the passions—insofar as their aim is a certain understanding of perfection—republics are particularly vulnerable to corruption, since such a standard is difficult to achieve and maintain. As we have seen, it requires a delicate institutional balance to try pull this off. Once men no longer love virtue, elements of their original nature seem to reemerge—such as their freedom or desire for lack of external constraint (e.g., against laws), and their passionate self-interest, which manifests itself, for instance, in avarice. The change in meanings of words associated with republican mores, moreover, entails a change in perspective of what is considered moral and immoral. And once the citizens have lost their virtue, or their taste for virtue, the republic resembles "a cast-off husk, and [the republic's] strength is no more than the power of a few citizens and the license of all."¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Ibid., 1.3.3.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

This account with its description of “license” sounds immoral to traditional notions of morality. Yet it is important to remember: there were no fundamental moral restrictions or constraints on men’s freedom in the state of nature. In the state of nature men possessed license to do whatever they wanted to do, without moral restrictions, even if their desires were limited essentially to desires having to do with self-preservation. In any case, the meaning is clear: from the perspective of an unhealthy republic that has lost its virtue, the government is nothing but power in the hands of a few, and there is a general licentiousness, among both citizens and non-citizens. And again, Montesquieu reminds us of the hierarchy and reliance on tradition of republics—responsibility for maintaining the republic and preventing the emergence of corruption lies with the elders: “It is not young people who degenerate; they are ruined only when grown men have already been corrupted.”¹²⁷ As we have seen, republics must be founded and maintained as closed societies, which are capable of keeping out corrupt influences. And they must rely on and perpetuate the fiction that what is oldest is what is best and most praiseworthy. Yet this belief is far from the thoughts of the first men in the state of nature—in the state of nature there was no talk of virtue, perfection, or corruption. What men think of as best and most praiseworthy, then, is an innovation that came after what is truly oldest.

Montesquieu suggests that one sign of decadence verging on corruption is the decadence of “great rewards.” In his view great rewards in republics are a sign of decadence because they prove that republican principles—of equality and virtue—have been corrupted.¹²⁸ Republics should not satisfy individual self-interest in the form of

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.4.5.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.5.18.

great rewards because this satisfaction leads to distinctions and inequalities that go against republican principles. In particular these rewards go against republican equality and the general tone of austerity in republics. And as I have tried to show throughout this chapter, there is a tension between men's natural inclinations or passions and the suppression or modification of inclinations or passions in society, and in particular in republics. Montesquieu suggests that this is indeed the case when he claims that those who have been "corrupted by delights" will not love the frugal life, "and if this had been natural and ordinary, Alcibiades would not have been the wonder of the universe."¹²⁹ Montesquieu therefore strongly hints that the life of virtue as he understands it goes against our natural inclinations, and that the corrupt Alcibiades is closer at least in some senses—in his indulgence of his passions—to natural men than the pious and law-abiding citizens of republics, who have been trained to love frugality. Alcibiades in following his natural passions went against the grain of conventional opinion, but in pursuing delights he was closer to nature than those Greeks who advocated and lived the life of frugality. The pursuit of delights is what is in fact "natural and ordinary."¹³⁰

We have seen earlier in this chapter Montesquieu's judgment that whereas the spirit of monarchy is war and expansion, the spirit of republics is peace and moderation. And Montesquieu suggests that there was a precise time when the Spartan republic was indeed corrupted by monarchical ambition. The infection came from Athens: "Athens was seized by ambition and transmitted it to Lacedaemonia; but this was in order to

¹²⁹ Ibid., 1.5.4.

¹³⁰ Consider, on this point, Randal R. Hendrickson, "Montesquieu's (anti-)Machiavellianism: The Fate of Ordinary Acquisitiveness in *The Spirit of Laws*," *Journal of Politics* 75 (2013): 1-12.

command free peoples rather than to govern slaves; to be at the head of the union rather than to shatter it. *All was lost* when a monarchy rose up, a government whose spirit tends more toward expansion.”¹³¹ Sparta was infected with ambition from Athens, then, but initially this ambition was compatible with republican government and a foreign policy of moderate and peaceful defense. Over time, however, republican principles decayed and became corrupt and a monarchy came into being, which contradicted the spirit of peace and moderation of republican government. As we have seen, the spirit of monarchy is war and expansion, and monarchy’s ambition is something that Sparta succumbed to over time after being infected by Athens’ desire for ambition.

One of the resources available to republics, however, in trying to maintain healthy and uncorrupt mores is censorship. And in Montesquieu’s judgment the task of republican censors is great, since corruption is a constant threat to republics. Republican censors “must reestablish all that has been corrupted in a republic, notice slackness, judge oversights, and correct mistakes, just as the laws punish crimes.”¹³² However, we need to compare this state again to the state of natural man and his weakness. As we noted in our analysis of Book I, Montesquieu’s account of natural man suggests that men naturally lack the strength to follow difficult laws and prefer following their own self-interest to following moral demands. By nature men are susceptible to the kinds of “mistakes” that republican censors must watch for and correct. Republicanism requires moral education and continual moral reeducation to maintain its virtue. Without this continual correction—and at times punishment—the republic will fall prey to corruption. And

¹³¹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.8.16; my emphasis.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 1.5.7.

Montesquieu adds to the list of the reasons why censors are necessary in a republic by claiming that not only do crimes destroy virtue, but also negligence, mistakes, slackness in love of the homeland, dangerous examples, seeds of corruption, that which does not run counter to the laws but eludes them, that which does not destroy the laws but weakens them: “all these should be corrected by the censors.”¹³³ In this account we see many of the ways in which the republic is threatened by corruption, but again, when we remember Montesquieu’s description of men’s nature, we recall that men are by nature prone to the kinds of mistakes and slackness that this statement describes. Censors must try to maintain a morality that is not supported by men’s nature. And although censors must continually correct men’s faults to ensure the perpetuation of virtue in the republic, their task will be particularly taxing, since men’s weak nature always has a tendency to return.

When republics become corrupt, their corruption begins almost always with the corruption of their principles—in the case of republics, virtue and equality. In particular, Montesquieu claims that republics must be wary of something he calls “extreme equality.” As he puts it, “The principle of democracy is corrupted not only when the spirit of equality is lost but also when the spirit of extreme equality is taken up and each one wants to be equal to those chosen to command....There will no longer be mores or love of order, and finally, there will no longer be virtue.”¹³⁴ The republican spirit of (true) equality requires virtuous mores and a love of order; extreme equality corrupts virtue and love of order, since with the spirit of extreme equality there is no deference and

¹³³ Ibid., 1.5.19.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 1.8.2.

submission to the laws of the republic, which are compatible with the true spirit of equality. From the perspective of men's nature, though, the principle of equality seems to culminate in the spirit of extreme equality. If all men are equal by nature, or at least equal in some of the most important ways, and the fundamental principle of republican government is in theory the equality of men, why should a kind of extreme spirit of equality not reign? Republics seem particularly vulnerable, then, to extreme equality, which has its basis in human nature. Yet as Montesquieu has pointed out, republican government is also compatible with hierarchy, deference, and submission to established laws, and in particular submission to those men who authoritatively interpret the laws for the citizens. Later on, Montesquieu clarifies the way in which the spirit of equality differs from the spirit of extreme equality: "As far as the sky is from the earth, so far is the true spirit of equality from the spirit of extreme equality. The former consists neither in making everyone command, but in obeying and commanding one's equals. It seeks not to have no master but only to have one's equals as masters."¹³⁵ Conventional inequalities between those who rule and those who are ruled, then, exist in republics. Yet these inequalities are compatible with the "true" spirit of equality that ought to rule in republics, even if they are in tension with what we know of men in the state of nature.

Another source of republican corruption is—paradoxically—security. Security corrupts republics, whereas a sense of insecurity is necessary for healthy republics: "A republic must dread something. Fear of the Persians maintained the laws of the Greeks....How singular! The more secure these state are, the more, as tranquil waters,

¹³⁵ Ibid., 1.8.3.

they are subject to corruption.”¹³⁶ While republics—like individual men in the state of nature—seek to procure their self-preservation, republics need to exist in a state of fear and anxiety about their security to maintain their health. Republics may be tempted, once they attain a state of security, to relax in their “tranquil waters.” Yet Montesquieu suggests that republics must seek out something or someone to dread. Republics, in order to avoid corruption, must be constantly vigilant against a perceived threat, and have something or someone to fear and struggle against. As I have tried to show, acquiring security is merely one of many ways that Montesquieu thinks republics are subject to corruption. And Montesquieu suggests that there is a great difficulty in recovering a republic’s health once corruption has first occurred. In Montesquieu’s view, once a republic has been corrupted, none of the ills that may afflict a republic can be dealt with “except by removing the corruption and recalling the principles; every other correction is either useless or a new ill.”¹³⁷ There is then a need, after a republic has been corrupted, to attempt to remove the corruption and “recall the principles” of virtue and republican equality. However, one can exacerbate a bad situation by trying to correct the ills of the republic. It is important to emphasize here the extremely difficult task of constantly “removing the corruption”—such a description sounds like the task of a doctor surgically removing a sick part of the body—and recalling or restoring the principles that have been forgotten. As we have seen, the task of maintaining republican virtue takes continual effort to constantly remove or thwart new sources of corruption, and ultimately goes against the grain of our nature, as Montesquieu understands it. Eventual corruption of the

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.8.5.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.8.12.

republic seems inevitable, since the constant struggle to prevent or repair corruption wears down men's limited strength. At bottom, republics struggle to maintain a standard of moral and political perfection with imperfect and fallible human beings.

Ancient republics, then, ultimately have to do with aiming at attaining and maintaining some standard of perfection, and trying to order men's passions to adhere to that standard. Yet, in an important statement later in the book having to do with this matter, Montesquieu claims, "Perfection does not concern men or things universally."¹³⁸ Republics like Sparta aim at perfection, yet perfection is, as we have seen over the course of Montesquieu's commentary on republics, an impossibly high and inhuman standard. Republican perfection seems to try to stretch the limits of what is humanly possible. Yet in doing so it attempts to adhere to a moral and political standard that warps human nature in important ways and ultimately estranges it from its true contours. In addition, Montesquieu makes clear the tension between human nature and men's passions, on the one hand, and governments that twist nature important ways by aiming at inhumanly high standards. As he puts it, "It is a misfortune of the human condition that legislators are obliged to make laws that oppose even natural feelings....This is because the statutes of legislators regard the society more than the citizen, and the citizen more than the man. The laws sacrificed both the citizen and the man and thought only of the republic."¹³⁹ Montesquieu here blames republican legislators for elevating the supposed good of the community over what is good for men individually or naturally, that is, the satisfaction of their natural passions.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 5.24.7.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 6.27.1.

As the book progresses, and as I will try to show in the chapters that follow, Montesquieu's true standard in judging regimes is precisely human nature and humanity, and republican virtue does not meet this standard because it requires the sacrifice or repression of men's nature in order to exalt the good of the community. It remains to be seen if there is a regime that can more adequately satisfy men's nature than the ancient republics best exemplified by Sparta. Following Montesquieu's investigation of the nature of ancient republics and their inadequacy with regard to satisfying the needs of human nature politically, Montesquieu turns to a promising alternative: monarchies and their animating passion of honor. As we will see, neither repressive and painful virtue nor self-exalting honor are particularly natural, strictly speaking, if we take our bearings from the standard of Book I. But whereas virtue warps human nature in a particularly inhumane way, honor warps human nature in a more salutary way, according to Montesquieu, and is the first of the political alternatives to be able, in principle, to aim at and achieve the most important political goal, as brought to light in Book I, political security.

3.0 MONARCHIES AND HONOR

3.1 THE PASSIONS IN MONARCHIES

According to Montesquieu, honor is the predominant passion and spring of monarchies, just as virtue is the predominant passion and spring of republics. And in a chapter entitled “How virtue is replaced in monarchical government” Montesquieu clarifies what he means by honor: “HONOR, that is, the *prejudice* of each person and each condition, takes the place of the political virtue of which I have spoken and represents it everywhere.”¹⁴⁰ Montesquieu thus claims that honor is a “prejudice” and moreover one that affects every person and every condition within a monarchy. That is, it is not rooted in knowledge of an accurate estimation of oneself and one’s worth. We can add that it is an unnatural evaluation, since an independent man in the state of nature had no one else to compare himself to. Inequality exists and men only learn to compare themselves to each other within society, and although Montesquieu claims in Book I that one of the motives in joining society is to gain greater knowledge or enlightenment, here he carefully makes explicit that honor is merely a prejudice; it lacks any solid natural foundation or grounding in what is true. In addition to its unnaturalness, however, Montesquieu emphasizes the way in which the passion of honor, although it is a prejudice, can in a monarchy quite easily replace republican virtue and lead to very impressive political results. Whereas in his discussion of ancient republics Montesquieu makes a powerful rhetorical case for the impressive political effects that result from

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 1.3.6.; my emphasis.

republican virtue, here he makes the case for the impressive political effects of honor. Indeed, despite its illusory character, Montesquieu claims that honor “can inspire the finest actions; joined with the force of laws, it can lead to the goal of government as does virtue itself.”¹⁴¹ Honor, combined with fine actions and the force of the laws, is the formula that can lead a monarchy to the goal of government.

In a chapter entitled “That virtue is not the principle of monarchical government,” Montesquieu argues that monarchy accomplishes “great things with as little virtue as it can, just as in the finest machines art employs as few motions, forces, and wheels as possible.”¹⁴² Monarchies in particular lack the “heroic virtues we find in the ancients and know only by hearsay,” yet there is still a particular greatness to monarchies. According to Montesquieu, “the laws” replace republican virtue, and this replacement results in a particular greatness; the state “excuses” one from being virtuous or trying to be so. The establishment of monarchical laws, then, ushers in a complete overturning of traditional standards of morality. There is no longer any need to sacrifice oneself out of devotion to the community. In monarchies, enjoying private “vices” or indulging in natural and unnatural passions may be the inevitable result of this lowering of the bar of moral standards, but “here an action done noiselessly is in a way inconsequential.”¹⁴³ As long as

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid., 1.3.5. Rahe notes that Montesquieu has a tendency to describe various forms of government “in the new mechanical and hydraulic language of Galilean, Cartesian, and Newtonian physics.” Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty*, 151.

¹⁴³ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.3.5. Spector notes that Montesquieu's treatment of egoism and his exculpation of private vice in monarchies is similar to Mandeville's treatment of private vice and public virtue in Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*. Céline Spector, “Vices privés, vertus publiques: de la *Fable des abeilles* à *De l'esprit des lois*,” in *Montesquieu and the Spirit of Modernity*, ed. David W. Carrithers and Patrick Coleman (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002), 127-157.

one obeys the morally lax laws of a monarchy, private vice is nothing to worry about. In addition, Montesquieu distinguishes between public and private crimes in a monarchy. Public crimes are those that harm society as a whole, whereas private crimes harm individuals more than society. Whereas in republics private crimes are more public than in monarchies—insofar as mores are so closely linked to the constitutions of republics—in monarchies private crimes are less important, and “public crimes are more private” since they harm individual fortunes more than the constitution itself. That is, not only is there less emphasis on private crimes and repressing individual passions in a monarchy, but what matters most, what is really onerous from the perspective of monarchical laws, is illegitimately grasping for the individual fortunes of others. Not only do monarchies exempt their citizens from painful republican virtue, then, but there is in principle at least a focus in monarchies on following one’s passions by accumulating wealth, or at least on using wealth as a powerful means to enjoy other passions.¹⁴⁴ And Montesquieu suggests that it is this, the security of individual men’s fortunes, rather than correcting men’s moral faults, that can or should be the primary focus of a monarchy’s laws.

In “On the principle of monarchy,” Montesquieu states that monarchies include pre-eminences and ranks; monarchy is based on a hierarchy in which the king is at the top, and there are various rungs below him, each corresponding to a different social rank.¹⁴⁵ In addition it is in the nature of honor “to demand preferences and

¹⁴⁴ While there is in principle a distinction between the pursuit of honor and the pursuit of wealth, it seems that the accumulation of wealth in a monarchy can be achieved through trying to distinguish oneself in the amount of wealth that one accumulates, that is, by trying to attain a kind of honor.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Binoche, *Introduction à De l’esprit des lois de Montesquieu*, 122.

distinctions.”¹⁴⁶ What is striking about this account of honor is the “demands” that one makes for preferences and distinctions, as if one is righteously indignant about one’s worth, either intrinsically or with regard to the monarchy. And it is rooted in a psychological comparison between oneself and other men. In republics, as we recall, all men are capable of feeling the sentiment or passion of virtue, and each man contributes to the good of the republic by equally contributing in virtue, even if, as Montesquieu suggests, each man possesses different and unequal faculties in contributing to the republic. Republics therefore reproduce something of the equality of the state of nature, even if the laws had to make men equal, since when men enter society, inequalities emerge, which are the source of competition, the desire for distinction, and potentially violent conflict, as Hobbes loudly proclaims and as Montesquieu more mutedly admits. Monarchies, in contrast to republics, quickly dissolve the equality of the state of nature and make no pretense of recreating it in the monarchy.

Yet despite failing to reproduce natural equality, Montesquieu has extremely high praise for honor and its effects in a monarchy. Whereas honorable ambition is “pernicious” in a republic, it has “good effects” in a monarchy. On the one hand this is because it “gives life” to the monarchy; on the other hand it is advantageous because it is not dangerous and it can “constantly be repressed.” It would seem to give life to the monarchy insofar as it is a way to excite the hopes and expectations of the citizens or subjects of a monarchy. The passion of honor involves the hope of this-worldly rewards for the recognition of one’s worth and abilities. Whereas this function was fulfilled in republics by religion—and the hopes of an afterlife to console men for their present

¹⁴⁶ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.3.7.

sufferings—monarchies reward men by inflating and soothing their honor, which as any person who has experienced this phenomenon would admit, can feel very pleasant. Furthermore, the focus on “life” in a monarchy is very important. While there was no talk of republics being lively—indeed, how can an order of self-repressing monks or the like justly be characterized as being full of life?—the liveliness of monarchies and the enjoyment of this-worldly passions are in stark contrast to republican self-denial and attempted self-overcoming. Yet honor is not dangerous, as Montesquieu suggests, because it can easily be repressed. This is because it can be quite easy to deflate men’s honor and sense of self-worth. This may cause psychological pain, but it may be necessary for the healthy maintenance of the monarchy. This is because no matter how highly one estimates oneself, or how highly others estimate one, there is almost always someone else who can make a persuasive claim to being better than oneself according to the standard (such as honor) by which one measures oneself. And the monarch can use this fact in tamping down men who have an overly inflated sense of honor. Although Montesquieu does not spell this out, this thought applies equally to the monarch.

Montesquieu illuminates the prejudice of honor at work in a monarchy by providing an image of monarchy in motion. He compares monarchy to “the system of the universe,”¹⁴⁷ and the monarch is at the center of the universe, in charge of it. According to Montesquieu, the monarch can obtain great honor without being terribly ambitious. He does this by honoring men—his subjects—in various ways, which thereby increases his subjects’ honor for him. With honor enlivening a monarchy, “there is a force constantly repelling all bodies from the center [of “the universe”] and a force of gravitation

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

attracting them to it.”¹⁴⁸ The monarch can then make judicious use of honor to keep the monarchy in motion, and manage to keep his seat. Moreover, honor “binds men” in a monarchy. In a monarchy, it is impossible to resist the gravitational pull of honor. One ineluctably strives constantly to advance oneself in honor and distinction, and there is no such thing as a final resting point at which one has acquired *all* the honors.¹⁴⁹ And it is a pleasant thing to acquire more and greater honors. In this way, monarchy resolves the tension between self-interest and the common good, without demanding any painful sacrifices on the part of a monarchy’s subjects. As Montesquieu says, one may by chance find a man who is morally good in a monarchy, but this is rare. For, in order to be truly good—taken “in a political sense”—in a monarchy, one must have the *intention* of being good, and love the state less for oneself than for itself.¹⁵⁰ In monarchies men work for the common good while “believing” that they work for their own good. In Montesquieu’s understanding of monarchy, then, there is an attempt to resolve the tension between self-interest and the common good. According to Montesquieu this is one way in which such a tension can be resolved. And Montesquieu reinforces his emphasis on honor as a prejudice by wanting his readers to know the tough-minded truth about monarchy—the honor that “guides” all the parts of a monarchy is in fact “a false honor,” even if this false honor is extremely “useful to the public.”¹⁵¹ Honor in a monarchy is then pure

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Pangle notes that the incompatibility between Christianity and prideful monarchy was a major cause of the censorship of *The Spirit of the Laws* by the faculty of the Sorbonne. Pangle, *The Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity*, 60.

¹⁵⁰ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.3.6.

¹⁵¹ Cf. Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty*, 199. Mosher notes that in his treatment of “false honor” Montesquieu may have in mind Montaigne’s essay “On Glory,” where false honor relies on “external appearances.” Michael A. Mosher, “Monarchy’s Paradox: Honor in the Face of Sovereign Power,” in *Montesquieu’s Science*

illusion. (And this may be why Montesquieu uses such an exaggerated image in describing the nature of monarchy.) It may be an illusion that “gives life” to monarchy and binds men to the monarchy, but it is an illusion nonetheless. At their core men are still the natural and unpretentious men of the state of nature, who become intoxicated with self-interested honor only once they leave that state.

Still, Montesquieu marvels at the intoxicating effects of honor in those who experience it, and the way in which honor can induce men to undergo extremely difficult tasks. As he asks, “And is it not impressive that one can *oblige* men to do *all the difficult actions* and which require force, with no reward other than *the renown* of these actions?”¹⁵² Even in a monarchy, with its purported resolution of the tension between self-interest and duty to the state, one can induce men to sacrifice themselves, by holding out the hope for attaining honor and glory. In dispensing, at least in principle, with religion, monarchies use the promise of glory, of having one’s name remembered and honored throughout the ages, as an inducement for men to undergo “all the difficult actions.”

of Politics: Essays on The Spirit of Laws, ed. David W. Carrithers, Michael A. Mosher, and Paul A. Rahe (Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield, 2000), 211; also consider Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (London: Penguin Classics, 1993), 702-717.

¹⁵² Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.3.7; my emphasis.

3.2 EDUCATION IN MONARCHIES

Education plays an important role in monarchies, but in a significantly different way than it did in republics.¹⁵³ As we have seen, in republics legislators form men according to a certain fixed code and then men educate their children by that code. And this republican education requires a closed society in which all impressions from outside the city are forbidden. In monarchies, by contrast, men's true education begins not in "public institutions" in their youth, but rather "when one enters the world." Such an education provides even greater hope for a unified education than republican education. Whereas the greater world is a source of potential corruption for republics, for monarchies, "The world is the school of what is called *honor*, the universal master that should everywhere guide us."¹⁵⁴ In monarchies, it is not legislators and fathers who educate by means of myth and constraint, but rather men are educated by taking their bearings from how men actually act when they are not being constrained—in society, as it were, not from the blinkered perspective of a republic or traditional religious community. As we have seen, in Montesquieu's analysis, honor is not strictly speaking natural, since no one compares oneself to anyone else in the state of nature; but honor *becomes* in a way natural within society—one could say men acquire a second nature in society, which involves comparisons, distinctions, and honors. Once men are in society, they compare themselves to each other, and desire to acquire as much honor as they can. Men observe how other men behave, and learn how they can rise in society. In the world,

¹⁵³ Merry notes how little concerned Montesquieu is with the education of the actual prince or monarch, in contrast with, for instance, Machiavelli. Merry, *Montesquieu's System of Natural Government*, 212.

¹⁵⁴ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.4.2.

or a world shaped by a monarchy, men learn three things—that a certain nobility should be put in men’s virtues, frankness should be in men’s mores, and politeness should be in men’s manners. Montesquieu points out that these lessons all pertain to one’s self-interest—they have to do with what one “owes oneself” and nothing to do with what men owe others—and they involve not what causes men to join together in devotion to a virtuous cause, but rather what gives men individual distinction. The mores and manners of a monarchy cause men to try to elevate themselves above other men. Yet whereas Hobbes fears the potentially bloody consequences of unfettered ambition and competition between men, Montesquieu thinks competition, properly guided, can lead to a common good.

The standard by which one judges oneself in a monarchy, according to Montesquieu, is not goodness, justice, or reason; rather, men are judged according to whether or not their actions are “fine,” “great,” or “extraordinary.” As soon as honor finds something noble in a monarchy, honor is either the judge who “makes it legitimate” or is “a sophist who justifies it.” That is, there is a standard of nobility, of something high as opposed to what is low, that legitimizes a conception of the noble or sophistically justifies something that has not been judged to be legitimately noble. And just as Lycurgus mixed traditional virtues and vices in forming Spartan institutions, monarchies too allow traditional vices—deceit is allowed and not punished in pursuit of greatness of spirit. Yet although deceit goes unpunished, “truth is desired in speech” in a monarchy, and frankness in mores is part of education in monarchy.¹⁵⁵ But men’s frankness is not caused by an intrinsic love of the truth. Rather men desire to *appear*, by telling the truth,

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

“to be daring and free.” Men who with frankness speak the truth appear to be powerfully independent of other men’s opinions, yet they only *seem* to be independent. Montesquieu punctures a hole in their illusion of independence, and suggests that they are in reality very dependent on other men’s opinions of them. From Montesquieu’s perspective, though, such dependence concealed by apparent independence has salutary political effects in a monarchy.

In addition, education in monarchies involves learning politeness in manners. As we have seen, Montesquieu thinks that men are naturally independent, yet they are also characterized by a kind of “asocial sociability.” In his account of monarchical education, Montesquieu adds to his account of men’s nature by suggesting that men are also “born to please each other.”¹⁵⁶ Montesquieu therefore softens Hobbes’ account of men’s potentially violent self-interest by suggesting men’s natural desire to please each other. This desire to please others, according to Montesquieu, manifests itself in polite manners. Yet the desire to observe the social codes of propriety is rooted in self-interest and the desire to distinguish oneself in the eyes of others. If one fails to observe codes of propriety, one offends others with whom one lives and discredits oneself to the point of being unable to advance oneself in the world. Whereas men are fundamentally self-interested, then, Montesquieu suggests that in society, and especially in monarchies, men need to observe codes of propriety and display good manners—even if such codes are arbitrary and artificial, based in illusion, and cause one to depend on the opinions of others—in order to advance their self-interest. While we are born to please each other and do this by being polite with others, Montesquieu is tough-minded about the true origin of

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

politeness. Rather than being rooted in any kind of intrinsic goodwill toward those with whom we come in contact, the true origin of politeness does not come from “a pure source”—in reality, “We are polite from arrogance; we flatter ourselves that our manners prove that we are not common and that we have not lived with the sort of people who have been neglected through the ages.”¹⁵⁷ Politeness flatters oneself into thinking that one does not even belong to the same species as the unwashed masses.

Montesquieu provides a compact yet revealing account of passions in a monarchy in a chapter on education in a monarchy. For one thing, luxury and even great amounts of luxury are permitted in a monarchy. So the desire to enrich oneself is a powerful passion in a monarchy. This is in sharp contrast to the ban on luxury and strict regulation of commerce in ancient republics. But according to Montesquieu, great fortune in addition to honor produce “delicacy of taste in all things.”¹⁵⁸ Delicacy of taste also comes from the variety and “especially the weariness” of the pleasures in a monarchy. A few things are particularly important here. For one, Montesquieu never explicitly blames the emergence of excessive pleasures and the enjoyment of them in a monarchy. However, there is nonetheless a subtle critique of the passions in a monarchy. For instance, Montesquieu claims that there is a certain “weariness of the pleasures” in a monarchy. This seems to come from expending oneself in experiencing the variety of pleasures one can experience in a monarchy. This weariness seems to result in a kind of boredom and enervation of one’s natural vigor, which in turn contributes to greater and greater delicacy of taste in the fevered search to experience more and greater pleasures. In addition,

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

Montesquieu subtly criticizes monarchy's "confusion" of fancies. As we recall from Book I, Montesquieu thinks that it is excessive prejudices or fancies that cause us to lose our ability to know ourselves. On the one hand, then, while Montesquieu does not blame in principle the standard by which those in a monarchy pursue their passions—that is, according to the standard of pleasure—he does suggest that the pleasures that men pursue cause them to lose contact with the core of their nature. Despite that, Montesquieu seems less concerned with this problem than Rousseau is, as we will see. In any case, perhaps it is not so horrible to have delicate taste. Furthermore, according to Montesquieu's account of education in a monarchy, honor "meddles" in everything in a monarchy, into all modes of thought and all ways of feeling, and in shaping everything under its influence it alters our duties, by extending or limited our duties. That is, what counts is not a law or rule itself, but rather the *interpretation* of the law or rule in the light of the standard of honor. For instance, although monarchy's laws prescribe that men ought to obey the will of the prince (or his ministers), the principle of honor trumps any action on the part of the prince or his ministers that dishonors those under the prince's jurisdiction. In such cases the principle of one's honor should be followed in lieu of the will of the prince: one would otherwise be "incapable" of serving and obeying the prince. In effect, then, honor is the true arbiter of the laws in a monarchy.

An education in a monarchy, according to Montesquieu, has three supreme rules. The first rule is that men may give importance to their fortune, although they are forbidden from giving any importance to their life. This rule permits us to see with clarity one measure of the distance between men in the state of nature and men in a monarchy. In the state of nature men fear death and desire nothing so much as to protect their lives

from the specter of it, once they become aware of it. In monarchies, however, honor aids in inspiring fearlessness in the face of death. Whereas republics try to constrain men into rising above their natures, monarchies try to get men to forget themselves or their deepest needs by seducing them to risk death in the pursuit of an illusion, that is, their honor. The second rule of honor is that when men have been placed in a rank, men should do nothing that might “show” that they consider themselves inferior to their rank. That is, if one’s estimation of oneself does not conform to the conventional standard, one should nonetheless maintain the appearance that one deserves one’s rank. And third, corroborating Montesquieu’s statement that honor is the true arbiter of the laws in a monarchy, he says, “what honor forbids is more rigorously forbidden when the laws do not agree is proscribing it,” and “what honor requires is more strongly required when the laws do not require it.”¹⁵⁹ Honor, though it is a mere prejudice, is the true animating and regulating force within a monarchy.

3.3 THE NATURE OF MONARCHIES

Montesquieu articulates the way in which the nature of monarchy differs from that of republics and of despotisms in the following way: “Monarchical government is that in which one alone governs, but by fixed and established laws.”¹⁶⁰ This arrangement is in sharp contrast to republics, in which the people or a part of the people rule, and despotisms, where, as in a monarchy, one rules, yet without fixed laws, and where the

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 1.2.1.

despot rules everything according to his whims and caprices. (There is then a kinship between republics and despotisms insofar as both lack fixed laws.) The nature of monarchies is such that only one man rules, albeit while being guided by established and fixed laws. Despite their various defects republics seemed to be impressive governments because they took account of men's natural equality and tried to reproduce such equality in a social state—even if Lycurgus was ignorant of the state of nature—in a particular civic way of life. By contrast, monarchies with their single rulers seem, at least at this point, to be further from the state of nature than virtuous and austere republics.¹⁶¹ In a monarchy fixed and established laws replace the idea of good laws in a republic.

In the chapter entitled “On laws in their relation to the nature of monarchical government,” Montesquieu provides a clear statement of how monarchies are constituted: “Intermediate, subordinate, and dependent powers constitute the nature of monarchical government, that is, of the government in which one alone governs by fundamental laws.”¹⁶² Furthermore, Montesquieu repeats himself to emphasize *subordinate and dependent powers*, i.e., there is an inegalitarian hierarchy at the core of monarchy's nature. And where the individual members of republican governments were the legitimate source of political power in republics, in monarchies “the prince” is *the* source—at least so Montesquieu says now—of all political and civil power. That is, one man above the rest is *the* unique source of all political power. All legitimacy is derived from him. What, then, restrains the prince? If he is the source of all legitimacy, what does he owe anyone

¹⁶¹ As Rahe astutely notes, Montesquieu never raises in *The Spirit of the Laws* “the obvious and unavoidable question: whether a regime of artificial preferences and distinctions can be made compatible with what one can infer...from the natural equality of man.” Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty*, 200.

¹⁶² Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.2.4.

else? What restrains the prince, according to Montesquieu, are the intermediate power and the “fundamental laws.” This dependence and subordination on the part of some men is far from the equality of the state of nature. Yet these lower powers serve a useful purpose. They provide a kind of balance of powers, and even balance of passions within a monarchy. And whereas earlier Montesquieu had said that society initially makes men unequal and that only laws could make them equal again, this restoration or reproduction of natural equality does not seem to take place in monarchies in the way that it does in republics.

In addition, it is not clear who the prince is or how he became a prince. There were of course no natural princes in the state of nature. It is also not clear if the prince acquired his position by legitimate authority or by force and fraud, for instance, and it is not clear if the prince’s power is hereditary. In any case, perhaps Montesquieu must proceed delicately when discussing the nature of monarchies because he does not want to arouse the indignation of partisans of monarchy in his native country, which, to say the least, is not a model of a monarchy as Montesquieu envisions one, with strong intermediate powers to buffer the power of the prince. Montesquieu at least wants to make it appear as if one of his aims is to make his fellow countrymen—and others—have greater affection for their duties, their prince, their homeland, and their laws. If each man could have a greater feeling for his happiness in his own country and government Montesquieu would consider himself “the happiest of mortals.”¹⁶³ Yet Montesquieu is silent as to the precise content of the laws in a monarchy. It seems enough to say that they are “fundamental laws” to satisfy at least some readers that they are good or wise laws.

¹⁶³ Ibid., preface.

And whereas Lycurgus was explicitly said to be a wise legislator—somehow uniting wisdom and political power—monarchy’s laws are not explicitly said to unite wisdom and power. Montesquieu adds, however, that the fundamental laws become mediate channels by which power flows. This is because if there is in a state only the capricious rule of one alone, nothing is “fixed” and there can therefore be no “fundamental law.” The fundamental laws therefore prevent monarchies from collapsing into despotisms. The “fundamental law” seems then to provide a standard of justice outside the monarchy, which is fixed, and to which one might recur in order to prevent arbitrary and irrational rule. But even without regard to the goodness of a particular fixed law, Montesquieu regards the idea of fixed law as such as good. He thus defends the notion of the rule of law as superior to both republicanism and despotism.

The most “natural” intermediate and subordinate power, according to Montesquieu, is that of the nobility. And, “in a way the nobility is of the essence of monarchy, whose fundamental maxim is: *no monarch, no nobility; no nobility, no monarch.*”¹⁶⁴ Without a nobility or other body to restrain a monarch, a monarchy will become a despotism. Montesquieu seems to suggest then that a monarchy’s natural tendency is then toward either imperialism and glory, or, without the check of a nobility, despotism and oppression. After all, the spirit of monarchy is war and expansion. Perhaps one could even say that according to Montesquieu a human tendency is the desire to acquire, as Machiavelli would have it, and that the desire to acquire can be unleashed either domestically and or with regard to foreign policy. In order to restrain this appetite, which in Montesquieu’s view is natural but potentially extremely harmful for humanity,

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 1.2.4.

one must find the appropriate institutional balance to channel these passions. And a nobility provides an appropriate institutional check on a monarch.

Montesquieu has a tendency quickly to shift focus, without any loss of lucidity, from general discussions of the nature of government to more immediate and practical political affairs, with his theoretical intentions remaining always clearly in the background. For instance, immediately after two short paragraphs compactly disclosing some of the most salient aspects of the nature of monarchies, Montesquieu provides four paragraphs that are more generally concerned with practical affairs and yet which in their own way expand upon the nature of monarchies as such as well as upon the weighty matter of the relationship between ecclesiastical power and the laws. In one paragraph he warns European states not to abolish intermediate power like the justices of the lords. He warns them not to follow the path of England, which abolished the prerogatives of the lords, clergy, nobility, and towns in the English monarchy. If one abolishes these prerogatives, one will end up with a popular state (a bad thing, here), or a despotism.¹⁶⁵ This is not Montesquieu's last word on England, of course, and we will consider Montesquieu's more comprehensive judgment of the English government and its goodness later. Next, he advises the tribunals of a "great" European state—presumably France—not to strike down the jurisdiction of the lords and the ecclesiastical authorities. It is against the nature of the monarchy to do so. Why? Because it is against the

¹⁶⁵ Rahe notes that while according to Montesquieu the English government is a kind of monarchy "in disguise," the English government is "monarchical neither in its nature and structure nor in its principle." The English government appears to be "sui generis." Paul Rahe, *Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville, and the Modern Prospect* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 31. Cf. Binoche, *Introduction à De l'esprit des lois de Montesquieu*, 128.

fundamental laws of a monarchy by which there must be intermediate powers—in this case the lords and the religious authorities—to counter the encroaching power of the monarch and his ministers. Yet in practically the same breath, Montesquieu concedes that he “does not insist” on the privileges of the ecclesiastics but that he “would like their jurisdiction to be determined once and for all.”¹⁶⁶ Montesquieu could take them or leave them, depending on their practical utility. As things stand, the ambiguity of their power unnecessarily confuses things. In the case of the French monarchy tending toward despotism, religious authorities are useful in pushing back against the central authority, not because of any genuine wisdom they claim to possess. Montesquieu therefore implies that in at least some cases and in principle monarchies can do without religion, or at least religious authorities. Whereas religion is absolutely necessary in republics—as a means to inspire virtuous self-sacrifice and devotion to the community by offering the consolation of an afterlife—monarchies at least in principle offer sufficient this-worldly satisfactions to their inhabitants and can do without power-wielding religious authorities. But immediately after making this extremely bold claim, Montesquieu turns to the more immediately practical question and problem of dual sovereignty. And here he tries to carve out a reasonable space for ecclesiastical authority. He appears in the guise of a political conservative and appeals to tradition, which we should certainly not overturn. Given the facts on the ground, that is, that religious authorities have *some* power, this particular prince (the French king) should recognize their power in the laws and that their power is independent. Why is this? Because the prince’s justice has “always” prescribed “limits” for itself. Montesquieu appeals rhetorically to conservatism and a sense of

¹⁶⁶ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.2.4.

moderation on the part of the prince. It is not clear, however, how hopeful Montesquieu was about achieving this rhetorical goal, for self-moderation is so difficult to attain and maintain. Therefore intermediate powers are necessary.

Montesquieu also makes explicit the thought, alluded to earlier, that to the extent that independent clerical power is dangerous in republics, (since religious authority should remain in the hands of civic authorities), it can be “suitable” in monarchies, “especially in those tending to despotism.”¹⁶⁷ Where would Spain and Portugal have been, he wonders, if they did not, after the loss of their laws, have the power that “alone” checks arbitrary power? It is clear that Montesquieu must have in mind other things that can check arbitrary power—e.g., the nobility, and, as we will see later commerce—but at the very least Montesquieu thinks of religion can be useful in checking arbitrary power. However, how else does Montesquieu describe clerical power, in the same paragraph no less? As a “barrier” (no high praise) and even as an “ill.” That is, right after appealing to partisans of religion, claiming that it alone can moderate a despotism, he calls religion a barrier “where no other exists,” and since despotism is *the* worst state for men, religion is only helpful if it limits despotism. Then it is good; otherwise it is an “ill.”

In describing the nature of monarchy, Montesquieu compares monarchs to “the sea.”: “Just as the sea, which *seems* to want to cover the whole earth, is checked by grasses and the smallest gravel on the shore, so monarchs, whose power *seems* boundless, are checked by the slightest obstacles and submit their natural pride to supplication and prayer.”¹⁶⁸ The monarch, then, appears to have the ambition to acquire possession of the

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.; my emphasis.

entire earth. But the monarch's power, which only "seems" boundless, is really based on a false illusion of his power. In reality, in desiring to acquire the entire earth, monarchs encounter obstacles—that is, the wills of other men—that act as constraints on the monarch's all-conquering ambition. In this comparison of a monarch to the sea Montesquieu flatters the monarch's imagination, encouraging him to think of himself as a god, or what men might imagine as a god. That is, he encourages the monarch to submit his natural pride to prayer and supplication. This fosters in the monarch's imagination a sense of strength, but it also encourages the monarch to treat his subjects with humanity. As we have already discussed, in Montesquieu's view monarchy's true spirit is war and expansion. Encouraging monarchs to think of themselves as humane gods is one way to check monarchy's natural—and potentially harmful—tendency. Another is to encourage them to be like the sea. On the one hand, as with monarchs, there is something majestic about the sea's extent and power, but the sea can be fairly tame. The sea just laps up against the earth's shores; it does not really do that much, despite appearing to want to cover the whole earth. Montesquieu wants monarchs not to do too much, thus checking their natural ambition. Encouraging monarchs to resemble the sea will then at least in some cases have a pacifying effect on monarchs or potential monarchs.¹⁶⁹ Still, there is a kind of "pathos of distance," as Nietzsche would have it, between monarchs and their subjects. From the perspective of the monarch, his subjects are no more than "grasses" or "the smallest pieces of gravel on the shore." One blade of grass or one piece of gravel is

¹⁶⁹ Citing the historical evidence, Rahe notes that Montesquieu failed "in persuading the French [monarchy] to abandon [its] fatal longing for primacy and dominion on the continent of Europe." Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty*, 58-59.

nothing in comparison to the monarch. This is how far we are from the equality of the state of nature.

It is for this reason, above all, that intermediate powers are so useful and even essential in a monarchy. Many blades of grass or pieces of gravel combined can act as checks on the monarch. Yet in addition to the necessity of intermediate ranks or powers in a monarchy, monarchies also need a depository of laws, that is, a depository of the “fundamental laws.”¹⁷⁰ According to Montesquieu, the depository can only be in the “political bodies,” bodies “which announce the laws when they are made and recall them when they are forgotten.”¹⁷¹ This, then, is a significant modification to Montesquieu’s understanding of the nature of monarchy. There is an ambiguity here regarding whether or not the political bodies formulate the laws by themselves, in consultation with the monarch or his ministers, or if the political bodies merely announce the laws as a kind of mouthpiece for the monarch. However, the political bodies serve a function similar to that of the censors in a republic: the political bodies “recall” the laws when they are forgotten, although there is no suggestion at all of the political bodies fulfilling the republican censors’ other roles, such as correcting faults, punishing, or preventing the influence of corruption from outside of the republic. Whereas it was suggested earlier that the nobility is not only “of the essence” of monarchy and that moreover the nobility is the most “natural” intermediate and subordinate power of a monarchy, Montesquieu now heaps contempt on the nobility, or at least the nobility in practice. If there is a genuine natural nobility, it lacks political power. The conventional nobility, according to

¹⁷⁰ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.2.4.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Montesquieu, is a pack of lazy fools. Political bodies that guard the depository of laws are necessary, since the real nobles are ignorant, lax, and scornful of civil government. Political bodies—e.g., a parliament—must bring the laws “out of the dust” under which they would be under the rule of the nobility.¹⁷² Montesquieu seems to envision that the members of the political bodies will not be lazy and lax, nor will they have scorn for civil government, even if in some or many cases they are ignorant of the true grounds of the laws.¹⁷³

While the false nobility is intoxicated by vainglory, the members of the political bodies will be the jealous guardians of the laws. The members of the political bodies are less affected by vainglory, or its effect is less noxious with them. Another candidate for the seat of the depository of laws is the prince’s council. But this is not suitable since the prince’s council is instead the depository of “the momentary will of the prince who executes.” The “momentary will of the prince” is far too similar or potentially similar to the arbitrary caprice of a despot. And besides, the prince’s council is constantly changing, according to Montesquieu. The depository of laws should be or at least appear to be permanent. The political bodies moreover ought to be relatively large, and what is more, perhaps surprisingly, is that they ought to have “the people’s trust.”¹⁷⁴ Earlier, Montesquieu had stated that in a monarchy, *the prince* is the source of all political and civil power. At the time this was to flatter the prince and to provide a point of departure

¹⁷² Spector stresses that the slowness with which the parliaments conduct their affairs are a check on the swiftness with which the prince executes his affairs. Spector, *Montesquieu: Liberté, droit, histoire*, 102-103.

¹⁷³ Mosher notes that Montesquieu himself served in the regional Parlement of Bordeaux. Mosher, “Monarchy’s Paradox: Honor in the Face of Sovereign Power,” 183.

¹⁷⁴ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.2.4.

for thinking about the nature of monarchy. But now the nature of monarchy has been so contorted in such a small space that now monarchy or at least a certain species of enlightened monarchy is the new model. Monarchy's legitimacy is *now* rooted in something called "the people's trust," which reminds us of Locke's rooting the legitimacy of government in a "trust" between the prince and the people, which consists in sharply demarcated powers for the prince and a focus on guaranteeing security for men, both for their bodies and their properties.¹⁷⁵

Montesquieu seems to point, then, in the direction of a kind of constitutional and limited monarchy. And the laws of this constitutional monarchy, moreover, possess enlightenment: the depository of laws "enlightens [the people] in difficult times...[and] returns them to obedience."¹⁷⁶ Still, despite significantly piquing our interest as to what monarchy's enlightened laws truly consist of, we are still left in the dark. Montesquieu has not explained what monarchy's laws are, nor why they are good or enlightened, nor how they satisfy men's most pressing passions, nor how they are superior to republican laws, if at all. Montesquieu in fact never explicitly says what the content of monarchic laws should be. What is important, however, with regard to laws in a monarchy, is the institutional balance and constraints involved in a monarchy. Yet Montesquieu strongly points in the direction of "security" as an important aspect of laws in a monarchy, without ever explaining forthrightly how such laws should be created, or what "security" means precisely. We will investigate later what the true grounding of the laws ought to be, and what their relation to security is later.

¹⁷⁵ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 197-209.

¹⁷⁶ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.4.2.

Although Montesquieu does not give a fully fleshed out account of his famous separation of power doctrine in his sections dealing with monarchy, he nonetheless points in that direction in these sections, and suggests ways in which power in a monarchy should be in the hands of multiple parts of the constitution of a monarchy. For instance, he suggests that there is a “drawback” in having the prince’s ministers judge contested suits.¹⁷⁷ Montesquieu suggests that there is “by the nature of things” a “contradiction” between the monarch’s council and his tribunals. One might think that a contradiction in the nature of something might be a bad thing; instead, Montesquieu presents this contradiction as a good because it checks the unrestrained power of the monarch to have judges who at least in principle impartially interpret the laws. According to Montesquieu, the king’s council should be composed of only a few persons, whereas the tribunals require many men. Why are many men required to fill the tribunals of the judiciary? One reason might be that there is a lot of work to do, and one or a few tribunals are incapable of hearing so many cases. Another reason, however, is that Montesquieu wants to diffuse power, and reduce the possibility of arbitrary power in a hands of one or a few men. If there are more tribunals, there will be more checks on potentially abusive power. Another reason that Montesquieu makes explicit is that the function of the king’s council should be to pursue public business with “a certain passion.” As Hamilton suggested, there should be “energy in the executive,” since executive power has to do with getting practical affairs done swiftly, effectively, and efficiently.¹⁷⁸ On other hand, the tribunals of the judiciary should be “coolheaded,” according to Montesquieu, dispassionate, and

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 1.6.6.

¹⁷⁸ Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist 70,” in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Charles Kesler and Clinton Rossiter (New York: Signet, 2003).

“in a way, neutral” in their affairs. The judicial men should at least in principle try to judge dispassionately according to the established, fundamental laws, and try to avoid narrow partisanship. Although the judicial men are supposed to be less motivated by passion than other men in a monarchy, they are still motivated by honor in a certain way. Their honor has to do with honoring or even venerating the established laws, and considering themselves to have honorably discharged their duties by carrying out the function in a monarchy of guarding and interpreting the laws of the monarchy.

One of the most striking of features of republics, as we have seen, is their tone of severe austerity (especially in the case of Sparta), which manifested itself, for instance, in a prohibition on luxury. According to Montesquieu, however, luxury and the desire to enrich oneself are intrinsic to the nature of monarchies: “As wealth is divided in accord with the constitution of monarchies, there must be luxury.”¹⁷⁹ The practical example Montesquieu uses to prove this thesis, however, is a curious one. In citing Tacitus, Montesquieu points to the example of the German Suiones, whose monarchy honored wealth. From the example of the Suiones Montesquieu draws the sweeping conclusion that luxury is “singularly appropriate” in monarchies, and sumptuary laws are pointless in monarchies. From the obscure example of the Suiones, Montesquieu makes a moral case for the effects of luxury in a monarchy. Whereas ancient republican legislators scorned luxury for its immoral consequences Montesquieu points to how luxury can genuinely lead to the common good, or rather the common good understood in a radically new way. For when wealthy men spend money and enjoy their luxury, the poor will be less likely to die of hunger. Inequality of wealth may exist and may indeed be exacerbated in

¹⁷⁹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.7.4.

monarchies, yet since wealth circulates throughout the monarchy, it helps both the wealthy and the poor secure both their basic necessities and even allows them to enjoy luxurious superfluities. As Hobbes metaphorically suggests in the *Leviathan*, money is like the blood of the commonwealth, which enlivens all parts of the commonwealth.¹⁸⁰ Indeed, just as the transfer of wealth benefits all members of the state in Hobbes' commonwealth, so too with Montesquieu's new depiction of monarchy. Yet if the Suiones' monarchy was for a brief moment the prototypical monarchy, the standard quickly switches to a new, expanded model without an historical precedent affixed to it.

For, as Montesquieu suggests, if a monarchy is ultimately to sustain itself, it needs various classes which all attempt to enrich themselves by trading with each other. In a healthy monarchy, luxury should increase, in ascending order, from the laborer, through the artisans and merchants, to the nobles, magistrates, and lords, and finally to the revenue officers and "the princes" (plural). One might think that in a commercial monarchy the *true* princes are simply the wealthiest members of society. Yet all classes, from the lowest to the highest, possess some proportion of luxury. Needless to say, there is no indication that the Suiones had such an extensive system of wealth production and distribution. And most notable in this list are Montesquieu's subtle introduction of artisans and merchants in his taxonomy of a monarchy. There was no hint of a place—or at least there was only a highly restricted place—for the arts and commerce in republics, but they now play an integral role in the life of monarchies. The merchants in particular seem important since their explicit function is to trade goods and thereby to increase wealth and luxury. This is to say that, although Montesquieu presents this list of classes

¹⁸⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 24.

in a monarchy as an apparent ascent from the lowly laborer to the princes, it is those lower classes that work and generate wealth that are most important to a monarchy. Still, the central class on this list is the magistrates, those who guard and interpret the laws of a monarchy—it is on them that the commercial monarchy as a whole depends in order to function according to fixed laws. Without such an arrangement, Montesquieu warns, “all would be lost,” as indeed it was for the Suiones. In addition, Montesquieu enigmatically suggests that republics end in luxury, while monarchies end in poverty.¹⁸¹ The transformation from republics to monarchies is a moral revolution from a harsh and austere way of life to a pleasant and easier way of life. Yet while Montesquieu has shown the moral revolution involved in the transition from republics to monarchies, he does not yet suggest how a monarchy degenerates into poverty and despotism. This much, however, can with confidence be said: Montesquieu presents the transition from republics to monarchies as a descent from the point of view of traditional morality, that is, a descent from virtue and purity into corruption and luxury. On the other hand, from another and deeper perspective, he also presents the transition from ancient republics to commercial monarchies as an ascent from a constraining and harsh morality to an easier, better way of life, which is choice-worthy according to a new and more enlightened standard of morality. From both perspectives, however, despotism is the worst alternative. Why this is so is a theme I will consider in the chapter on despotism.

Montesquieu’s understanding of the nature of monarchy is certainly different from classical understandings of monarchy, and in particular from that of Aristotle.¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.7.4.

¹⁸² Schaub provides a useful discussion of the differences between Montesquieu’s and Aristotle’s conceptions of honor. Schaub, “The regime and Montesquieu’s principles of

And in a chapter entitled “Aristotle’s manner of thinking,” Montesquieu criticizes Aristotle’s treatment of monarchy, which is characterized by a fundamental “awkwardness.”¹⁸³ In the third book of his *Politics*, Aristotle distinguishes between five different kinds of monarchy. Aristotle’s defect with regard to monarchy, according to Montesquieu, is that Aristotle does not distinguish among monarchies by the *form* of the constitution but rather by “accidental things, like the virtues or vices of the prince,” or by extrinsic things, like usurpations and successions. Now according to Aristotle, virtue, and in particular intellectual virtue, is the greatest qualification to rule. And according to Aristotle, if a ruler genuinely were to possess an “excess of virtue,” he could not even legitimately be considered a part of a city—he would be “like a god among human beings”—and if such a human being exists, he should be given unlimited political power in his city.¹⁸⁴ However, Aristotle seems to suggest that such an august person is likely never to be seen in most cities. Yet even by the less rarefied standard of virtue understood as selfless devotion to the common good, such devotion, from Montesquieu’s perspective, cannot be counted on in real political life. Aristotle forgets about or at least does not give sufficient due to the power of self-interest—and therefore “vice”—in all men’s souls. Montesquieu suggests that all governments, including monarchies, need to take account of self-interest—both that of the rulers and the ruled—and channel it appropriately.

education,” 82-84. Manent also provides a discussion of Montesquieu’s critique of Aristotle in Manent, *Les Métamorphoses de la Cité*, 160-162.

¹⁸³ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 2.11.9.

¹⁸⁴ Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 3.13.

The correct way to distinguish among regimes, then, is according to their form, that is, by the way in which human passions are organized and channeled within a particular regime. By Montesquieu's new standard, two regimes that Aristotle puts forth as examples of monarchies—the Persian Empire and Sparta—are revealed not to be monarchies at all. In Persia fear was the predominant passion, and it was therefore a despotism according to Montesquieu's classification. And Sparta, where self-denying virtue was the predominant passion, was actually a republic. Persia may have been a monarchy at some point in its history, but it lacked the correct institutional balance involving intermediary powers and honors to be called a monarchy. And while Sparta, according to Montesquieu, *became* a monarchy after “infection” by Athenian ambition, at its founding and as a model it is a republic. To be sure, Montesquieu's perspective involves a radical alteration of received views. And Aristotle and the ancients could not have known of an empirical phenomenon that did not exist in the ancient world. History has caused a fundamentally new political phenomenon to emerge. Yet Montesquieu makes his new perspective seem perfectly obvious. Who does not see, he wonders, that Persia was manifestly a despotism and Sparta a republic? (This difference in perspective is due to the fact that Montesquieu emphasizes that ancient republics were democratic and had virtue for their principle, a judgment that ancient political thinkers would deny.) In addition to showing the inadequacy of Aristotle's understanding of monarchy, Montesquieu makes fun of sanctimonious and condescending Christian theologians. He does this by making a subtle and impious joke about not knowing of the Trinity. He parodies Christian theologians who pity those poor ancient thinkers who did not have the good fortune to know the truth about the triune God. As a mock-solemn Montesquieu

says, “The ancients, who did not know of the distribution of the three powers in the government of one alone, could not achieve a correct idea of monarchy.”¹⁸⁵ What the poor ancients *really* lacked was knowledge of the distribution of three powers in a government “of one alone.” *This* is the *genuinely* important trinity, and there is no mystery involved once one understands the new and genuine science of politics.

3.4 THE CORRUPTION OF MONARCHIES

According to Montesquieu, just as ancient republics are corrupted either by the spirit of war and expansion or by the spirit of extreme equality, monarchies are corrupted when one strips the prerogatives of a monarchy’s intermediary powers—e.g., the political bodies or the privileges of local towns. The intermediate bodies of a monarchy are particularly important, because a healthy monarchy involves a division of powers and the intermediary bodies *share* political power with the monarch. The intermediate powers prevent the monarchy from turning into a despotism of “one alone.”¹⁸⁶ Montesquieu offers as practical examples of monarchies turning into despotisms two Chinese dynasties. According to Montesquieu the Chinese monarchs did not limit themselves to “a general inspection” but wanted to “govern everything” without intermediaries. Wanting to govern everything without intermediaries is, according to Montesquieu, the cause of corruption of “almost all” monarchies. Montesquieu warns that if monarchs want to preserve themselves, they should follow a conservative policy and show their

¹⁸⁵ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 2.11.9.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.8.6.

power more by following the order of things—that is, the established monarchic regime—instead of demonstrating their power by constantly changing the order of things. Just as Montesquieu counseled monarchs to be “like the sea” and not to swallow up all the grass and gravel that block him, so too now does Montesquieu seek to encourage monarchs to moderate their ambition and conform to the established order. In effect, monarchs should preside over their monarchies, without seeking to meddle in every affair that happens within the monarchy. In his analysis of monarchical corruption Montesquieu also makes the distinction between what a monarch wills—a good thing—and what the monarch fancies—a bad thing. Without stating explicitly what he means by what the monarch wills, it seems to have to do with what the monarch should will as his true interest, which is the stability of the established laws, which not only secure his preeminent position but also guarantee security to his subjects. This policy is in the monarch’s true interest because in limiting oneself to willing and following the established law, the monarch keeps his subjects satisfied without arousing their ire. What is important to bear in mind, however, is that Montesquieu never says that despotism is not a natural temptation for someone occupying the seat of the monarch. Might it not be completely natural, for men who desire to acquire, to desire to rule one’s subjects according to one’s whims and fancies?¹⁸⁷

Montesquieu uses all of his rhetorical power to try to moderate the ambition of those who would find themselves with such immense power. Yet he is fully conscious of the temptation of such power and of the disastrous consequences for human nature that

¹⁸⁷ Merry intriguingly suggests that despotism for Montesquieu is in effect a sub-species of monarchy. Merry, *Montesquieu’s System of Natural Government*, 156.

result when such temptations are followed without moderating self-restraint (an unreliable habit of mind), or the institutional restraint of the laws. Because men are fundamentally self-interested and because the taste for political power is so intoxicating, monarchies are easily corrupted when the prince refers “everything to himself exclusively, reduces the state to its capital, the capital to the court, and the court to his person alone.”¹⁸⁸ Unlike the metaphor of the monarchy as a universe, where there was a kind of balance of forces, when all political power is “reduced” to the person of the prince, the result is a despotism. Whereas there is a kind of elegance to a monarchy operating with a balance of powers, there is an ugliness to the corrupted prince’s despotic ambition. Although the despotic temptation may be natural, by becoming despotic the prince misunderstands his true advantage, and the path that would ensure the anxiety-free perpetuation of his regime. According to Montesquieu, the prince misunderstands his authority, situation, and the people’s love when he fails to consider that his position as a monarch is secure, just as a despot should justly believe himself to be imperiled. There is then a kind of failure of self-knowledge on the part of a prince seduced by despotism. Because he is at the top of ladder, he fears the people’s envy. According to Montesquieu, as long as the monarch dispenses honors, he can be assured of his subjects’ love. Just as there was a fundamental fear and timidity at the core of the natural men coming down from their trees and encountering other men for the first time, there is still potentially a fear on the part of a man at the peak of political power. And failing to feel himself secure and following his whim, a despotic prince finds himself in a political position where he has a genuine reason to be afraid of the envy of those who live under a despotism. In

¹⁸⁸ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.8.6.

Montesquieu's account, then, the ill of despotism arises from a fundamental misunderstanding of the prince's situation. The prince in a monarchy can be secure if he guarantees the security of his subjects and dispenses with honors. There is then a kind of equality—each man is secure and receives some kind of honor—within a regime of immense social inequality. And one can quite easily win the affection of the people by honoring them. Failing to realize that one is secure, failing to honor men, and reducing all political power to oneself, then, is the way in which corrupt monarchies become despotisms.

It is to that fundamental political alternative, despotism, that I now turn, to consider its nature, and to see what viable options are available to those who might be able to overturn a despotism. As we will see, Montesquieu's first two political alternatives, ancient republicanism and monarchy, involve delicate institutional balances that require foresight on the part of enlightened or semi-enlightened legislators. As we have seen, ancient republicanism and monarchy are both somewhat in conformity with Montesquieu's account of what human nature requires politically, and monarchy is much more in conformity with a healthy human nature than ancient republicanism is. Despotism, the next political alternative that Montesquieu considers, is closely related to monarchy in that it is the rule of one, and it too is from a certain point of view close to human nature. After all, Montesquieu thinks it is the government toward which human nature naturally tends without enlightened legislation. Whereas monarchy requires some degree of enlightenment and leads to healthy political results for human nature, despotism follows the natural tendency of unenlightened human nature, with devastating political consequences.

4.0 DESPOTISMS AND FEAR

As we have seen, Montesquieu classifies all governments according to three types. We have already investigated two types of government and their concomitant passions—republics, where the people or a part of the people rule, and which are animated by the passion of virtue, and monarchies, where one man alone rules, according to fixed laws, and which are animated by the passion of honor. It remains to investigate the third and apparently final form of government. That alternative form of government, as Montesquieu has hinted throughout the first part of the *Spirit of the Laws*, is despotism, and the passion that animates despotism is fear.

4.1 THE PASSION OF FEAR

According to Montesquieu, fear is *the* passion that animates despotisms.¹⁸⁹ According to Montesquieu despotisms have no place for republican virtue or monarchic honor. On the one hand, Montesquieu says, virtue is completely unnecessary to a despotism, and on the other hand, honor is dangerous to a despotism. Virtue is unnecessary to a despotism, according to Montesquieu, because a despot has no concern for the common good, which is what the passion of virtue concerns; or, rather, the despot claims, explicitly or implicitly, that his capricious will is tantamount to the common good: his will constitutes the only good that matters. This concern with his own good

¹⁸⁹ Shklar provides a thought-provoking analysis of Montesquieu's understanding of fear. Judith Shklar, *Montesquieu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 84-85.

without regard for the good of others is characteristic, in fact, of the perfectly free man in the state of nature. But in the case of a despot, he exercises a certain kind of freedom while all other men live in fear as his slaves. Furthermore, the passion of virtue may be useful as a tool of motivation to induce men to follow certain projects that are claimed to be in accord with the common good. So, too, does honor motivate men to rise above themselves, and by pursuing their own interest, the common good of a monarchy comes into existence. The despot has no use for motivating men to pursue any notion of the common good. And honor is dangerous to a despot, according to Montesquieu, because men who possess honor do not live in fear, they scorn life by preferring to die rather than lose their honor, and they are willing to challenge the despot's claim to exclusive political power.

A despotic prince, then, must keep all men under his power in a state of perpetual fear, to the extent that he is able to do so. As Montesquieu says, "When in despotic government the prince ceases for a moment to raise his arm, when he cannot instantly destroy those in the highest places, all is lost, for when the spring of government, which is *fear*, no longer exists, the people no longer have a protector."¹⁹⁰ In this way, then, we see the extreme vulnerability of despotism, even despite the fact that despotism is very easy to establish and is according to Montesquieu the most common form of government historically. It takes an enormous amount of strength, diligence, and perseverance on the part of a despot or his administration to maintain his regime and keep men living in fear, particularly when those under his rule have had some taste of freedom or honor.

Despotisms and republics are then particularly difficult to maintain because they are both

¹⁹⁰ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.3.9.

particularly susceptible to fundamental elements of human nature that resist such forms of governments and constantly try to reassert themselves. In the case of republics the element of human nature that reasserts itself is mere self-interest, and the desire for a secure and easy way of life more devoted to pleasure than to painful virtue. In the case of despotism it is the demands of honor, which amount to a kind of self-interest (i.e., self-esteem), which threatens the despotism. In this account, moreover, we see both a distinct similarity and a distinct difference between how monarchs and despots treat subjects who demand honor. In Montesquieu's account of honor, it became clear, perhaps counter-intuitively, that honor was not a threat to a monarch, because it is easy for a monarch to manage honor, by sometimes reducing, to some degree, men's over-weening sense of their self-importance. Still, a monarch always manages to honor all his subjects in some way, however small. A despot is similar to a monarch, then, in that he has the power to reduce his subjects' honor. But whereas a monarch may reduce without destroying a subject's honor, a despot "instantly destroys" his subjects' honor, without which "all would be lost," or rather the despotism would be lost and the regime would change.

It is striking, too, that Montesquieu suggests that when despotism's spring—fear—no longer exists, the people no longer have a "protector." Whenever a government's spring or animating passion is destroyed, men are thrown back into the state of nature, which, after the establishment of societies, would most likely more resemble (as I think Montesquieu would agree) Hobbes' violent state of nature than Montesquieu's more pre-social and peaceful state of nature.¹⁹¹ Montesquieu's original

¹⁹¹ Spector perceives a continuous link from the fear of men in the state of nature to despotic fear. See Spector, *Montesquieu: Liberté, Droit, et Histoire*, 149.

state of nature seems to be a state that one can no longer recover after the establishment of societies—and in fact Montesquieu gives no indication that it would be desirable to recover it if one could. Montesquieu therefore refers with some irony to the despot as the people’s “protector,” but on the other hand this reference seems to be a subtle nod toward Hobbes. Part of Montesquieu’s guiding intention is to oppose the kinds of despotism that can arise within the Hobbesian framework, and which did not seem to seriously concern Hobbes.¹⁹² In Hobbes’ account, *any* government is preferable to the violent state of nature in which we would live without a protective government. Indeed, in Hobbes’ account, what men mistakenly call tyranny is in fact merely monarchy “misliked.”¹⁹³ Montesquieu opposes Hobbes’ view that despotism is a tolerable form of government (except perhaps in some provisional and conditional cases), and Montesquieu seems to agree with Hobbes that a despot can indeed be seen as a kind of protector of men from Hobbes’ understanding of the state of nature, in which men surely live in constant fear of death, as Hobbes never tires of emphasizing. But while both Hobbes and Montesquieu agree that the state of nature is a potentially very violent state, Montesquieu is less willing than Hobbes to cling to despotism as a legitimate form of government and in all cases preferable to the state of nature. It may be preferable to do without a despotic “protector” for a time in order to found an alternative and more rational form of

¹⁹² Rahe points out that Montesquieu’s analysis of despotism is in part a response to Hobbes’ and Voltaire’s more sanguine opinions of “enlightened” despotism. Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty*, 127.

¹⁹³ According to Hobbes, “There be other names of Government, in the Histories, and books of Policy; as *Tyranny*, and *Oligarchy*: But they are not the names of other Formes of Government, but of the same Formes misliked.” Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 130.

government. For Montesquieu despotism is unequivocally the worst form of government imaginable.

In the previous chapter I gave an account of honor as a passion and its relation to monarchy, but it is only in a chapter on despotism that Montesquieu further develops an important element of honor. This is the passion of honor's connection to *self-esteem*. According to Montesquieu, honor has to do with high self-esteem, and "People capable of much self-esteem would be in a position to cause revolutions."¹⁹⁴ As we have seen, honor is an unnatural prejudice; it therefore emerges from men's experiences with others in society. It seems, moreover, that any man who currently lives in a despotism and is capable of great self-esteem would have to have previous experience with honor and high self-esteem from living under a previous regime, for instance a monarchy. Men who are born under a despotism and who know of life under no other kind of regime than a despotism would seem to lack the kind of high self-esteem necessary to stand up to a despot. Therefore men who have some experience with honor are capable of opposing a despot and even causing revolutions to usurp a despot's power. In Montesquieu's account, the despot is aware of this threat or potential threat, and deploys the passion of fear to try to destroy any vestige of honor in men's souls. Montesquieu uses violent language to describe the way in which fear "must beat down everyone's courage and extinguish even the slightest feeling of ambition."¹⁹⁵ While Montesquieu reserves his harshest judgment for the way in which fear violently beats men down, we can also see that all three passions Montesquieu has explicitly treated—virtue, honor, and fear—are or

¹⁹⁴ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.3.9.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

are potentially violent. This is so because while fear beats men down, virtue can violently contort the core of men's nature, and honor is a potential source of inspiration for violent and bloody revolutions, or sacrifice in the service of a fatherland. While it seems that on the whole Montesquieu prefers honor as the least violent passion with regard to its effect on the core of human nature as compared to other passions, in his estimation despotic fear mutilates human nature in the harshest and most violent way as compared to other passions.

Yet in Montesquieu's account the question of the naturalness of despotism is ultimately somewhat complicated. In his account of men in the state of nature fear is presented as one of the most primitive and core passions of human nature: men are naturally timid, and initially fear that they will die at the hands of other men. Fear is therefore more primary and literally more natural for human beings than pride or honor. Yet while men passionately desire to rid themselves of their natural fear—an acutely painful psychological state—they are naturally prone to living in fear and for this reason are particularly susceptible to submitting to a despotism. Despotism, seen from this perspective, can thus seem to be a very natural consequence of human nature—insofar as men are naturally fearful—and also extremely unhealthy—insofar as men desire nothing so powerfully as to rid themselves of fear. Despotism is then a natural state, albeit naturally unhealthy, compared to healthier states in which men do not live in fear, for instance republics or monarchies. However, without enlightenment, which Montesquieu insists comes a very long time after men's primitive state, men are naturally inclined to live in despotisms, because of the natural strength of fear and men's natural lack of enlightenment.

Montesquieu is emphatic that monarchic honor is nowhere to be found in despotisms and that fear replaces honor in a despotism, in the same way that honor replaced virtue in monarchies. While, as we have seen, one of the fundamental rules of honor is that it “scorns” life, or rather, it prefers to fulfill one’s own code of honor rather than cleave to life at all costs, a despot exercises his strength by taking other men’s lives away. And honor is furthermore opposed to despotism because it has fixed and consistent rules, whereas the despot is guided by his own whim. Monarchic honor and despotic fear therefore are in tension with each other and when or if they become opposed, it would seem to be a struggle to the death.¹⁹⁶ It is striking that Montesquieu claims that a despot is strong *only* in taking life away. This fact suggests that a despot’s only outlet for exerting or discharging his strength is by causing other men to live in fear and by taking other men’s lives away. Where the passion of virtue in republics fostered in men a certain strength that was then channeled toward concern for the common good of one’s community, and monarchy’s honor could cause men to strive to attain higher and greater distinctions in the service of the common good, a despot’s passion (and thereby his strength) manifests itself in beating other men down.

Moreover, there is a striking contrast to the way in which the passions are felt in different forms of government. On the one hand, in both republics and monarchies *all* men, not just their rulers or representatives, passionately feel the predominant passion—either virtue or honor. By contrast, in despotisms the despot and his vizir do not feel the passion of fear in the same way that all *other* men continuously feel fear. All men who live under the power of the despot are equal, but they all live equally in fear, as slaves to

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 1.3.8.

the despot. Because all men besides the despot and his vizir are equal, despotisms reproduce something of the natural equality of the state of nature. However, as in the case of republics, the equality that is artificially reproduced is significantly changed and warped compared to the equality of the state of nature. To be sure, there is clearly no natural slavery in the state of nature. So one may say that while republics significantly modify the equality of the state of nature while retaining a certain kind of equality that resembles the equality of the state of nature, despotisms produce a kind of equality that completely overturns the equality of the state of nature. There is a place for a kind of freedom if not natural freedom in both republics and monarchies; there is no place for freedom of any kind in a despotism, since all men live in fear and under the arbitrary rule of the despot and his vizir.

4.2 THE NATURE OF DESPOTISM

Montesquieu compactly and forcefully defines the nature of despotic government in the following way: despotic government is a government where “one alone, without law and without rule, draws everything along by his will and his caprice.”¹⁹⁷ As we noted in the previous chapter, in Montesquieu’s account, despotisms seem to be closely akin in

¹⁹⁷ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.2.1. Schaub suggests that Montesquieu’s “starting point” is “the most prevalent political situation: despotic government,” unlike the state of nature starting points of Hobbes and Locke. Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, 20. I am inclined to think Montesquieu is closer to Hobbes and Locke than Schaub suggests, if we take our bearings strictly from how *The Spirit of the Laws* unfolds from his starting point in Book I. However, Schaub is correct insofar as human nature can naturally incline men to submit to despotisms as long as they are unenlightened. Men are initially more likely to submit to a despotism than to found a republic or a monarchy, for instance.

some ways to monarchy, beginning from the obvious fact that in both monarchies and despotisms only one man above all the rest rules. And as we have also seen monarchies are particularly susceptible to being corrupted and becoming despotisms. For instance, the monarch may feel anxiously insecure in the power of his rule and attempt to become more powerful by doing away with fixed laws. He may do this by destroying the intermediary powers intrinsic to a monarchy, meddling in all men's affairs, and thereby becoming despotic. Yet there are considerably more features to the nature of despotisms than Montesquieu has so far let on in his analysis of monarchy. To begin with, an important part of the nature of a despot's power is that like a monarch he delegates much of his political power and has it administered by others. On the surface, this may not appear to be too different from the way in which power is diffused in monarchies or even in republics. In monarchies, power is divided and shared between, among others, the prince, the intermediary political bodies, judicial bodies, and perhaps the clergy. Yet in despotisms, political power is in principle much more consolidated than it is in monarchies. And the greatest amount of political power in despotisms is exercised not by the despot himself but rather by his chief minister, that is, his "vizir." It is intrinsic to the nature of despotisms that the despot himself will not exercise political power explicitly or overtly, because the despot's elevated self-regard (that is, his sense of honor and high self-regard) and his concomitant laziness make him in an important way apolitical. According to Montesquieu, a despot sees himself as "everything" and sees others as nothing. For this reason, "A man whose five senses constantly tell him that he is everything and that others are nothing is naturally lazy, ignorant, and voluptuous."¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁸ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.2.5.

There is, then, a connection between sensual materialism rooted in the passions and despotism, as there is a desire to voluptuously gratify the senses on the part of the despot. He is animated by the desire to satisfy his senses alone and is characterized by laziness and ignorance—he is ignorant, for instance, of a more rational form of government (monarchy) that would ensure a greater sense of his security. And the despot’s laziness and ignorance recall Montesquieu’s description of the lazy and false or merely conventional nobility of at least some monarchies. There is a connection in some cases, then, between conventional social and political inequality, and laziness and ignorance on the part of the rulers. Believing oneself to be superior to others can have a tendency to make one believe that one does not need to work very hard, and that one already knows all that one needs to know, or to possess wisdom, despite the fact that one is fundamentally ignorant. This laziness, ignorance, and voluptuousness, in Montesquieu’s account, tends to make one apolitical and to “abandon the public business.” Rather than delegating power among many ministers, who would have intrigues among themselves and compete with each other for the title of “first slave,” the despot delegates all power to one minister, the vizir. This is the “simple” thing to do, and indeed there is a kind of brutal simplicity to all political rule in a despotism. The diffusion of power in a monarchy permits a kind of diversity and individuality, whereas when a despot establishes a vizir, *all* political power is instantly transferred from the despot to the vizir, and the establishment of a vizir is a fundamental law. Whereas it was the political bodies—ensuring the people’s trust—that safeguarded the fundamental laws of a monarchy, the only fundamental law in a despotism is the will of the despot, or after the vizir has received power, the arbitrary will of the vizir. When the vizir is firmly

established and in charge of running public business, the despot is free to indulge “the most brutal passions” in his private seraglio. And is it in the seraglio that a despot’s passions are so indulged and enervated that he becomes incapable of conducting public affairs. Appointing a vizir, however, makes it easy for the despot to renounce public life and indulge his passions in his seraglio. Yet while despotism might be a natural temptation to a man in such a position and many people might be attracted to the life of a despot, Montesquieu rhetorically makes the life of a despot seem in many ways horrible and revolting.

In fact, a despot’s seraglio is in effect a prison where the despot’s hearts and spirits—that is, his passions—are weakened and he lives in ignorance. In addition, in this context, Montesquieu boldly compares despotism to “a certain pope.” To be sure, this pope remains nameless, and Montesquieu ironically presents this account as received hearsay (“It is said that a certain pope...”), thereby apparently distancing himself to a degree from the account, but the comparison is nonetheless striking. The papacy and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, then, is in Montesquieu’s account akin to a despotism, one in which the ruler or rulers secretly indulge their passions in self-imposed ignorance, while keeping those whom they spiritually rule spellbound by fear. While religion, in Montesquieu’s account, can be useful in preventing the rise and expansion of secular despotisms, the nature of the Catholicism can be considered to be a certain kind of despotism. It is perhaps for this reason that Montesquieu subtly pointed a finger at religious institutions and called them in many instances an ill.¹⁹⁹ I will give a fuller

¹⁹⁹ Pangle provides an extremely lucid and insightful account of “[t]he theological significance of despotism.” Pangle, *The Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity*, 28-39.

account of Montesquieu's views on the relationship between despotism, religion, and fear below.

Just as the natural tendency of monarchies is toward expansion and the acquisition of power, so too is a despotism's natural tendency toward expansion. But whereas the end of expansion for monarchies is the glory of the prince and the state, the despot wishes to expand his state so that he may enlarge his seraglio, and enjoy more and greater pleasures—that is, enjoy more and more natural and unnatural passions. Yet since the despot is apolitical when the vizir rules and both become even less concerned with administration as the despotism increases in extent, rule becomes more and more arbitrary as the despotism increases, a phenomenon that does not decrease in any way the fear in which men live under in a despotism.

Montesquieu provides a clear statement on the nature of despotisms when he writes, “In despotic states the nature of the government requires extreme obedience, and the prince's will, once known, should produce its effect as infallibly as does one ball thrown against another.”²⁰⁰ In illustrating despotism in this way, Montesquieu does two things: first, he highlights the violence that is intrinsic to despotism, and in particular the violence that the despot or his vizir inflicts on other men. There is no concomitant kind of violence in either republics or monarchies. In the second place, Montesquieu's image calls to mind scientific machinery and necessity, just as he used mechanical images in depicting monarchy. The despotic prince's will is the cause of all action within a despotism, and he makes his will done through the application of fear. This produces a violent kind of cause and effect, such as can be seen when a ball with a powerful force

²⁰⁰ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.3.10.

strikes another ball. In addition, in his depiction of despotism, Montesquieu calls to mind some of the language used in Book I in describing the men of the state of nature, but this time with a twist. In despotism, according to Montesquieu, “Man is a creature that *obeys* a creature that *wants*.”²⁰¹ This language is striking in that it conjures thoughts of the sub-human or beast-like status of men living in a despotism, both the despot and his subjects. Men are “creatures” that slavishly obey one moved by arbitrary desire. This situation amounts to a kind of stuntedness or perversion of human nature. In the state of nature there is a near-absolute freedom and equality, which contrasts with despotic slavishness. And one of the main reasons men join society is to gain enlightenment. In a despotism, there is no indication that anyone desires to pursue or can pursue any kind of enlightenment.

There is a rhetorical element, moreover, to Montesquieu’s presentation of despotism. Men who have had a taste for freedom, honor, or even republican virtue are likely to be revolted by Montesquieu’s description of the beast-like condition of men living under a despotism. They are likely to be morally indignant about the prospect of living under such a regime after having read of this kind of description of it. Montesquieu therefore plays on the reader’s own passions in opposing such a regime. In some ways, as we have seen, Montesquieu depicts positively some of the ways in which men *are* beastlike, for instance the way in which both men and beasts freely follow their instincts or inclinations, or the way in which men and beasts share the passion for self-preservation, the precondition of life. And as Montesquieu indicated, the beasts often make better use of their passions than men. Yet Montesquieu laments the way in which

²⁰¹ Ibid.; my emphasis.

beast-like men living under a despotism are characterized by “obedience and chastisement.” What he laments, then, is men in a despotism being domesticated like beasts—being constrained, through fear and the arbitrary threat of punishment.

Furthermore, as we have seen, in Montesquieu’s analysis the family is natural or quasi-natural, in that the two sexes are naturally attracted to each other by pleasure, and humans’ attachment to their offspring is natural. These natural passions are useless in checking the will of the despot, since, as Montesquieu writes, to a despot “It is useless to counter with natural feelings, respect for a father, tenderness for one’s children and women, laws of honor, or the state of one’s health; one has received the order and that is enough.”²⁰² One “receives” an arbitrary order from the despot like a beast being branded, and this is the order that one is constrained to follow, against all natural inclinations. One passion, fear, rules all men without regard not only for the healthy tendencies of human nature but for the contingencies of time, place, or circumstance. As we have suggested, Montesquieuan political science has a high regard for statesmanship in the sense of paying attention to time, place, and circumstance in legislation. Despotism by contrast wills a monolithic order that emanates from the will of the despot without regard for time, place, or circumstance. In this, too, it is quite literally very simple and therefore natural, as opposed to the complexities involved in the founding and maintenance of republics, monarchies, or moderate governments.

In his treatment of monarchy, Montesquieu dealt with the place of religion in politics with some ambivalence. While he stated that he wanted the relationship between religion and politics in monarchies to be settled once and for all, and while he suggested

²⁰² Ibid.

it might be healthiest for monarchies to dispense with any ecclesiastical power at all, he also suggested that religion can be salutary as a palliative for the worst effects of despotism, especially for secular despotisms. And Montesquieu extends and clarifies this thought in his assessment of despotism. Monarchic power, according to Montesquieu, is *limited* by honor itself, which reigns like a monarch over the prince, and the people.²⁰³ By contrast, religion can “sometimes” counter a despotic prince’s will with religion. This is because “The laws of religion are part of a higher precept because they apply to the prince as well as to the subjects.”²⁰⁴ It is strange that Montesquieu suggests that religion can have such a powerful and even potentially revolutionary force within despotisms, whereas he says that the laws of religion hold no sway of the courtiers of a monarchy, for whom the laws of religion are brushed aside as “ridiculous,” and who will be moved only by the laws of honor. However, it might have to do with the fact that monarchy is in principle capable of so much this-worldly satisfaction that one has no need in a monarchy to recur to other-worldly hopes for salvation or deliverance. By contrast, almost everyone in a despotism living with fear is dissatisfied with this life, and even the despot anxiously fears losing his power. In despotisms, then, religion is useful in limiting or trying to limit the power of a despot, since the laws of religion are such that they apply to the despot as much as to anyone else. And religion supplies men with hope, a kind of passion, as an antidote to fear of the despot. Hope feeds men’s illusions that they will be rewarded, either in this life or in the afterlife, for their present sufferings. Montesquieu’s understanding of religion can then be instrumental as a powerful arm against the threat of

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

secular despotism. Yet as we recall, in other circumstance, Montesquieu has called religion a potential “ill,” and compared the papacy to a despotism. Both religious and secular powers are susceptible to turning into despotisms, since both lack a sufficient understanding of what men’s natural passions are and the kind of government that can best satisfy them.

One of the themes of Montesquieu’s analysis of despotism is its simplicity and its monolithic uniformity, further evidence that despotism is natural, or that simple natural men may be particularly susceptible to despotism. And Montesquieu directly links the predominant passion of fear to the simplistic nature of despotic government—as Montesquieu says, “Not many laws are needed for timid, ignorant, beaten-down people.”²⁰⁵ While both republics monarchies require a delicate institutional balance and therefore a kind of practical complexity, despotic government, once fear has beaten down men’s spirits, both limits men’s ideas to “two or three,” and prevents the emergence of new ideas and enlightenment. This emphasis on preventing the emergence of new ideas or free thought necessarily reminds us of republics’ emphasis on preventing the introduction of corrupt impressions and ideas from outside the community. But the most important difference between republics and despotisms regarding this idea is Montesquieu’s emphasis on the beast-like way of life of men living under a despotism. Despite Montesquieu’s critique of the inhumaneness of republican virtue, there was nonetheless something elevated and awe-inspiring about the republican way of life. By contrast, there is something painful in observing men living in fear under a despotism—men who are likened to sub-human beasts whose brains are “stamp[ed]” “with two or

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 1.4.14.

three impulses, and no more.”²⁰⁶ In describing men as being branded like animals and having their inclinations and impulses constrained in this way, we can see in sharp relief the difference between healthy men living in the natural freedom and independence of the state of nature—with their inclinations and passions unconstrained—and the slavish men living under a despotism.

Besides inculcating the passion of fear in his people, a despotic prince is also characterized by anger, in particular with regard to war. According to Montesquieu, despotic princes are habituated to total freedom within their palaces, and therefore when they encounter resistance outside their palace—for instance, among any subject who would resist their wills or among armed men of a different nation—they become angered by those who resist their wills. This account is in sharp contrast to Montesquieu’s description of a reasonable monarch who is “like the sea” and does not seek to swallow up all the pebbles and blades of grass that oppose his will. The difference is that the monarch submits to a kind of necessity (that of other men’s wills) that is in his own interest, whereas a despot tries to overcome all wills that oppose his. It is for this reason that Montesquieu suggests that a despot “cannot have an idea of true glory,” which the rational monarch does have.²⁰⁷ True glory involves a conception of the common good of all wills, and therefore of a state of peace among all those who live under a particular regime. The despot, by contrast, has no conception or interest in the common good, since all revolves around his own particular and volatile passions. Because of this there is an additional tone of brutality to wars waged under a despot’s authority. While republics and

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

monarchies may judge it necessary to wage war (for the passions of self-preservation or the passion of monarchic glory), because of their petulant anger at any who oppose them despots wage war “in all their natural fury.”

Montesquieu suggests that whereas republics and monarchies aim at virtue and honor, respectively, and both forms of government desire their preservation and perpetuation, despotisms aim at tranquility.²⁰⁸ But this tranquility does not involve any sort of contentment, and it cannot legitimately be considered a stable peace. Rather, as Montesquieu ominously calls it, despotic tranquility “is the silence of the towns that the enemy is ready to occupy.” This statement is striking for the fact that Montesquieu makes a distinction between allies and enemies among those living under a despotism. While there was no suggestion of those living under republics or monarchies being enemies to each other, the despot and his forces are seen as enemies by those living under the despot’s power. And it is also striking that Montesquieu suggests despotisms are uniquely incapable of achieving and maintaining their goal. Or rather, the despot’s end is contradicted by men’s natural passions, and therefore any kind of peaceful equilibrium in a despotism is only temporary, or an illusion, and cannot be maintained indefinitely. While the despot genuinely desires tranquility, he can never regard himself as in a state of peace with those over whom he rules. While republics are considerably vulnerable to corruption, despotisms too are susceptible to instability because of men’s natural passions. Hobbes imagined and laid the groundwork for a commonwealth that might be both despotic and one that men were content to live in so long as it satisfied the basic

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

condition of guaranteeing their security.²⁰⁹ Montesquieu suggests that despotism as such is incapable of satisfying men's desire for security, since men living in a despotism are at war with the despot's arbitrary power.

In addition, Montesquieu explicitly connects the passion of fear with fear as it relates to religious belief when he argues that in despotisms, "religion has more influence than in any other [state]; it is a fear added to fear."²¹⁰ In his analysis of republics, Montesquieu alluded to the religious nature and bases of republics, although he did not there emphasize the relation between religion and fear, perhaps because republican education itself does not emphasize fear, or perhaps does so only indirectly. (Or perhaps it is because ancient republics did not know of the biblical religions, which very much have to do with emphasizing fear of various sorts.) And whereas according to Montesquieu religion can in some cases be a tool with which to oppose a despotic prince, here we see the way in which a despotic prince can seize precisely this tool or arm, and put it to his own use in perpetuating power and keeping men in a state of fear.

Montesquieu's account of the relationship between despotism, religion, and fear is complicated. In general Montesquieu seems to suggest that religion can make a despotism worse since at bottom the core of religion is fear and religion can therefore multiply the men already live with in a despotism. Yet in some cases religion can also in some cases constrain a despotism by compelling a despot to fear and therefore defer to

²⁰⁹ Krause compares Montesquieu's understanding of despotism with Aristotle's understanding of tyranny and Hobbes' justification of despotism. Sharon Krause, "Despotism in the Spirit of the Laws," in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics*, ed. David W. Carrithers, Michael A. Mosher, and Paul A. Rahe (Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield, 2000), 233-235.

²¹⁰ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.4.14.

something higher than himself. Religion can then both fortify and moderate despotic fear, depending on the circumstances. The fear that a despot deploys toward others can then in principle be turned back toward him, and in this way weaken his power. Religion constrains a despot because it gives force to the souls of the subjects of the despot by causing them to believe that there is a higher code to which the despot, previously thought of as omnipotent, must rightfully submit. In sum, in Montesquieu's account religion is fundamentally tied to fear, and it thus something natural or something that arises naturally. And it can both be allied to despotism and also in principle be a competitor to despotism, and limit the power of a despot.

One of Montesquieu's most powerful statements regarding the nature of despotic government concerns his explicit comparison of despotic government to human nature (which implicitly concerns men's natural passions). Because of the ways that despotic governments constrain human nature, "It seems that human nature would rise up incessantly against despotic government."²¹¹ This would seem to follow from Montesquieu's account of men's natural inclinations and passions, and the reasons men join society once they leave the state of nature. We have seen the way human nature in Montesquieu's view chafes against established laws, for instance those in republics. However, according to Montesquieu, "Despite men's love of liberty, despite their hatred of violence, most peoples are subjected to this kind of government."²¹² Despotic government is a powerful—yet artificial—force that can keep men beaten down despite men's natural passions that oppose it. In Montesquieu's survey of forms of government,

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid.

both republics and despotisms significantly constrain or hamper human nature. Yet republics seem to inflict less violent damage on human nature than despotisms. Republics try to induce men to overcome their purportedly base natures. When men are unable to sustain such efforts—when their wills wear down—human nature recurs and reasserts itself. Despotisms, by contrast, powerfully beat men down and keep them in a stunted state such that human nature has difficulty reasserting itself. Despotism is therefore significantly stronger in some ways than republican government. It is also, Montesquieu suggests, men's most natural social state, since it is both simple (it requires no enlightenment and only a few passions), and because it is based on fear, a more natural passion than either virtue or honor.

According to Montesquieu, one reason that most men live under despotisms is that they are so simple and uncomplicated. Montesquieu contrasts despotisms with moderate government—a kind of government I will consider when I treat Montesquieu's analysis of commercial republicanism—and shows how while moderate governments require a complex and delicate political science, despotisms are simple and straightforward: "Despotic government leaps to view, so to speak; it is uniform throughout; as only passions are needed to establish it, everyone is good enough for that."²¹³ Despotisms are so common because they are easy to found—all it takes is a few passions of the despot—and its force is powerful enough to keep human nature in most cases from asserting itself and overturning a despotism. It is particularly striking, however, that Montesquieu suggests that "only passions" are needed to found a despotism, whereas some degree of knowledge, prudence, and good fortune are required

²¹³ Ibid.

to found other forms of government. That is, while Montesquieu generally looks favorably on the passions and their place in political life, here he says that the passions by themselves are inadequate for founding a good form of government. Some fuller or more complex kind of legislation or political science is needed to found good forms of government. We have seen how this is done in republics and monarchies. It remains to be seen how this is done in moderate commercial republics, perhaps the form of government that Montesquieu recommends as the best alternative to despotisms, and which I will treat in the chapter that follows.

4.3 EDUCATION IN DESPOTISMS

Like republics and monarchies, despotisms have an educational program appropriate for them, which Montesquieu considers in a chapter entitled “An education in a despotic government.” Montesquieu contrasts despotisms in particular with monarchies, since “Just as education in monarchies works only to elevate the heart, education in despotic states seeks only to bring it down.”²¹⁴ In instilling fear despotic governments bring down the heart, which presupposes that one’s passions have already had some taste of being elevated, and in particular of being honored. Here Montesquieu uses violent language to describe a despotic state’s educational program: despotic education beats the heart down. Education in a despotism, moreover, is quite simple: “[I]t is reduced to

²¹⁴ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.4.3.

putting fear in the heart and in teaching the spirit a few very simple religious principles.”²¹⁵

In addition to the emphasis on fear and the way in which it is put into men’s hearts is Montesquieu’s subtle introduction of religious principles into despotic education, which may be compatible with despotic fear. This is important since it represents the reverse of what a certain kind of anti-despotic religious education can do (i.e., instill hope and a law higher than the despot’s laws) in a despotism. As Montesquieu suggests, religion can in some ways be useful in constraining a despot’s power. This new account, however, shows how religion can be placed in the service of the despot’s aim to “educate” his people through the passion of fear. For instance, the people will not have access to just religious teaching, but rather the despot picks and chooses religious teachings that suit his will, and it is not hard to imagine that he will seize upon any teachings that inspire fear in the hearts of men and that command submission and obedience to political rulers. But there are some ways in which despotic governments are similar to republican and monarchical governments. According to Montesquieu, men are beaten down beginning from their experience in a household, each of which is a “separate empire.” Education in a despotism, then, “comes mainly from living with others” in the family in which one was born. This is similar to republican education, then, in its focus on education taking place within the confines of the family—which itself is described as an unnatural empire—and it is similar to monarchical education in that it has to do with what one learns while living with others, as one experiences fear while living with others. Moreover, no one receives an enlightened education, not even those who hold political

²¹⁵ Ibid.

power. According to Montesquieu, “It will be a good, even for the commander, to have had such an education [in fear and slavery], since no one is a tyrant there without at the same time being a slave.”²¹⁶ And Montesquieu points to a strong link between despotism on the one hand, and ignorance on the other. As we have seen, one of the (potential) advantages of living in society with others is the ability to gain knowledge and enlightenment. As Montesquieu suggests, though, this possibility is of no interest to the despot. A despot “does not have to deliberate, to doubt, or to reason; he has only to want.”²¹⁷ As important as the passions are to Montesquieu, there is something stunted about a man who has desires and no reason, and who keeps his subjects in perpetual fear and ignorance. And whereas as Montesquieu has suggested republican and monarchical education can foster in men’s hearts a love for their regime, despotic government is singularly incapable of persuading men to love their regime. Rather, it compels men to live in perpetual fear, a state no better than the state of war.

4.4 THE POLITICAL EFFECTS OF CLIMATE ON THE PASSIONS

One of the most important elements of Montesquieu’s treatment of despotism is the strong link between despotism and hot climates, a theme of particular relevance to anyone who is concerned with Montesquieu’s understanding of the passions. According to Montesquieu, the nature of the climate in which one receives one’s first education and in which one lives strongly affects *all* of one’s passions. There is, Montesquieu suggests,

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

a certain rate by which the passions ought naturally to be cultivated and trained, and hot climates speed up the process by which the passions emerge in a destructive way—indeed, in a way that makes men more prone to being incapable of resisting despotism. As we have seen, for Montesquieu the passions are important for giving life to the various forms of government—without the passions, men are, so to speak, dead. And men’s passions become enervated in hot climates where men’s passions emerge at a younger age than usual and are deadened more quickly than usual. As Montesquieu puts it, “In hot climates, where despotism usually reigns, passions make themselves felt earlier and are also deadened sooner; the spirit ages more quickly.”²¹⁸ Montesquieu thus suggests that it is necessary for youthful passions to be cultivated or trained in a certain way, and also that the passions are particularly hard to manage, particularly in hot climates. A number of dangerous political consequences follow from the effects of hot climate: one is less inclined to work hard, for instance, there is less honor (“It is not as easy to distinguish oneself” in hot climates), and the young are shut in at home and are unable to gain an education of the ways of society.²¹⁹ Another unhealthy consequence of a hot climate on the passions is that one marries younger and “comes of age,” as Montesquieu delicately puts it, younger than in cooler climates, the effect of which is to contribute to an early extinction of the passions. Yet the core of Montesquieu’s critique of the passions in hot climates is not that men are immoral in hot climates but rather that the good effects of the passions are lost too early in men’s lives there, and that they are

²¹⁸ Ibid., 1.5.15.

²¹⁹ Pangle emphasizes the fact that Montesquieu’s understanding of the diversity of men in differing climates is in line with the emphasis in modern political thought on the malleability of man. Pangle, *Montesquieu’s Philosophy of Liberalism*, 162-163.

less capable of resisting despotism there. What is lamentable is not so much that men feel passions strongly at a young age so much as that the passions die out so quickly when they are felt intensely at a young age. Montesquieu uses powerful language to describe the almost inevitable result of the passions being unleashed at a young age in hot climates—the passions will soon be deadened, and men will lack one of their most important natural resources for living well and preventing the emergence of despotism, or resisting or overcoming an existing despotism.

One of the most important themes in Montesquieu's political science with regard to the passions is the variability of the passions within different climates, a fact which Montesquieu emphasizes has immense political consequences. Because the passions differ so much in different climates, according to Montesquieu, "*laws* should be relative to the differences in these passions."²²⁰ In Montesquieu's view, the variability of men's passions in different climates is a result primarily of the temperature of the air in which they live, and he provides detailed physiological accounts of the way cold and hot air affect men's bodies, and by extension their passions. For instance, according to Montesquieu, cold air "contracts the extremities of the body's surface fibers," which in turn "increases their spring and favors the return of blood from the extremities of the heart."²²¹ By contrast, hot air "relaxes and lengthens the extremities of the fibers, which decreases their strength." Given these physiological observations Montesquieu notes that men are more vigorous in cold climates and more indolent in hot climates. This physical difference in climate has important political consequences—for instance, men who live in

²²⁰ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 3.14.1.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 3.14.2.

cold climates have a greater self-confidence, greater courage, less desire for vengeance, a higher opinion of their security, more frankness, and fewer suspicions of each other.

From this list it would seem that men who live in cold climates will be more inured against despotic fear. Because of this self-confidence and courage, and their greater sense of vigor and individualism, men in cold climates will be less inclined to allow a potential despot to rule over them. According to Montesquieu, monarchies are transformed into despotisms in part because there is no resistance to the despot's reach, or against the fear that a despot uses to achieve his ends. Men who live in cold climates in a way have a natural tool or arm to resist a potential despotism—just as a monarchy is maintained through honor, which is an element of resistance against a monarch's desire for ever greater power, so too do men in cold climates possess a natural arm against despotism—their natural vigor, self-confidence, and courage. In this way the climate cooperates, so to speak, with what we know of the healthy passions of men living in the state of nature.

Just as a natural man is born free and remains free with the goal of preserving himself, men living in cold climates are aided by nature to preserve and maintain their freedom, and to have the resources to prevent despotism. By contrast, hot climates work against nature and cause “a great slackening of heart” in men, making them more susceptible to despotism. If men in cold climates possess natural vigor and courage, men in warmer climates are prone to discouragement, feel they can do nothing, and are in general “timid like old men.” Montesquieu's account of the variability of human nature in different climates, then, provides an important supplement to Montesquieu's initial account of human nature in Book I: although he alluded obliquely there to the differences of human nature in various climates, here he points to the enormous differences between men in

different climates. While men are the same species everywhere, they differ more according to their climate, Montesquieu suggests, than they do in either Hobbes' or Locke's accounts of human nature and government. In Montesquieu's account, a cold climate can aid human nature and a hot climate can potentially profoundly harm human nature.²²²

One of the effects of hot climates, in Montesquieu's view, is a kind of premature exhaustion of the passions: in hot climates men lose something of their natural vigor at a young age. And in Montesquieu's view this unhealthy tendency can be reinforced by bad or unenlightened legislation. For instance, in India the legislator Foe "followed his feelings," and "put men in an extremely passive state; and this doctrine, born of idleness of the climate, favoring it in turn, has caused a thousand ills."²²³ Montesquieu is silent here as to the precise content of these ills. But he is explicit as to the connection between heat and the enervation of the body and soul—when heat causes weakness and indolence, "rest is so delicious and movement so painful that [the idea that rest and nothingness are the goals of human beings] *appears* natural" (my emphasis). As Montesquieu has indicated before, it is quite easy to mistake that which men experience in society for that which is natural, and the example of Foe and the Indians is a good example of this phenomenon. Not only are men in this state deluded as to what constitutes their natural

²²² Manent makes an important point with regard to Montesquieu's analysis of climate when he notes, "If a factor so completely nonhuman as climate exercises such a power on man, it is because the nature of man, or one might say the humanity of man, does not suffice to determine or cause his actions." Manent, *The City of Man*, 75. Men are naturally free, yet also constrained to varying degrees by necessity, such as the climate in which they live.

²²³ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 3.14.5.

state (by falling prey to false appearances), but perhaps more importantly, they lack the natural vigor to live freely and to resist despotic fear.

One way to counter the bad effects of a hot climate and avoid despotism is through the more rational or at least “sensible” example of Chinese legislators—the Chinese “made their religion, philosophy, and laws all practical.”²²⁴ A major theme in Montesquieu’s thought is the superiority of an active life over a passive and indolent life, and the example of the Chinese legislators favors activity over rest. The idea that it is important or healthy to be active does not comport explicitly with Montesquieu’s portrait of natural men in Book I (we are not told precisely what natural men do in the forests), but there does seem to be a clear connection between men’s natural passions and activity. Since the passions are natural and healthy in Montesquieu’s view, work and activity are ways in which the passions can be exercised and felt, and men can be more fully human. Work and an active life provide an outlet for the passions and allow the passions to be *felt*, in a way that they are not in a state of passivity and inactivity. And, to repeat, allowing the passions to manifest themselves in work and activity helps to keep the threat of despotism at bay.

Besides promoting practical activity, Montesquieu suggests that enlightened legislators trying to overcome the unhealthy tendencies of hot climates might take advantage of certain tendencies of the passions in hot climates.²²⁵ In these cases Montesquieu advises legislators to “turn effect against cause and destroy laziness by arrogance.” The effectual first cause in this chain is hot weather, which causes rest and

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ In Pangle’s formulation, “The goodness of a legislator is proportional to his opposition to the vices of the climate.” Pangle, *Montesquieu’s Philosophy of Liberalism*, 168.

laziness, which in turn causes arrogance. It might seem strange that such arrogant people are so susceptible to despotism.²²⁶ After all, if they are so arrogant, why do they put up with despots who beat them down? Montesquieu's response to this line of thought seems to be that men living in hot climates may have some vestiges of self-esteem (men there "are so impressed by the point of honor"), but their heat-induced languor trumps in most cases their sense of honor to resist a despot. An enlightened and non-despotic legislator, though, can take advantage of this rudimentary sense of honor. This can be achieved by giving "prizes to the plowmen who had best cultivated their lands and to the workers who had been most industrious."²²⁷ This practice, Montesquieu categorically states, will succeed in *every* country, presumably because it is such a deeply rooted tendency of human nature, at least once men live with others in society. And Montesquieu here hints that the unhealthy tendency toward laziness and rest applies not just to southern climates and Buddhist (Foe is a Buddhist legislator) or other non-Christian religions, but to Christian Ireland, too. (Religion can then in some cases lead to the same kind of unhealthy inactivity that hot climates lead to.) In sum, legislation that favors work and activity enlivens the passions and works against the dangerous effects of climate and the possibility of despotism.

While introducing honor is one effective way of combating the bad effects of climate and avoiding despotism, so too does Montesquieu in his treatment of despotism hint or point to another powerful way to thwart despotism. This is by introducing commerce into a regime—according to Montesquieu, "Muscovy has tried to leave its

²²⁶ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 3.14.9.

²²⁷ Ibid.

despotism; it cannot. The establishment of commerce requires the establishment of the exchange, and the operations of the exchange contradict all Muscovy's laws."²²⁸

Although Montesquieu does not explain here explicitly the mechanisms of commerce, it seems that commerce has to do with diffusing the exclusive power of the despot, and has to do with passions other than despotic fear.²²⁹ And as we see as we read further and more deeply into the book, commerce provides the backbone of an entirely new form of government that Montesquieu has up to now provided hints about but never fully explained. While we have up to now examined the compatibility and incompatibility of three forms of government with human nature and its passions, and seen most recently the ways in which despotisms take advantage of men's natural fear and prevent the healthy development of human nature, it remains to investigate this new form of government that Montesquieu associates with commerce. In doing so I will continue to focus on the way such governments comport with men's natural passions, to see to what degree governments devoted to commerce are in Montesquieu's view compatible with human nature's core natural passions.

4.5 THE CORRUPTION OF DESPOTISM

Corruption, according to Montesquieu, is that which causes the destruction of the nature of a government. And according to Montesquieu, all governments are in principle

²²⁸ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 4.22.14. Rahe provides a useful discussion of the impossibility of combining despotism and commerce. Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty*, 184-185.

²²⁹ Krause provides a useful discussion of Montesquieu's understanding of the effects of commerce on despotism. Krause, "Despotism in *The Spirit of the Laws*," 242-246.

susceptible to corruption, some more so than others. Republics are particularly susceptible to corruption since the demands of republican virtue go against the grain of human nature's desire for freedom, ease of life, and pleasure, and monarchies are susceptible to corruption to the extent that a monarch is tempted to become a despot. Despotic corruption is different from these two cases, since "particular accidents" violate the principles of republics and monarchies, whereas despotism is destroyed by its internal vice "if accidental causes do not prevent its principle from becoming corrupt."²³⁰ Despotism has an intrinsic internal vice because "it is corrupt by its nature," that is, the passion that animates it, fear, corrupts the government itself, since it keeps men in a psychologically painful state that men deeply wish to escape. It seems to be the case that while republican virtue can be made compatible with human nature (even if is difficult to do so), and monarchical honor can be made compatible with human nature, fear both follows from primitive human nature and is a psychological phenomenon that men deeply desire to overcome. This is so because one of the strongest reasons men join society in the first place is because of their overriding desire to flee the fear of death and to secure themselves. Any government devoted to keeping men in a state of fear is then intrinsically corrupt, and men naturally want to rebel against it if they have the power to do so. Despotism both takes advantage of a powerful and vulnerable aspect of men's nature, and deprives men of what they most deeply desire, at least as we understand human nature by taking our bearings from Montesquieu's account in Book I.

Moreover, despotic corruption is unusual for the fact that there is a continual corruption of a despotism for as long as the government exists. Other forms of

²³⁰ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.8.10.

government may be able to rid themselves of an external corruption and recover their original (so-called healthy) principle of government; by contrast, despotisms are continuously in a state of corruption for as long as the government exists. However, according to Montesquieu, whereas particular accidental causes may be the source of corruption of other forms of government, accidental causes may help to maintain despotic governments. Accidental causes keep despotic fear alive, without which the principle of despotisms would be extinguished. Men might naturally rebel against despotisms, yet it is extremely difficult to dispense with accidental causes—such as climate, religion, and the genius of a people—once they have become firmly entrenched and work against men’s natural passions. And Montesquieu uses the language of natural necessity to describe the way in which despotic fear is kept alive.²³¹ In this way nature works against human nature, so to speak: these accidental causes “force” despotic government “to follow some order and to suffer some rule.”²³² Seen from this perspective, then, it seems as if Montesquieu excuses to some extent some despotisms, at least in certain circumstances: it is in fact climate or religion, for instance, that is truly responsible for despotisms maintaining themselves, due to the overwhelming force of these accidental causes. Nature and circumstances, then, force a despotic government to follow an order or path and in this way maintain itself for a long time under certain conditions.

Up until now we have seen how various forms of government are either in conformity with Montesquieu’s account of the core of human nature and men’s passions

²³¹ Krause, makes the important point that for Montesquieu “despotic government arises on the basis of natural necessity, rather than human art.” Krause, “Despotism in *The Spirit of the Laws*,” 255.

²³² Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 1.8.10.

(as it emerged in Book I), or how they diverge from that account. We have noted that Montesquieu has hinted at various points both that there is a genuinely enlightened science of politics, superior to the previously considered alternatives, and that it can provide the basis for a new and more rational form of government that can satisfy men's core passions more than any other previous form of government. To this point ancient republics, monarchies, and despotisms have all been tested and have all failed to adequately satisfy human nature politically, despite some promise by monarchy. It is to Montesquieu's account of commercial republicanism that I now turn, to investigate how that government might potentially be more rational and thereby more in conformity with the core of men's passions than any government that Montesquieu has so far considered.

5.0 THE APPARENT NATURALNESS OF COMMERCIAL REPUBLICS

5.1 A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF LIBERTY

As we have seen, one of the most important features of Montesquieu's account of men in the state of nature is their freedom from any external constraint, which, for my purposes in particular, includes the thought that men's passions are free in this state, albeit in a limited sense: i.e., their passions are limited largely to the desire for self-preservation. And as we have also seen, men's passions are manipulated or molded in various ways outside the state of nature to adhere to various forms of government, which are to differing degrees natural or unnatural. And after his analysis of despotism, the most destructive form of government with regard to human nature and in particular human freedom, Montesquieu shifts to a subject that he has been largely silent or at least oblique about up until this point—political freedom and the ways to include and maintain it in a government. Apart from a brief allusion to the thought that monarchy may in principle be productive and supportive of political freedom, the major theme from Book I—man's nature and how its passions might be fully and adequately be satisfied—has remained in the background, as Montesquieu has considered regimes that largely do not satisfy human nature and its passions.

After disposing with the subject of despotism, Montesquieu makes a new beginning, focusing on the theme of liberty. The focus on liberty begins in a strange way. While liberty might sound to an undiscerning ear to be not only a very good thing for human beings but also something whose definition and content is obvious for anyone

with eyes to see, Montesquieu points to the perplexing and deeply disputed nature of liberty. As he says, “No word has received more different significations and has struck minds in so many ways as *liberty*.”²³³ For instance, some men think that liberty means the ease with which one disposes of tyrants. Other men, on the contrary, believe that liberty has to do with the election of one’s chosen leaders. Still others think it has to do with the right to be armed and to use violence to advance one’s interests. Others, still, think it has to do with being governed by a man of their own nation or by their own laws. And some men, Montesquieu suggests, consider liberty to consist solely in being able to wear a long beard. Montesquieu neither explicitly affirms nor denies here that any of these formulas are true or false. But as he subtly indicates, they all miss the mark somehow as a comprehensive formula insofar as they are inconsistent, as stated, with Montesquieu’s understanding of men’s passions and their freedom in the state of nature. All these formulas fall short, in Montesquieu’s estimation, because “each has given the name of *liberty* to the government that was consistent with his customs or his inclinations.”²³⁴ That is, one’s understanding of the correct definition of liberty is rooted in an irrational prejudice based on the form of government under which one lives and by which one is shaped or molded, or else according to one’s particular inclinations (and it is therefore not universally true). The caves in which we live prevent us from coming to a full understanding of what true liberty actually is. Montesquieu suggests, then, that all men who *believe* they have lived under governments devoted to liberty have not in fact done so, or else they have lived under free governments, but without an adequate

²³³ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Ibid., 2.11.2.

²³⁴ Ibid., 2.11.2.

understanding of why they are free. Implied in this thought is that even those living in ancient republics and monarchies may have a partial and to some degree true (yet also to some degree defective) understanding of liberty.

What, then, is Montesquieu's definition of liberty? Montesquieu provides his clearest and most compact definition of liberty—that is, political liberty (or liberty in society outside the state of nature)—when he writes, “It is true, that in democracies the people seem to do what they want, but political liberty in no way consists of doing what one wants. In a state, that is, in a society where there are laws, liberty can consist only in having the power to do what one should want to do and in no way being constrained to do what one should not want to do.”²³⁵ To begin with, we can note that the first sentence in this account makes a clear connection between political liberty and some kind of morality and moral restraint, as well as apparently dismisses the illusion that political liberty has to do with doing whatever one wants, whenever one wants: that is, extreme libertinism or license or even anarchy. Furthermore, we can note that the perplexing second sentence of this account is divided into two distinct parts, which are in some tension with each other.²³⁶ In the beginning part of the sentence, Montesquieu takes his bearings from the perspective of traditional morality or moralities. He speaks of laws (that limit and guide our behavior, presumably toward some conception of the good), and he speaks of liberty consisting only in the “power” to do what one *should* want to do and in not being

²³⁵ Ibid., 2.11.3.

²³⁶ In this brief and compact statement we can see *the* major theme of *The Spirit of the Laws* as a whole, between virtue or repressive morality, and freedom. Manent perceptively notes that the entire “movement of *The Spirit of the Laws* unfolds between the two poles of Ancient and Modern, that is to say, between ancient republican virtue and modern English commerce and liberty.” Manent, *The City of Man*, 12.

constrained to do what one *should not* want to do. This understanding of liberty, rooted as it is in the perspective of a traditional morality where one fulfills moral obligations toward other and towards various understandings of one's communities (as in ancient republics), is far from men's condition of the state of nature, where men follow their limited passions and inclinations and have no moral obligations to one another at all. Yet it is from this perspective of traditional morality that Montesquieu begins to elucidate *his* understanding of political liberty, *the* simply *true* understanding of political liberty.

Montesquieu starts from a conservative position and presents himself in the guise of a conservative, concerned with the importance of humbly doing one's duties. There is at first blush no incompatibility at all between the morality of doing one's duties toward others and enjoying genuine freedom. It becomes clear fairly quickly, however, that there are some problems with this understanding, which Montesquieu is surely aware of, but to which he does not call explicit attention. For instance, what is the basis of and the content of this moral perspective, that Montesquieu seemingly takes for granted, and which he implicitly encourages his readers to take for granted, at least at first? Both are left unsaid. Montesquieu then quickly shifts from an understanding in which men handed down or imposed on other men a particular moral code (as, for instance, in republics and societies based on traditional religious teachings) to a novel understanding of the liberty of individuals to choose their own moralities or ways of life, however irrational or in conflict with other moralities they may be. Social life seems to require some degree of morality and of restraints on how one lives one's life, but such restraints can clearly hamper the liberty to choose one's own way of life. This thought becomes clearer in the second part of the sentence, which is not at all conservative sounding. In this part of the

sentence Montesquieu says that liberty has to do with not being *constrained* to do what one should not want to do. For example, no rational person would think it is good to be forced to act for the benefit of a brutal and murderous tyranny, even if such a regime preaches that its way is the right way. In this way Montesquieu wants to reject illiberal attempts to impose behaviors that are claimed to be moral but are actually bad for us. And as the constraints of externally imposed and inherited moralities lose their seemingly unquestionable authority, Montesquieu tries to persuade his readers that they are free their own morality or moralities, whose content is enigmatically left unstated.²³⁷ The primary question is no longer the question of how one *should* live, or the simply best way of life; what is now primary is men's freedom to choose how to live, whatever the content of that life.

Montesquieu then makes a clear distinction between men in the state of nature with their completely free passions and amorality, and political liberty. There is a distinction, he claims, between independence (as in the state of nature) and genuine liberty: "Liberty is the right to do everything that the laws permit; and if one citizen could do what they forbid, he would have this same power."²³⁸ Morality here retreats to the background and "rights" come to the foreground. The stern, demanding, and unquestionable moralities of ancient republics and traditional religions lose their force, and one now has rights by which the laws permit us to do much while forbidding little.

²³⁷ Manent goes directly to the heart of the matter when he notes, "The primary intent of *The Spirit of the Laws* is...to weaken decisively the authority of the Ancients, of the idea of the 'best regime,' the idea of virtue, in order to replace it with the authority of the present moment, of the modern experience, summed up in the notion of 'commerce' and 'liberty.' Therein lies the principal difficulty of this enterprise." Manent, *The City of Man*, 15.

²³⁸ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Ibid., 2.11.3.

And while Montesquieu somewhat obliquely mentioned power in his first definition of liberty, it now becomes clear that power is both something that men naturally have and naturally desire to have more of, and also that it is potentially very dangerous, insofar as it threatens every man's liberty. This is the true reason that men need moral limits. Men need moral limits not because their fathers, priests, or statesmen compel them to follow them (or simply because they are true), but rather because men are very dangerous without moral limits, due to their natural love of power. Men need moral limits not because of divine sanction or to lead them in the direction of the virtuous or correct life, but rather to prevent them from harming each other. Montesquieu is unconcerned with which is morality is true or which moralities might be truer than others, since what men really care about, when it comes down to it and which men are often unaware of, is being and staying alive. One no longer has nor can one have complete independence outside the state of nature, and if all men were to do what the laws forbid (that is, rob and kill each other, for instance), one would be in a state of anarchy. Although Montesquieu does not explicitly point to Hobbes here, Montesquieu and Hobbes are united in defending the rule of law in order to protect men's rights, and permitting men to follow their passions within the limits of the rule of law.

5.2 THE PASSIONS AND POLITICAL FREEDOM

As we have seen, one of the keys to Montesquieu's thought is considering the passions or "springs" of various forms of government, which put governments and indeed human life in motion. It is particularly strange, then, that upon arriving at a new

government that he praises so highly Montesquieu does not explicitly articulate a predominant passion that animates this form of government.²³⁹ While it is true, however, that Montesquieu does not explicitly point to a dominant passion that animates this form of government, he does obliquely point to the most important passions that are either given free rein there or are given special protection in such governments. And he compels the reader to sift through the analysis and portrait of such a government to see for himself what these passions are, why they are protected and preserved, and how they might be praiseworthy, insofar as they are in conformity with men's core passions in the state of nature. One such passion, for instance, is men's natural desire for self-preservation, which Montesquieu claims is protected in regimes devoted to political liberty. Indeed, one of the most important elements of political liberty is precisely this kind of emphasis on protection and security: as Montesquieu says, "Political liberty in a citizen is that tranquility of spirit, which comes from the opinion each one has of his security, and in order for him to have this liberty, the government must be such that one citizen cannot fear another citizen."²⁴⁰ As we recall from Book 1, men's strongest natural passion is to preserve their lives, and in particular their bodies, and to avoid death, which threatens men as they leave the original state of nature and come into contact with other men. A government devoted to political liberty, then, is one that guarantees those men's bodily preservation who are members of that particular political community. Such a political community ensures that men do not fear each other—as they irrationally did when they

²³⁹ Rahe is correct in asserting that Montesquieu never explicitly claims which particular passion animates commercial republics. Rahe, *Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift*, 14, 31.

²⁴⁰ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 2.11.6.

first came in contact with one another in the state of nature—and thereby assuages their anxiety about death at the hands of any other man, in that particular community. Yet the specter of death can of course never *entirely* be avoided and therefore in this state men are only persuaded to have the *opinion*—and not the perfect knowledge—of their perfectly ensured security. Yet this opinion is enough to reduce men’s anxiety about death, and to help satisfy that which men desire most, according to Montesquieu—their bodily preservation and perpetuation.

Another passion that is derivative of the desire for individual self-preservation is the desire to live free from external compulsion. And Montesquieu’s best regime is structured in such a way that this desire can be protected and preserved. Legitimacy in such a government is rooted in self-rule, and the freedom of men’s minds and passions: as Montesquieu says, “As in a free state, every man, considered to have a free soul, should be governed by himself, and the people as a body should have legislative power.”²⁴¹ This passage is striking for the fact that it mentions free souls without elaboration as to what a free soul is. Yet upon closer inspection men are only “considered” to have free souls, which could amount to nothing more than what Tocqueville calls a “salutary dogma,” a cover for an understanding of men’s baser passions as they exist naturally. Montesquieu adds, moreover, a difficulty for self-rule: that it is impossible for all the people in large states to govern themselves, and self-rule is “subject to many drawbacks” in small ones. These difficulties exist for this reason: “the people must have their representatives do all that they themselves cannot do.”²⁴²

²⁴¹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 2.11.6.

²⁴² Ibid.

Although the legitimacy of this form of government is rooted in men's natural ability to govern themselves (or to be free from being compelled in a way contrary to their inclinations and desires), Montesquieu seems to think that men are not always particularly good or effective at governing themselves, and that genuine self-rule is a practical impossibility in political communities. And although Montesquieu does not explicitly spell this thought out, I think these reservations have to do with the problematic nature of men's passions, and in particular their inveterate self-interestedness, their natural desire for limitless power, and their at times extreme partiality and irrationality. Men's freedom and their free passions must be acknowledged for a government to be considered legitimate, but men must also be protected, as it were, from themselves, by their institutions—for instance, by having political representatives, the best practical solution, in Montesquieu's view, for protecting liberty and having some degree of genuine self-rule.²⁴³ As he says, "The people must have their representatives do all that they themselves cannot do."²⁴⁴ For Montesquieu, the transfer of legitimate political power from free men in the state of nature to accountable representatives in a political community is an easy and straightforward transfer; it is not in any way problematic. In transferring political power from themselves to their legitimate representatives men are just as free as they were before such a transfer took place. As we will see, Montesquieu's solution to preserving men's freedom in political communities is highly problematic, in Rousseau's view, and is a major point of disagreement between Montesquieu and

²⁴³ As Cohler notes, the English government explicitly depends "upon representative institutions which [are] balanced so that passions counter passions." Anne Cohler, *Montesquieu's Comparative Politics and the Spirit of American Constitutionalism* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 21.

²⁴⁴ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 2.11.6.

Rousseau. The idea that most men are too driven by their passions to govern the political body as a whole is explained in Montesquieu's statement that "the great advantage of representatives is that they are able to discuss public business. The people are not at all appropriate for such discussions; this forms one of the great drawbacks of democracy."²⁴⁵ While men have free passions that ground the legitimacy of a government, only certain men more capable of enlightenment than most others are capable of discussing public business and superintending the government as a whole. The passionate nature and the lack of reason on the part of most men make them incapable of maintaining a stable government, and this drawback compels Montesquieu to suggest the remedy of semi-enlightened representatives as a way to preserve natural liberty.

Nowhere does Montesquieu claim explicitly what the passion is that provides the spring that sets commercial republics in motion. Yet he does claim, almost off-handedly, that vanity makes for a good spring of government, without specifying any form of government in particular that is attached to vanity. Yet putting his treatment of the passion of vanity together with his account of commercial republics it seems that vanity indeed can be a useful and even healthy spring in commercial republics in particular. As we recall, men's passions in the state of nature are powerful, yet minimal: men followed their limited individual inclinations by acquiring what they could to procure their self-preservation. And in Montesquieu's account, the passion of vanity is in complete conformity with men's naturally self-interested, self-regarding, and acquisitive nature. It is simply a consequence of a passion that emerges when self-interested men come in contact with each other and desire to augment their self-love. (In the state of nature men

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

are exclusively concerned with themselves and their self-preservation; in society men acquire vanity as they become concerned with the image they present to others and how others view and evaluate them.) As Montesquieu says, “Vanity is as good a spring for government as arrogance is a dangerous one.” The result of the unleashing of vanity is unambiguously good, to Montesquieu’s mind: it results in “innumerable goods”: “luxury, industry, the arts, fashions, politeness, and taste.”²⁴⁶ (In this list, it is important to note that all these activities are peaceful, they are productive of pleasures and a kind of softness, and they distract men from the fact of death.) And perhaps most importantly, work is a consequence of vanity. In the state of nature men work minimally and only to preserve their security (for instance, by gathering enough food to survive another day). In society, however, men can pursue an easier and more comfortable way of life through a life of industrious work, procuring and trading goods to make their lives more pleasant, comfortable, and easy. While vanity is a kind of external “spring” that we can easily see, then, behind it are the core passion of self-preservation, the related desire to pursue pleasure and avoid pain (desires which all men have naturally), the desire to see oneself advance socially above others, and the desire to be admired by others. From this perspective, then, vanity can be seen as derivative both from the natural passion of self-preservation, as well as the monarchic passion of honor (insofar as one desires to be compared favorably with others). The vanity of commercial republics is then in some ways similar to that of monarchic honor insofar as one is ranked and compared to other men (and one derives pleasure by evaluating oneself highly and being highly evaluated by others). Yet in monarchies all men deferred to the monarch and received clear ranks,

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 3.19.9.

and in commercial republics there is no monarch. In men's pursuit of vanity in a commercial republic, there is no single monarch around whom all other men revolve. As Montesquieu will later suggest, in commercial republics each man regards himself, somewhat justifiably but also somewhat exaggeratedly, as the sovereign. (Sovereignty derives from all men's free natures, yet sovereignty, as we have seen, often resides elsewhere.) In commercial republics there is no single and clear standard or hierarchy against which to judge oneself and psychologically augment one's vanity. In a commercial republic it seems that one can be vain—and derive the commensurate pleasures of vanity—however one wishes to present oneself to the world and advance in society. And because of the diversity that results from commerce, there will be many ways for individual men to be vain and enjoy the fruits of vanity. In addition, in this list of the goods that result from vanity we can see clearly the way in which men's passions are unleashed and satisfied to a greater degree than in ancient republics. Ancient republics (and classical philosophers like Plato and Aristotle) sternly forbade commerce, and the cases of Penn's republic in America and the Jesuits' Paraguay significantly restricted commerce. By contrast, in commercial republics where vanity is unleashed, men can pursue a way of life that is easier, more comfortable, and more materially and psychologically satisfying than is available in either the state of nature or any ancient republic. Encouraging men to work hard and consequently to profit from the spring of vanity is then a kind of improvement on life in the state of nature. In this account, then, Montesquieu sides with Locke in agreeing with him that the condition of the industrious

day laborer in England is preferable and with hard work his future will be more materially satisfying than the condition of the savage king in America.²⁴⁷

5.3 THE NATURE OF COMMERCIAL REPUBLICS

While Montesquieu has only hinted up until now that there is a novel kind of moderate form of government (for instance during his analysis of monarchy), just after his initial definition of liberty he begins to give a more comprehensive account of the nature or structure of moderate governments, and the passions within them. Although he does not explicitly refer to the passions here, his account sheds important light on his understanding of the passions. As Montesquieu says, “Political liberty is found only in moderate government. But it is not always in moderate state. It is present only when power is not abused, but it has eternally been observed that any man who has power is led to abuse it; he continues until he finds limits.”²⁴⁸ Men’s natural passions are kinds of powers, and according to Montesquieu there is ample empirical evidence to demonstrate both that men desire to acquire power in manifold ways and also that they inexorably abuse it when given the opportunity to do so. These are simply incontrovertible facts about human nature that must be acknowledged and taken into account in judging human life, and in particular when founding a form of government that does justice to the truth of human nature. All men passionately love themselves more than any other beings, and desire to acquire as much power as they can (in various ways) unless they come up

²⁴⁷ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 26.

²⁴⁸ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 2.11.4.

against limits and constraints that prevent them from abusing their power against other men. Montesquieu's structural prescription for these facts about human nature is to suggest the seemingly simple remedy of setting powers against one another to prevent any one's man abuse of his power (or one group's abuse of their power): "So that one cannot abuse power, power must check power by the arrangement of things. A constitution can be such that no one will be constrained to do the things the law does not oblige him to do or be kept from doing the things the law permits him to do."²⁴⁹ It may be hard for citizens of liberal democracies to fathom how novel and even radical Montesquieu's suggestion of a political balance of powers based on his understanding of human nature is, a suggestion which ensures political liberty and security against the abuse of power. Yet to all men in history (with the exception, as we will see, of modern England and perhaps a few others), the idea of being exceptionally free of external constraints is both wholly new and intensely liberating from older, more constraining and painful ways of life. Men living in ancient republics had their core passions manipulated and coerced to follow self-annihilating virtue, and even that state, according to Montesquieu, is preferable to the government Montesquieu insists most men have lived and continue to live under—despotism and its crippling fear. It is from this perspective that we can begin to understand Montesquieu's quiet, yet persistent and powerful hint to those who form governments that with the correct constitutional structure, a constitution "can be such" that men can still preserve a great deal of the freedom that they possessed in the state of nature. Not even Hobbes who, like Montesquieu, promoted the spread "rights" while minimizing the importance of duties, was able to perceive the

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

effectiveness of the plan that Montesquieu envisions to balance political liberty with security and stability. Or rather, Hobbes did foresee Montesquieu's solution of divided powers without a clear sovereign, while dismissing it as an implausible and dangerous three-headed monster.²⁵⁰ Yet for Montesquieu this is the only way to preserve liberty, since Hobbes' solution tends inexorably towards despotism and the abuse of power.

According to Montesquieu, there is only one nation "whose constitution has political liberty for its direct purpose." That nation, as becomes clear, is England. Furthermore, Montesquieu invites his readers "to examine the principles on which this nation founds political liberty. If these principles are good, liberty will appear there as in a mirror."²⁵¹ In this brief statement Montesquieu does two important things. First, he distances himself from the classical tradition of perfect, imaginary, chimerical cities and republics and allies himself with the revolutionary "tradition" of Machiavelli and his heirs. As to the question of the best regime, Montesquieu rejects imaginary principalities or cities in speech and casts his gaze at the nation of England in motion, with its liberal constitution at work in practice. And second, in inviting his readers to examine the principles themselves, Montesquieu echoes what he asked his readers to do at the outset in Book I—to consider his principles themselves, and to think them through (and as it were to feel their sentiments) to see whether they satisfy the demands of our nature or not. Each reader must then check Montesquieu's account of the best regime against his own sentiments, passions, and rational capabilities to see whether or not the English

²⁵⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 228.

²⁵¹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 2.11.5.

regime is in fact the best regime, the regime that best satisfies human nature, provided that any regime, imaginary or actual, can in fact provide such satisfaction.

The most immediately striking as well as the most well-known and influential aspect of Montesquieu's England is the doctrine of the three powers, and the separation of the powers, a doctrine that is meant to defang and tame men's acquisitive passions. As Montesquieu says, "In each state there are three sorts of powers: legislative power, executive power over things depending on the right of nations, and executive power over the things depending on civil right."²⁵² The first has to do with creating laws, the second with conducting matters pertaining to war and peace, and the third with judging legal disputes and punishing crimes. It is easy quickly to pass over this powerful idea, because it seems so obvious and because it has so powerfully and effectively shaped the world in which we live and our way of life. However, a few things about this statement are worth noting. First, Montesquieu notes that in *each state* these three powers are to be found. What, then, of the other apparent states that are not arranged with these three powers? Montesquieu suggests, I think, that at bottom all states have three powers, but that most states do not separate them properly. Elsewhere he claims that states *as such* have laws simply, a standard according to which republics and monarchies qualify but not despotisms. Here Montesquieu goes further and suggests that only states that have not only laws but organizational structures with tripartite powers are truly legitimate states. Why, then, are they the only states that are truly legitimate? It seems to me that it is because in Montesquieu's view the core of human nature is best preserved and protected in such regimes, where one is allowed to follow one's passions and inclinations within

²⁵² Ibid., 2.11.6.

reasonable limits. And the organizing structure both gives human nature its due and protects it, as it were, from itself. As human beings are free and naturally desire to acquire power, the English system manages to preserve political freedom and prevent the emergence of despotism by setting powers against each other. The structure of a despotism is simple, and according to Montesquieu it only takes simple passions and no rational capabilities to found a despotism. To avoid such a result, and given that men are naturally and passionately self-interested and desire power, it is necessary to set powers against each other, with all the powers remaining separate from each other. As Montesquieu says, “When legislative power is united with executive power in a simple person or in a single body of the magistracy, there is no liberty, because one can fear that the same monarch or senate that makes tyrannical laws will execute them tyrannically.”²⁵³ All men and all branches of government are potential tyrants or despots. Setting the powers against each other secures them from each other and prevents the emergence of despotism and its fear. In sum, the goal of this form of government is to diffuse power and allow the passions the chance to be free from despotic fear: as Montesquieu says, “All would be lost if the same man or the same body of principal men...exercised these three powers; that of making the laws, that of executing public resolutions, and that of judging the crimes or the disputes of individuals.”²⁵⁴

One of Montesquieu’s main insights into the passions is that men are naturally acquisitive and tend to oppress one another if they can find the means to do so. The institutional structure that is erected to diffuse power and prevent its abuse presupposes

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

both that those men who rule (and who represent the people) will be subject to strong passions themselves, and also that they (or at least some of them) will be more enlightened or at least somehow less subject to harmful passions than the vast majority of men. Men's representatives, Montesquieu supposes, will be more inclined to rise above petty passions and discuss and order public business. Yet even these men too are subject at least in principle to potentially harmful passions. Just as each individual man is a potential despot, so too is the legislative body that represents the people as a whole. For this reason Montesquieu insists on the right of the executive to check (against an enigmatic and unnamed standard) the legislative body: "If the executive power does not have the right to check the enterprises of the legislative body, the latter will be despotic; for it will wipe out all the other powers, since it will be able to give to itself all the power that it can imagine."²⁵⁵ Montesquieu thus suggests the people and their representatives are led more powerfully by a sub-rational imagination that desires power after power than by reason, and that the executive's job is to judge and sometimes to check the decisions of people who sometimes make bad decisions. Montesquieu presupposes without proving so that the executive will be more enlightened or less subject to strong passions than other men—Hobbes, too, seems to presuppose this in his sovereign—and the executive's job consists of supervising the government as a whole and simply executing those laws of the legislative body that he judges to be legitimate, or at least not harmful or destructive of the political community as a whole. It would appear that he would be more inured against destructive passions since his job is simply to execute the law in light of the necessities of the moment. Yet this institutional structure also has the function of

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

encouraging the people and representatives to be at least slightly more dispassionate and reflective, by encouraging them to be more attentive to the manner in which the executive executes the laws, that is, at their core, *their* laws. According to Montesquieu, the legislative body should not have the power to check the executive, but “it has the right and should have the faculty to examine the manner in which the laws it has made have been executed.”²⁵⁶ In this way the mutually fruitful examination of the executive and the legislative bodies compels the executive to be accountable for his actions (and thereby helps prevent despotic acts on his part), and makes the legislative body reflect on why the executive acted the way that he did, and reflect on whether he has broken their “trust” or not. In this regime it is not always apparent precisely where sovereignty ultimately resides—depending on the moment it seems to shift from the people to their representatives to the judges and executors of the laws. Hobbes might perhaps accuse Montesquieu of advocating a kind of confused, hopelessly contradictory, and ultimately vulnerable and dangerous three-headed man.²⁵⁷ Yet Montesquieu thinks that it is only through such a delicate institutional balance that men might be able to preserve their liberty—grounded ultimately in their natural passions—and prevent the emergence of despotism in a way that Hobbes’ solution is unable to do.

As we recall from Book 1, peace is the first natural law for men whose most powerful passion is to avoid death. On the surface, it might seem as if setting men’s passions and powers against one another might lead to the kind of conflict that would result in anarchy and violence. Yet according to Montesquieu, a delicate institutional

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 228.

balance can indeed be achieved, which balances men's passions and powers and results in peace. As he says," The form of these three powers should be rest or inaction. But as they are constrained to move by the necessary motion of things, they will be forced to move in concert."²⁵⁸ In this way we see that Montesquieu proposes to manipulate or constrain nature and in particular human nature for his own humane ends, while at the same time *preserving men's natural freedom*. Human nature may not be able to be transformed so as to make men completely harmless with regard to one another, but human passions can be taken as they are and ordered so as to ensure that what they most desire, their preservation and a peaceful life, can be procured. Men will then live in a kind of freedom, but manipulated by those who shape their political order to move in "peaceful concert."

Montesquieu had previously called our attention to the different opinions that men hold regarding the definition and content of liberty ("No word has received more different significations...as liberty."²⁵⁹ Yet rather than trying to rationally arbitrate the disputed nature of liberty in a way akin to Aristotle's procedure in Book 3 of the *Politics* with regard to the best regime, Montesquieu distills the definition of liberty into a clear, concise, and definitive answer to the question of the content of political liberty, an answer that leaves behind and transcends all the imprecise definitions of liberty: in short, liberty "consists in security or in one's opinion of one's security."²⁶⁰ Like his modern liberal predecessors Hobbes and Locke, Montesquieu believes he has found *the* definitive answer to the question of the best regime, the regime that will most satisfy human nature.

²⁵⁸ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 2.11.6.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 2.11.2.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 2.12.1. According to Pangle's penetrating account, "security" for Montesquieu can in fact be summed up as "life without anguish and suffering, comfortable life." Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism*, 142.

(And to be sure, Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu all agree as to the importance and centrality of security as a goal, even if their more comprehensive prescriptions are more complex.) While the end or goal of a regime devoted to liberty, that is, security, may sound prosaic to those who live under and have been formed by it, or perhaps to those who are impressed by the results of ancient republics or monarchies, a regime that is devoted to securing men's bodies is one that will in Montesquieu's opinion most satisfy the core passions of human nature, and in particular men's inveterate and intractable fear of death. Yet from this brief statement Montesquieu also indicates the *limits* of what any regime can achieve; it cannot completely conquer fortune. Men passionately desire security and governments can be formed that can protect men's security, but men cannot genuinely escape the prospect of death completely. For this reason political liberty is perhaps better understood at bottom as merely an "opinion" of security that the government does its best to support. Since it is an opinion it is at bottom only a kind of chimera and not genuine knowledge of one's complete and perfect security. Governments can attempt to guarantee men's complete security, yet the specter of death is always in the background, even when men feel themselves to be most secure. Yet the opinion that one has of one's security is the link, for Montesquieu, between the most powerful passion in the state of nature (the fear of death and thereby the desire for self-preservation), and the basis of a legitimate political order. It is the genuine reason why it is good to leave the state of nature and live in society.

5.4 SECURITY, LIBERTY, AND CRIMINAL LAWS IN THE COMMERCIAL REPUBLIC

One of the keys to understanding Montesquieu's account of how men's naturally free passions might be preserved in society is by understanding precisely what he has in mind when he discusses what security actually is. As we have seen, men are free in the state of nature and desire to remain free (from other men and death), but they are too timid and fearful (that is, weak) to be able to procure their own security by themselves. And according to Montesquieu one way the goodness of a society can be judged is by the judging the *degree* to which a society provides for its citizens' security. Men's security is always vulnerable. And according to Montesquieu, men's security is "attacked" most acutely by "public and private accusations," that is, by legal claims against citizens that are backed up by the force of the laws. For this reason, Montesquieu suggests that "the citizens' liberty depends principally on the goodness of criminals laws."²⁶¹ Montesquieu claims that knowledge of how to craft good criminal laws has not always been apparent to founders of political communities (for instance, founders of ancient republics, monarchies, or other traditional communities), and it has not manifested itself all at a stroke. Rather, such knowledge has accumulated slowly throughout political history: criminal laws "were not perfected all at once." Yet with enlightenment now available as to what men are like and what their core passions and needs are, criminal laws can come closer to perfection. Indeed, as Montesquieu optimistically claims, "the knowledge already acquired in some countries and *that will be acquired in others*, concerning the surest rules one can observe in criminal judgments, is *of more concern to mankind than*

²⁶¹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 2.12.2.

anything else in the world.”²⁶² It is hard to overestimate the boldness of this claim: not complete self-knowledge, nor complete knowledge of science, nor still knowledge of the divine is what concerns mankind the most. Rather, what matters *more than anything* is knowledge of good criminal laws and thereby of men’s security and liberty. There is doubtless a kind of humanitarian and even populist bent in Montesquieu’s optimism on this subject. The political freedom of *all men* trumps *all* other concerns. The quality of all men’s lives and the satisfaction of all men’s core passions will be achieved by the—inevitable, according to Montesquieu—worldwide reform of criminal laws. It is only with good criminal laws that men will be genuinely free and able to justify their movement from the state of nature to the state of society: “Liberty can be founded only on the practice of this knowledge, and in a state that had the best possible laws in regard to it, a man against whom proceedings had been brought and who was to be hung the next day would be freer than is a pasha in Turkey.”²⁶³ (This statement bears striking resemblance to Rousseau’s famous statement about the necessity of “forcing men to be free” in *The Social Contract*.) In a jarring and paradoxical image, Montesquieu claims that a man who violated the laws in a regime devoted to liberty and who is on the way to his certain death (because of his transgression of the laws) is freer than a despot, who has the illusion that he can do anything.

In addition, the proper way to reform criminal laws in a liberal regime is by paying attention to the nature of each particular crime and classifying it according to how much it threatens men’s security. As Montesquieu says, “It is the triumph of liberty when

²⁶² Ibid.; my emphasis.

²⁶³ Ibid.

criminal laws draw each penalty from the particular nature of the crime. All arbitrariness ends; the penalty does not ensue from the legislator's capriciousness but from the nature of the thing, and man does not do violence to man."²⁶⁴ This statement is important for the fact that it recalls the moral equality of men in the state of nature (men are simply men without any conventional hierarchies) who had no desire to physically harm one another. And although one of the main reasons that men join society is to gain enlightenment (for instance of what matters most to men, criminal laws) it has taken a long time for this knowledge to begin to be diffused.

Montesquieu divides criminal laws into four categories: those of religion, of mores, of tranquility, and of security. In this list what Montesquieu focuses on are general themes related to the nature of any particular society: e.g., religion or mores, which vary according to each society and its particular way of life. Yet in taking account of these main themes of all societies, Montesquieu has a kind of universalizing prescription for criminal laws, which can benefit *all* societies: one should only punish or correct that which genuinely threatens or interferes with the security of men bodies. Accordingly, crimes of religion should be milder than they have been hitherto, and strikingly, in those "crimes" that "wound the divinity," "where there is no public action, there is no criminal matter."²⁶⁵ By contrast, what should in fact be punished are crimes "against tranquility" and those that directly harm men's bodies.²⁶⁶ The goal or end of a regime devoted to political liberty is to guarantee men's bodily security and thereby men's ability safely to follow their natural passions within reasonable limits. And with enlightenment about

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 2.12.4.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 2.12.2.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

what matters most to mankind—good criminal laws—regimes devoted to political liberty can be founded that can satisfy men’s passions more than any previous regimes, and existing regimes can be reformed with the benefit of this knowledge.

5.5 THE PORTRAIT OF ENGLAND THE PASSIONS OF ITS CITIZENS

Although Montesquieu provides several practical examples of praiseworthy commercial republics (for instance, Holland and Marseilles), he devotes his greatest effort to portraying the English regime, in particular in an extended and especially rich chapter devoted to the ways in which to form the mores, manners, and character of a nation. There is, in Montesquieu’s view, a necessary relation between the constitution of a nation, on the one hand, and “the effects that had to follow the character” formed by the constitution, on the other. Montesquieu thus agrees with Plato and Aristotle that the nature of a regime powerfully forms the souls of those who live within it. Yet while this is apparent of other regimes that Montesquieu has treated, what is striking about Montesquieu’s treatment of England is both that he does not isolate a single passion that animates England as in other regimes, and also that he identifies *many* different passions—unsystematically and without a great amount of depth or comprehensive analysis. Yet as I will try to show, the key to understanding Montesquieu’s account of England as it relates to the passions is to keep in mind Montesquieu’s goal of letting *any* and *all* passions, natural and unnatural, be free in England, as long as they do not transgress the laws, whose goal is to protect men’s bodily safety and security. And the structure of the constitution is such that it allows men’s passions to be unleashed and free,

and channels and manages them in such a way that they do not threaten each other's safety and security. By preserving men's freedom in the state of nature, there is a seamless transition from the state of nature the commercial republic. In this way, then, even though they may be productive of and even encourage "unnatural" passions, commercial republics can be considered according to Montesquieu to be the most "natural" of regimes.²⁶⁷

Perhaps the most important statement in Montesquieu's account of England (and certainly the most explicit) as it relates to the passions is his observation that in England, "As all the passions are free there, hatred, envy, jealousy, and the ardor for enriching and distinguishing oneself would appear there to their full extent, and if this were otherwise, the state would be like a man who, laid low by disease, has no passions because he has no strength."²⁶⁸ Several things are worth observing about this important statement. To begin with, Montesquieu praises the passions *as such* as a source of source, and he connects them with the physiological health of an imaginary body. The passions enliven and give strength to men's bodies. Moreover, he connects passions that are traditionally thought of as vices with the healthy passions of a healthy body. As in Book 1, Montesquieu thus turns the traditional prejudice of the bad effects of men's passions (i.e., that they need to be resisted and restrained, and that they are destructive of "higher" concerns) on its head and here claims that apparently destructive passions can have good or at least harmless effects if a constitution is ordered in the right way. The focus in this statement, in

²⁶⁷ Rahe rightly claims that "what Montesquieu says of monarchy can be said of England's government as well: it 'is favored by the passions & favors them in its turn.'" Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty*, 99.

²⁶⁸ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 3.19.27.

addition, is on the free passions of individual men: the focus in England is not on the sacrifice of any free passions for the sake of the community (as in Sparta), but rather on pleasant things, or things that can have pleasant effects, like money-making and distinguishing oneself in the eyes of others.²⁶⁹ There is then no focus at all on any communal goals but only on what is good and pleasant as an individual man judges it—to be sure, often from deeply prejudiced perspectives. Perhaps the key to Montesquieu's argument as to the goodness of the passions, however, is that they give men strength and animate the body. The traditional view is that the passions seduced and distracted men from more exalted and important callings, like contemplation or morality. Montesquieu's argument is that the passions are necessary for healthy life even if they at times appear immoral from more traditional perspectives. And at bottom no passion is bad or evil unless it threatens other men's security. Moreover, not only does Montesquieu praise, excuse, or exonerate supposedly immoral passions, but he does so for passions that are clearly unnatural if we take our bearings from the portrait of the natural passions in Book 1. It is impossible to think of strictly natural men having hatred for each other, men who have no desire to harm others. Yet the introduction and tacit approval of unnatural passions in society seems completely unproblematic for Montesquieu. Unnatural passions can be introduced and in society and can even be healthy for men as long as their core natural passion, the desire for security, is satisfied. This is, as we will see, a major point of disagreement between Montesquieu and Rousseau. Whereas the transition between the

²⁶⁹ As Pangle notes, "In Rousseau's terminology, this is the regime of the *bourgeois*, the ancient cities were the regimes of the *citoyen*." Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism*, 147.

state of nature and the commercial republic can be seen as a kind of ascent for Montesquieu, the same cannot be said to be true of Rousseau's view.

Part of Montesquieu's argument in Book 1 was that when men leave the state of nature and enter society they become competitive with each other and desire power and their own advantage in tension with other men. And as in Hobbes' state of war, men who desire power are a threat to each other, which can potentially result in death, a result which natural men most want to avoid. In Montesquieu's commercial republic men join together to extend their strength and channel their passions by joining parties, which passionately compete with each other. According to Montesquieu, the English parties have an enduring and passionate "hatred" for each other, which, without constitutional restraints—and the manners and mores that persuade men to defer to them—would cause potentially bloody conflict. Yet the paradoxical effect of the parties being in conflict with each other is that their hatred will in effect be "powerless," that is, men's lives will not genuinely be threatened by each other. Men's passionate nature desires to increase its strength and it does so by joining parties that increase their strength (and which would not require the sacrifice of any natural passions), and the constitutional structure of the commercial republic is such that it provides a outlet or channel for such passionate desire for strength. And in doing so it renders men's passions relatively harmless by setting the parties against each other, just as the powers of the major institutions are set against each other. In addition, just as in other forms of government there is a kind of physical necessity that follows from the ordering of the passions, so too, according to Montesquieu, is there a kind of physical necessity at work in the party system of commercial republics. As Montesquieu says, "As these parties are made up of free men,

if one party gained too much power, the effect of liberty would be to lower it while the citizens would come and raise the other party like hands rescuing the body.”²⁷⁰ The citizens living under a commercial republic know that the balance of institutions and parties is such that it protects all citizens’ liberty and prevents the possible emergence of despotism. If one of the parties becomes weakened Montesquieu envisions that there will of necessity be an impassioned defense of the weaker party so as to rescue that party and the institutional structure and balance.

In his depiction of England, Montesquieu focuses in large part on the sub-rational elements of human nature that manifest themselves in English citizens and animate their lives. While there is according to Montesquieu a kind of enlightened balance and moderation to the regime as a whole—and to those who understand its deepest roots as well as its precariousness—most English citizens are at bottom atomistic individuals who are characterized by fickleness and volatile passions. As Montesquieu notes, “As each individual, always independent, would largely follow his own caprices and fantasies, he would often change parties; he would abandon one and leave all his friends in order to bind himself to another in which he would find all his enemies; and often, in this nation, he could forget both the laws of friendship and those of hatred.”²⁷¹ Otherwise stated, Montesquieu takes men as they are, that is, as semi-rational creatures that are motivated by their protean passions and their sub-rational imaginations. What is most striking about this statement in particular, however, is men’s radical individualism and the lack of stable ties between men, similar to that of men in the state of nature. So-called social laws (for

²⁷⁰ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 3.19.27.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

instance, of friendship) are radically conventional, impermanent, and in constant flux. What is constant is men's intractable desire for independence and their passionate and semi-rational nature.

What is especially arresting about Montesquieu's account of the passions in England is his insistence that a certain kind of fear—different in nature than despotic fear—is necessary and salutary for a regime devoted to political liberty. A certain kind of restive fear renders men more attached to and jealous of their political freedom. The primacy passion of a commercial republic, as I have argued, is the desire for self-preservation, which is satisfied by a focus on security. Yet, as Montesquieu also shows, the fear of losing one's body or one's possessions heightens one's attachment to those goods and to a form of government that claims to protect and secure those goods. According to Montesquieu's formulation, "One is afraid of seeing the escape of a good that one feels, that one scarcely knows, and that can be hidden from us; and fear always enlarges objects. The people would be uneasy about their situation and would believe themselves in danger even at the safest moments."²⁷² Just as in the state of nature, men have an acute anxiety about losing what is dearest to them. And as, according to Montesquieu, commercial republics focus more than other governments on protecting those goods, men's anxiety about death (which can never fully be removed) attaches men to a government that promises to ensure their safety to the extent that such safety is possible. In sum, as Montesquieu puts it, men's (in some sense salutary) fear and anxiety cause them to be both attentive to the conditions of their political liberty and attached to that form of government that most protects their political liberty.

²⁷² Ibid.

As I noted in my first chapter, Montesquieu has a high regard for giving the passions their due in a full account of the human condition, and especially in political life. One of the clearest statements to this point that he makes in his portrait of England is when he writes, “This nation, always heated, could more easily be led by its passions than by reason, which never produces great effects on the spirits of men, and it would be easy for those who governed it to make it undertake enterprises against its true interests.”²⁷³ In this way Montesquieu both praises the passions’ effects and warns that they may be dangerously misled. On the one hand they provide a kind of strength or energy for the soul, which according to Montesquieu reason is incapable of producing; on the other hand, however, men are not very good at guiding their own passions, and because of their irrationality they can be easily manipulated (to go against their “true” interests, for instance). It would be a bad idea, then, to ignore or to try to overcome or do away with the passions, since “great effects of the spirit” are good things, according to Montesquieu. While ancient republics produced great effects by denying men’s passions (and thereby creating, as we have seen, an unusual and paradoxical passion), commercial republics allow men to produce great effects of the spirit by permitting men to follow their natural and unnatural passions and inclinations. Still, however, reason is necessary at least in some men for discovering and leading men toward their true interests. (While Montesquieu does not make this explicit, I suspect that he fosters the illusion that men’s true interests are somehow elevated, while in fact their true interests are still limited to the prosaic concern for security.) And according to Montesquieu, this danger of being misled applies to all men, both citizens and their representatives. Men are led by

²⁷³ Ibid.

powerful, “heated” passions, which are often more powerful than reason. And even those who represent citizens and manage the government are subject to heated passions that can lead men away from their true interests. The English government then gives the passions their due, while some admixture of the passions plus reason (or knowledge of the true interests of mankind) is necessary for a commercial republic to work.

Because the primary passion in commercial republics is the desire for self-preservation, there is a new focus on peace that pervades them. Montesquieu had claimed that ancient republics, monarchies, and despotisms all had a tendency toward bellicosity, whereas the new commercial republic tends toward peace. As Montesquieu says, “This nation, made comfortable by peace and liberty, freed from destructive prejudices, would be inclined to become commercial.”²⁷⁴ According to Montesquieu’s account in Book 1, men most powerfully desire their self-preservation and desire to live together in part in order to gain greater enlightenment (for instance, about human nature and what its needs are). In Montesquieu’s taxonomy of regimes it is only the commercial republic that enlightens men by destroying prejudices, which helps bring about a peaceful way of life for the regime as a whole. And one of the ways in which it procures peace is by allowing its citizens to engage in commerce with each other and by engaging in commerce with other nations. This emphasis on increasing commerce (understood at its core as the communication between people) as much as possible is in explicit contrast to the case of the extremely limited and highly regulated commerce of the Jesuits’ Paraguay in particular. In Paraguay commerce was intended simply to procure the necessities of life, which produces a kind of unadorned comfort. The highly commercial England, by

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

contrast, is characterized by abundance, superfluities, and even opulence. In England, there are no moral limits to the accumulation of wealth as there were in ancient republics or even as there was in the semi-commercial republic of Paraguay. One paradoxical effect of the emphasis on accumulating wealth in commercial republics, however, is that men do not actually enjoy the pleasures of wealth as much as they intend to do, or perhaps as much as they think they do. This is because, while men desire to preserve themselves and acquire as many material goods as possible, commercially minded men “find more distress in the prosperity of others than enjoyment in [their] own.”²⁷⁵ In anxiously accumulating as many goods as possible men focus more on comparing themselves (and in particular their wealth) in relation to other men, which causes a kind of psychological distress, and according to Montesquieu, robs men of a degree of pleasure that they would otherwise have if they focused more on what they actually possess. Yet Montesquieu does not criticize this phenomenon; it has good or at least harmless effects, insofar as it is a peaceful phenomenon. The psychological anxiety that this phenomenon causes (a result of the natural tendency of men to be in competition with each other and compare themselves with others) is a small price to pay for the peaceful way of life that commerce provides. As we recall from Book 1, all men compete with each other in society and the competition for material possessions (and the hope for pleasure that they promise) is the most peaceful form of competition, according to Montesquieu, and the most conducive way to comfortable and even luxurious self-preservation.

There is also an important way, according to Montesquieu, in which the political and military strength of England resembles that of monarchies and augments men’s

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

passions. Monarchies, as we recall, are animated by honor, and England, according to Montesquieu, is a commercial republic at its core but also a “naval empire,” which gives the commercially minded English “a natural pride.” This passion of natural pride causes the English to feel themselves, perhaps justifiably, of being “able to insult others anywhere.” They even believe, with exaggeration, “that their power is as boundless as the ocean,” a maritime image that recalls Montesquieu’s earlier description of a monarch. From this portrait of England as a kind of commercial republic and empire, then, we can see that its internal and external commerce with other nations will be more peaceful than the relations between the more warlike regimes. Yet the overwhelming power of England—commercially and militarily—fosters in its citizens a kind of collective pride in which each individual citizen imagines himself (and thereby feels himself) to be stronger than he is naturally. Naturally men desire to avoid death and to advance their self-interest by accumulating powers, and the case of England is an example of a way in which this can be done peacefully.

In Book 1, Montesquieu provided a portrait of natural men in which they were characterized by timidity when they left their solitary state and first encountered other men. In a remarkable statement in his description of England, Montesquieu portrays English men as being very similar to natural men in this regard. As he says, “But these men who are so proud, living mostly alone with themselves, would often find themselves among unfamiliar people; they would be timid, and one would see in them, most of the time, a strange mixture of bashfulness and pride.”²⁷⁶ In this description Montesquieu penetrates the core the Englishman’s nature, and shows how he is a mixture of natural

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

and social elements. The natural tendency of men in society is to be proud, and to care for their own good above others (a phenomenon that gains in intensity as one retreats into one's imagination, a phenomenon that Hobbes tried to tame). Yet at their core Montesquieu's Englishmen retain traces of their original natures, that is, their timidity, bashfulness, and irrational fear of strangers. There is then a line of continuity between the state of nature and the English commercial republic, and in this way England can be seen to be more natural, on the whole, than any other regime.²⁷⁷

5.6 THE CORRUPTION OF COMMERCIAL REPUBLICS

As we have seen, according to Montesquieu, political regimes are subject to destruction due to the various ways in which they become corrupt. This has been the case either because the painful difficulties involved in adhering to the standards of the regime have been too harshly unnatural (as in republics), or because the institutional balance of the regime has been upset, which has led to despotism (as in monarchies). And according to Montesquieu, the commercial republic devoted to political freedom too will end, since “all human things have an end.”²⁷⁸ The reason why this regime will end, though, is striking. The commercial republic “will perish when legislative power is more corrupt than executive power.”²⁷⁹ This idea and reference to corruption implies that while virtue—understood as a passionate devotion and sacrifice for the common good—is not

²⁷⁷ Rahe notes the parallel between Montesquieu's description of men in the state of nature and his description of Englishmen. Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty*, p. 101.

²⁷⁸ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 2.11.6.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

the primary passion that animates commercial republics, some moderate degree of virtue (understood in this way) is necessary in the legislative body.²⁸⁰ The legislative body must be devoted to and fulfill its “trust,” as Locke would have it, with those whom they represent, without which political liberty will be lost. To be sure, the vast majority of the citizens of a commercial republic will then not be animated by Spartan-like virtue, but their representatives need a kind of salutary sense of restraint that obliges them to fulfill their duties as representatives of the people. As I have tried to show, regimes dedicated to political liberty are the regimes that are in Montesquieu’s mind the regimes most in conformity with human nature and thus least in need of virtue, duties, and self-sacrifice. And the institutional structure of balancing passions and powers is intended to set political life in motion so as to dispense as much as possible with virtue. Nonetheless, as these statements show, the people’s representatives need a moderate degree of virtue and duty in order for the regime to be able to maintain itself.²⁸¹ Yet as Montesquieu foresees, given his clear-sighted understanding of human nature and its tendency to rebel against virtue and become corrupt (since men ineluctably follow their interests at the expense of others and desire to accumulate power), this regime too will end and men will be thrown back into the state of nature so as to set up a new regime (if they are lucky), or, what is more likely, they will be subject to a new despotism. Even the regime that *most satisfies*

²⁸⁰ Pangle however is correct in highlighting a major difference between ancient republics and England when he writes, “The English government is characterized by an almost complete abandonment of reliance on virtue [understood in the ancient sense].” Pangle, *Montesquieu’s Philosophy of Liberalism*, 114.

²⁸¹ As compared to the extremely painful self-sacrifice required in ancient republics Pangle calls attention to “a minimal devotion to the whole” on the part of citizens of commercial republics. This is true to a slightly greater degree for their representatives. *Ibid.*, 115.

human nature, which is in principle capable of perpetuating itself well and for a long time, is vulnerable and will not last forever.

As I have tried to show, according to Montesquieu there is in effect a straight line between the state of nature and the commercial republic, and therefore there is no real tension between the state of nature and the commercial republic with regard to the satisfaction of men's core passions. England, according to Montesquieu, best satisfies men's most pressing natural passion, the desire for self-preservation, and affords men a degree of comfort and ease of life (even amidst some psychological distress) that is in accord with men's self-interested and hedonistic nature. All other regimes, according to Montesquieu, are to some degree or other less in accord with men's natural state than the commercial republic. Yet despite Montesquieu's powerful and even triumphant rhetoric about the success and spread of commercial republics, a powerful critic of Montesquieu, Rousseau, virulently objects to the idea that such regimes are in accord with and ultimately satisfy men's natural passions. Paradoxically, as we will see, Rousseau agrees in large part with Montesquieu's account of men in the state of nature and of the necessity of using the standard of the state of nature in judging and evaluating men's various states. It is to Rousseau's powerful critique of Montesquieu, and his alternative account of men's nature and their passions, that I now turn.

One of the most striking aspects about Montesquieu's account of the state of nature is his agreement with Hobbes about the necessity of starting with an account of a state of nature that cuts to the core of men's psychological constitution and can give an account of men's most powerful and persistent natural passions. Montesquieu made significant modifications to Hobbes' account of the state of nature—in particular he rejected the idea that Hobbes' account of warlike men in the state of nature was a true account of men's nature. According to Montesquieu, such competitive, anxious, and warlike men that are in Hobbes' state of nature are in fact men as they exist in society, without the correct institutional constraints to channel their passions. And most significantly Montesquieu rejected Hobbes' political prescription as insufficient for securing men's natural desire for liberty. Yet an important point of agreement between Hobbes and Montesquieu is their insistence that a more or less stable political solution is available to men whose passions are often unruly. Hobbes and Montesquieu both agree that men's most pressing needs—understood as the needs of their passions, the most powerful and politically important aspects of their nature—can be satisfied by creating a government whose orderly institutions can satisfy men's basic needs, which cannot be satisfied in the state of nature. Yet while Hobbes is infamous for his bleak portrayal of the core of men's passions in the state of nature and comparatively little attention has been paid to Montesquieu's account of men's passions in the state of nature, both Hobbes and Montesquieu are generally sanguine about their political prescriptions to the difficulties involved in men's nature. Hobbes' account of the best government—the well-

ordered commonwealth over which the enlightened sovereign superintends—and Montesquieu’s account of the fundamental political alternatives open to men, including his best form of government, the commercial republic whose best practical example is England, far outweigh (in space and comprehensiveness) their accounts of men in the state of nature. This is because, I think, of their fundamental optimism with regard to their respective solutions to the question of men’s nature and its political implications. Hobbes and Montesquieu see no fundamental tension between men’s situation in the state of nature and their place in a healthy or good government. And indeed there is a kind of ascent in both Hobbes and Montesquieu from the state of nature to the state of society and indeed the best form of government. Like both Hobbes and Montesquieu, Rousseau insists on the necessity of starting from an account of the state of nature, and he even agrees with them regarding men’s natural freedom and equality. He also agrees as to the crucial importance of understanding men’s passions, especially the importance of the desire for self-preservation, or as we will see Rousseau calls it, *amour de soi*. Yet while Hobbes and Montesquieu are characterized by optimism about political solutions to men’s nature, Rousseau is deeply pessimistic, even if his account of men in the state of nature is not as bleak as Hobbes’s account. In his view, all supposedly enduring solutions to politics are illusory and in contrast to earlier modern thinkers Rousseau thinks there is a gradual and largely irreversible descent from men’s freedom and equality in the state of nature to their warped and unnatural passions in society.²⁸² In this chapter, then, I will

²⁸² Todorov underlines that once men have left the state of nature and entered society, there is no turning back. Their passions have been modified forever. Tzvetan Todorov, *Frail Happiness: An Essay on Rousseau*, trans. John T. Scott and Robert D. Zaretsky (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2004), 10.

give an account of Rousseau's understanding of men's nature and passions in the state of nature; his understanding of men's disorderly and misery-inducing passions in society; and finally give a brief account of the outlines of Rousseau's more positive project of educating an imaginary pupil's natural passions for life in a corrupt society, which will form the base for the chapters that follow. In the chapters that follow I will give a fuller account of this hypothetical educational project, in particular paying close attention to individual passions in Emile's development.

6.1 ROUSSEAU'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE STANDARD OF NATURE

As with all of philosophic predecessors, Rousseau insists on the necessity of using nature as a standard for judging human nature. And like his modern predecessors Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu, Rousseau's analysis of human nature centers on a novel and singular understanding of the state of nature. All modern thinkers, from Hobbes through Rousseau, understand the state of nature to be a kind of psychological thought experiment—as Hobbes claimed, his understanding of human nature is rooted in an “inference from the passions,” a result of looking inward in order to “read thyself” and try to understand what it really means to be a human. Rousseau, like Hobbes, agrees on the kind of turning inward and introspection necessary for beginning to understand human nature. For classical thinkers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, the way to begin to understand human nature is to begin from (necessarily incomplete or contradictory) opinions in the human soul and to proceed through a dialectical purification of those original opinions toward greater knowledge of the beings, including human beings. For

classical philosophers, then, understanding human nature is a result of social activity, of engagement with various kinds of interlocutors, which results in an ascent from ordinary, common sense opinions of individual human beings to something approaching the truth. The classics, then, need society and the ability to talk to other men in order to begin to understand human nature. By contrast, modern thinkers feel less need to talk to other men in order to understand human nature. For them, the introspective looking inward required in knowing human nature is a far more individual and solitary activity and the way that leads to the truth of human nature and its passions.

While Rousseau agrees with other modern thinkers about the necessity of starting from an understanding of the state of nature as a kind of act of solitary introspection, Rousseau disagrees strongly with his predecessors about the precise content of the correct understanding of men's passions in the state of nature.²⁸³ For Rousseau, we must dig much deeper than Hobbes, Locke, or Montesquieu had thought necessary in order to arrive at a correct understanding of human nature and its passions. In Rousseau's view, Hobbes in particular failed to understand major aspects of men's passionate nature—for instance, he was wrong about their competitiveness, their desire to harm others, and their fear of death. According to Rousseau, these aspects of men's nature are acquired socially and historically, and are not precisely part of the core of human nature. For Rousseau, men are currently so disfigured in their passions that it is practically impossible to know human nature and its core passions at all. Innumerable changes, the result of a “sequence

²⁸³ Melzer provides a thought provoking account of Rousseau's knowledge of what is natural. See Arthur Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 29-48.

of times and things” have separated men from their original nature and its passions.”²⁸⁴ And this irreversible progress, of dubious value, makes it extremely hard to acquire genuine self-knowledge, as opposed to the less valuable kinds of knowledge that men have acquired in their progress away from their natural state: according to Rousseau, “What is even crueler is that, as all the progress of the human Species continually moves it further away from its primitive state, the more new knowledge we accumulate, the more we deprive ourselves of the means of acquiring *the most important knowledge of all*: so that it is, in a sense, by dint of studying men that we have made ourselves incapable of *knowing him*.”²⁸⁵ Rousseau, then, agrees with Montesquieu that the further we progress in certain kinds of knowledge—knowledge that we acquire only in society—the more we acquire prejudices that prevent us from acquiring the most important knowledge of all, which in Rousseau’s view is genuine self-knowledge.²⁸⁶ The more that men move away from their natural primitive state and its passions, the more men mistake knowledge of their current condition and passions for knowledge of who they really are at bottom. The progress of certain kinds of knowledge, then, paradoxically erects blinders that prevent men from knowing what their core passions really are.

In pointing to the necessity of using nature as a standard, moreover, Rousseau makes a distinction between nature and natural passions, on the one hand, and

²⁸⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality (Second Discourse), Polemics, and Political Economy*, trans. Judith R. Bush, Roger, D. Masters, Christopher Kelly, and Terence Marshall (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 1993), 12.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*; my emphasis.

²⁸⁶ As this observation indicates, Rousseau’s judgment about what it is most important to know (oneself) is much closer to Socrates’ opinion than Montesquieu, who thought that the most important knowledge was that of the correct criminal laws. Consider Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 188. For Montesquieu self-knowledge is instrumental ultimately to an important legislative innovation.

conventional, artificial modifications of nature that men have undergone throughout their history. What is required in making this distinction is the “serious study of men,” of their natural passions and the historical changes that men have undergone in society.²⁸⁷ As I have indicated, according to Rousseau, previous philosophers who have tried to articulate the true account of men in the state of nature have failed because they had not gone back far enough to men’s true origins, and they conflated men’s artificial and acquired passions with his genuinely natural ones.²⁸⁸ According to Rousseau, previous philosophers have spoken of unnatural passions—(for instance Hobbes with regard to vainglory)—as if they were natural.²⁸⁹ Hobbes, Montesquieu, and Rousseau all agree that man is naturally an isolated individual, without duties or obligations to anyone or anything else.²⁹⁰ But Rousseau explicitly rejects Hobbes’s account of individual men because men in Hobbes’s state of nature, according to Rousseau, have already acquired characteristics that are a result of living in society. And as I suggested, following the observation made by Pangle, in my first chapter, Montesquieu’s account of men in the state of nature amounts to a kind of bridge between Hobbes’ account of men in the state of nature and Rousseau’s account. Montesquieu, as we have seen, suggests that men’s passions are naturally much more peaceful, timid, and non-competitive than the passions of Hobbes’ natural men. Yet while Montesquieu simply points in the direction that

²⁸⁷ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 10.

²⁸⁸ Starobinski offers a fruitful discussion of Rousseau’s “search for origins.” See Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 271-280.

²⁸⁹ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 19.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

Rousseau would take, Rousseau gives a fuller account of peaceful natural men than Montesquieu does.

Rousseau takes Montesquieu directly to task on the question of men's natural strength or timidity when he writes that "an illustrious Philosopher [i.e., Montesquieu]," thinks, contrary to Hobbes' view of men's natural aggression, that "nothing is so timid as men in the state of nature, and the [natural man] is always trembling and ready to flee at the slightest noise he hears, at the slightest movement he perceives."²⁹¹ Rousseau joins Montesquieu in rejecting Hobbes' view that men are naturally bellicose, but he rejects Montesquieu's view that men are as naturally fearful of other objects (including other men) as Montesquieu seems to think they are. Rousseau concedes that men are indeed initially frightened by "new spectacles," but these are rare occurrences in the state of nature, and men quickly overcome their initial fear. This is because natural men quickly recognize that they, "living dispersed among the animals," surpass the animals more in skill than the animals surpass men in strength, and they therefore have nothing to fear from them. Montesquieu's natural men remain trembling in their trees, whereas Rousseau's natural men are not characterized by such fear: according to Rousseau savage men are not characterized by fear and timidity but are rather "all robust, agile, and courageous."²⁹²

Montesquieu and Rousseau both agree, however, as to men's natural amorality, which has profound implications for their understanding of the passions. Classical philosophers thought and followers of traditional religions believed that men are naturally

²⁹¹ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 21. Cf. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, book 1.

²⁹² Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 22.

and necessarily part of some kind of moral order, however complicated and ultimately mysterious it may be, and however much men's opinions may differ as to the true content of the correct moral order, which can in principle guide men's lives to the best life.²⁹³ Montesquieu and Rousseau both disagree with such views and argue on the contrary that morality, that standard by which men guide their lives with others, is at bottom conventional, a result of human creation and artifice, and therefore unnatural. Rousseau powerfully states the case that natural men, "not having among themselves any kind of moral relationships or known duties, could be neither good nor evil and had neither vices nor virtues: unless, taking these words in a physical sense one calls vices in the individual the qualities that can harm his own preservation and virtues those that can contribute to it; in which case, it would be necessary to call the most virtuous the one who least resists the simple impulses of nature."²⁹⁴ Men then do not naturally owe anyone else anything—they have no natural obligations or duties to anyone, as the classics and the Biblical tradition taught. Men naturally merely follow their own limited inclinations or passions that guide them simply to preserve themselves—and only themselves—from anything that might harm them. In other words, men's only duty is to themselves and therefore their natural inclinations and their natural duties perfectly coincide (as they do not in society): with "instinct alone" a man has "everything necessary for him to live in the state of Nature."²⁹⁵

²⁹³ To be sure, some ancient thinkers disagreed with this account; for instance, the Epicureans.

²⁹⁴ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 34.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

I have suggested that for Rousseau one must turn inward to begin to know men's nature. There is a necessity to dig deep down to the roots of men's psyches in order to know men's nature. Hobbes and Montesquieu were on the right track, but they failed to go deeply enough into men's psyche in order to know men's core passions. In Rousseau's introspective turn he discovers at his core what he calls the "sentiment of existence."²⁹⁶ This sentiment involves no foresight into the future—and in particular no knowledge of the future fact of one's death. Despite its apparent simplicity, Rousseau denies that any previous thinker has successfully located it in men's psyche. And, to be sure, when any natural men felt this sentiment fully, they were incapable of reflecting on their experience and, not knowing its goodness in contrast to any other state, they failed to preserve it. Rousseau describes the sentiment of existence in this way: natural man's soul, "agitated by nothing, is given over to the sole sentiment of its present existence, without any idea of the future, however near it may be, and his projects, as limited as his views, barely extend to the end of the day."²⁹⁷ In feeling the sentiment of existence natural men are thus able to feel "the pure movement of Nature prior to all reflection."²⁹⁸ As we will see, this essential part of men's nature is apt to be lost once men enter society and it is a particularly difficult task to preserve its existence with social men (whose unnatural passions multiply, distracting them from this sentiment) or to recover it once it is lost.

²⁹⁶ Grace provides a thought-provoking account of Rousseau's novel understanding of the sentiment of existence. See Eve Grace, "Built on Sand: Moral Law in Rousseau's *Second Discourse*," in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Critical Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers*, ed. John T. Scott (London: Routledge, 2006), 397-418.

²⁹⁷ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 28.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

Rousseau, however, agrees with Hobbes and Montesquieu—and further back Machiavelli—that men are at bottom interested in themselves, in their own well-being and their advantage. As men have no natural moral ties involving duties and obligations to others, natural men learn by experience that “love of [one’s own] well-being is the *sole* motive of human actions.”²⁹⁹ Men have no natural obligations to their families, to the communities in which they were brought up, or to the divine and its interpreters. Rousseau seems to go in an even more individualistic direction than Locke on this point and according to Rousseau men are at bottom always moved only by “present and perceptible interest,” that is, their own individual interest. Like Hobbes Rousseau thinks men are drawn by their immediate interests and in particular by their immediate passions. Reason itself is only the “scout and spy” of men’s immediate passions.³⁰⁰ Yet despite agreeing on men’s fundamental amorality, Rousseau rejects Hobbes’ conclusion that men are naturally bellicose and aggressive toward other men and that they intrinsically wish to do harm to other men as they selfishly pursue their own advantage: as Rousseau says, “Above all, let us not conclude with Hobbes that because man has no idea of goodness he is naturally evil; that he is vicious because he does not know virtue; that he always refuses his fellows services he does not believe he owes them; nor that, by virtue of the right he reasonably claims to things he needs he foolishly imagines himself to be the sole proprietor of the whole Universe.”³⁰¹ Men may be naturally self-interested, they may naturally desire to acquire (as Machiavelli boldly proclaimed in the *Prince*), and they may in the end always care more about their own well-being than the well-being of

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 45.

³⁰⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 53.

³⁰¹ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 35.

anyone else, even those closest to them. But Rousseau rejects Hobbes' view that men's passions are such that they are naturally competitive, wish to harm others if they have the chance to do so, or even that they secretly aspire to universal tyranny. They simply desire to pursue their own self-interested passions governed by, as we will see, a conception of necessity that at least initially satisfies them fairly easily. And as we will also see, while men do not strictly speaking owe other men anything, there are also natural passions that to some extent link men to others (which do not necessarily direct men to an enduring sociality) and which increase men's pleasurable and self-interested sentiment of existence without doing anyone harm. And so too, as we will also see, there are passions not rooted in men's nature that are the true cause of the harm that men do to each other.

According to Rousseau, natural men's passions are extremely limited, in contrast, as we will see, to social men's unnatural passions, which are diverse and characterized by unnatural and fevered restiveness. Whereas for classical thinkers men's fullest nature is characterized by progress in men's rational understanding of the world and an erotic longing for eternity (manifested in different kinds of men's natures in various ways),³⁰² and for Hobbes men's passionate nature is characterized by a frenzied anxiety that passionately seeks to acquire power and avoid imminent extinction, Rousseau's natural man's passions are characterized by a peaceful and calm contentment with and resignation to one's present natural state, seeking neither to perpetuate one's being through various forms of hoped-for immortality, nor anxiously avoiding the impending fact of one's necessary death. In fact, Rousseau denies that natural men are strictly

³⁰² Consider Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 207a-212a.

speaking ever aware of their future death. According to Rousseau, natural men follow and resign themselves to “the physically necessary, which Nature itself demands.” All our other desires, like the desire to avoid death and the desire to perpetuate our being eternally, are unnatural desires, which arise only after men become aware of death, and which come to form irrational beliefs and prejudices. Because men naturally lack an anxious desire to avoid death, their passions are characterized by a kind of calm (and even naïve) resignation to necessity that both the classics and Hobbes deny are intrinsic to men’s nature. As Rousseau says, “Savage man, desiring only the things he knows and knowing only those things the possession of which is in his power or easily acquired, nothing should be so tranquil as his soul and nothing so limited as his mind.”³⁰³ Naturally men are like the sub-rational beasts who follow only their passions and necessity and who have no knowledge of their own mortality.

6.2 A NEW KIND OF FREEDOM

In addition to natural freedom understood as freely following one’s inclinations, Rousseau claims to find another, more elusive, kind of freedom that Montesquieu did not explicitly analyze, although it seems to be tied to his understanding of the virtue of ancient republics. And this new understanding of freedom has far-ranging implications for Rousseau’s understanding of men’s passions.³⁰⁴ Montesquieu had suggested in Book I

³⁰³ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 88.

³⁰⁴ De Man provides a useful discussion of Rousseau’s understanding of freedom. See Paul De Man, “Theory and Metaphor in Rousseau’s *Second Discourse*,” in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Critical Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers*, ed. John T. Scott (London: Routledge, 2006), 113-114.

of *The Spirit of the Laws* that men have some features of beasts—insofar as men are in fact kinds of beasts—and they have some non-beastlike features, like the ability to reason. According to Rousseau, men are part beastlike—when they passionately follow their natural inclinations, which as we have seen is itself a kind of freedom—but one of the distinctive features about human about human beings, according to Rousseau, is their capability of being a “free agent.” As Rousseau says, “Nature alone does everything in the operations of a Beast, whereas man contributes to his operations by being a free agent. Beasts follow their instincts alone, while men choose or reject instinct by an act of freedom.”³⁰⁵ This statement suggests that both beasts and men are led or compelled to follow certain inclinations that derive directly from nature, or natural necessity. Men, in contrast to beasts, however, possess a faculty that renders them capable of choosing—at least in some cases, and with varying degrees of power—to resist their natural inclinations, while beasts are compelled to follow all their inclinations. They are then capable of following or resisting their passions. Beasts freely follow necessity, while men are free in some instances to overcome what their natural passions incline them to do. In this way men have a certain kind of freedom that seems to raise them above the beasts. Because of this faculty men can resist certain natural inclinations and are thus capable of the passions of self-denying virtue that Montesquieu portrayed with such ambiguity. This makes men in some ways impressive beings, possessing something in them that has the power to yield to or overcome what other beings are compelled to do. At the same time, however, Rousseau suggests that men do not always put this ability to admirable purposes. Montesquieu had agreed on this point, claiming that men often make bad use of

³⁰⁵ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 25.

their passions; they make worse use of their passions than beasts make use of theirs.³⁰⁶

For Rousseau, men can deviate from their natural inclinations, although they often do so to their detriment. And whereas Montesquieu had explained this phenomenon primarily through his portrait of the ascetic monks who come to love their order through self-denying pain and other moral and political examples drawn from practical life, Rousseau takes a closer look at this phenomenon in the workings of the human soul. According to Rousseau, while both men and beasts feel the same impetus of natural inclination, at some point (it is not clear if this can happen in the pure state of nature) men realize that they can freely acquiesce or resist their natural inclinations. They then feel a new “consciousness of this freedom” over their passions. Rousseau goes so far as to claim that at bottom the appeal of this kind of freedom has to do with *power*. Men feel a sentiment of power when they are conscious of choosing to follow or resist an inclination. This is a much more attractive understanding of the ability to resist one’s inclinations than Montesquieu had let on. For Montesquieu, the passion of virtue felt in resisting one’s natural inclinations is at bottom a painful and self-sacrificing phenomenon. It feels good to “let ourselves go” and to do what nature urges or compels us to do, and it hurts and takes effort to resist those urges for the sake of morality. Rousseau’s understanding of this kind of freedom opens up a novel perspective on this phenomenon. Hobbes had insisted that at bottom men desire nothing more than to avoid death and ceaselessly desire to acquire power after power (L 70). Montesquieu agreed completely with Hobbes on this point, while disagreeing with his political recommendation. Yet neither Hobbes nor Montesquieu saw as clearly as Rousseau does that resisting our own inclinations and

³⁰⁶ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 5.

passions can constitute itself a kind of power, which it can be pleasurable to feel.

Rousseau agrees with both Hobbes and Montesquieu that men desire to acquire power.³⁰⁷

Yet in describing the phenomenon of resisting one's inclinations and passions as a power, Rousseau makes it appear to be a much more attractive phenomenon than Montesquieu thinks it is.³⁰⁸

6.3 ROUSSEAU'S UNDERSTANDING OF OUR CORE NATURAL PASSIONS

For both Hobbes and Montesquieu the challenge of knowing human nature is an especially difficult task, although if the project is carried out correctly reasonable men will agree with their respective conclusions. For Hobbes, if one looks inward one will perceive the truth of the hypothesis that man at his core is such as Hobbes describes him in his account of the dark and violent state of nature. According to Montesquieu, men become extremely prejudiced and deluded by false opinions in society, but for Montesquieu if one is set on the right track by his insights one will perceive without too much difficulty the truth of his principles, which he thinks all thoughtful readers must

³⁰⁷ Cooper offers a useful discussion of Rousseau's understanding of men's desire for power. See Laurence D. Cooper, "Between Eros and Will to Power: Rousseau and the 'Desire to Extend our Being,'" in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, trans. John T. Scott (London: Routledge, 2006), 443-475.

³⁰⁸ Rousseau's final thought on free agency is ambiguous, since immediately after provisionally describing men's moral free agency, he admits that there are significant difficulties surrounding this apparent distinction between men and animals, thus casting doubt on the entire claim. One major difficulty, for instance, is that free agency seems to reside outside of any understanding of necessity, which would make it fundamentally different from the rest of the natural world. If there is nothing but natural necessity then this free agency effectively cannot exist.

eventually admit. For Rousseau, by contrast, although his goal is exactly the same as Hobbes's and Montesquieu's, he thinks the challenge of knowing human nature and its passions is far more difficult than Hobbes or Montesquieu had thought. This is because human nature and its passions have changed so much that men as they (that is, we) currently are constituted are almost completely incapable of knowing what unmarred and original human nature really is. Rousseau compares man's nature to "the statue of Glaucus, which time, sea, and storms had so disfigured that it looked less like a God than a wild beast."³⁰⁹ For Montesquieu there is a kind of "flexibility" to human nature by which men adapt themselves and their passions to different kinds of societies. But for Montesquieu we can perceive a common human nature without digging too deeply into the human soul, and ultimately everyone will in principle perceive this common humanity and recognize it for what it is. For Rousseau, by contrast, human nature, "by the continual impact of the passions," has "changed its appearance, to the point of being generally unrecognizable." We are much further from our original nature than Hobbes or Montesquieu had thought. And even if we are shown our original nature—as Rousseau proposes to do—we are unlikely to recognize ourselves in such an account (in contrast to Hobbes' and Montesquieu's claims) because in our current condition we are so deformed by unnatural passions, the unnaturalness of which we fail to recognize. According to

³⁰⁹ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 12. Velkley and Kelly provide thought provoking accounts of Rousseau's image of the statue of Glaucus. See Richard Velkley, *Being After Rousseau: Philosophy and Culture in Question* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 36-39; Richard Velkley, "The Measure of the Possible: Imagination in Rousseau's Philosophical Pedagogy," in *Challenge of Rousseau*, ed. Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 226; and Christopher Kelly "Rousseau's Peut-Etre; Reflections on the Status of the State of Nature," *Modern Intellectual History* 3 (2006): 80-82.

Rousseau, while men today believe themselves to reasonably perceive the world they ultimately only “understand in delirium.”

Like both Hobbes and Montesquieu, Rousseau has high praise for the sub-stratum of passions that he perceives in the human soul, in contrast to the teachings of the classics and those of traditional religious thinkers. It is difficult to say if reason is in the end ranked above the passions for Rousseau, but it is certain that the passions are the more fundamental phenomena, which perform the function of being a kind of “motor” for rational activity itself, animating it and keeping it in motion. According to Rousseau, human understanding depends on the activity of the passions, and the passions too need understanding in order to be able to reflect on them. Progress in knowledge itself depends on the activity of the passions: “we seek to know only because we desire to have pleasure; and it is impossible to conceive why one who had neither desires nor fears would go to the trouble of reasoning.”³¹⁰ For Socrates and the classics Eros is a subject of and in some ways an obstacle to contemplation of our true situation. For Rousseau, the passions and the acquisition of greater pleasure—if not strictly speaking Eros as the classics understood it—are inseparable from any progress in understanding and the motive for any understanding and even any human activity simply. According to Rousseau, moreover, the origin of the passions is in our needs, and the progress of the passions depends on our knowledge. Rousseau’s use of the term “progress” is ambiguous and perhaps ironic, since it is not clear that the current state of our passions—and our concomitant knowledge—puts us in a better state than our original pre-rational state. In any case, Rousseau distinguishes between natural men, who feel only the simple

³¹⁰ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 27.

impulsion of nature—and thereby all his feelings of desire and fear—and non-natural man (i.e., us) who have “ideas” of our passions. Sub-rational natural man has desires that “do not exceed his Physical needs, and the only goods he knows in the Universe are nourishment, a female, the only evils he fears are pain and hunger [i.e., he has no fear of death, in contrast to Hobbes’ natural men].”³¹¹ Rousseau agrees with Montesquieu and against Hobbes that natural men resembles the beasts in lacking awareness of death. Knowledge of death and the passion of fear of death are not strictly speaking natural but rather unnatural acquisitions that man makes in leaving his original state and gaining knowledge of his condition.

If morality has to do with doing the right thing with regard to how we live our lives with others, both Montesquieu’s and Rousseau’s natural men are neither morally good nor evil because they live completely independently of others, have no desire to harm anyone, and lack any opinions about the right way to live that men acquire in society. For the classics, the natural situation of man is one in which we necessarily have opinions about the right way to live with others. By contrast, as Rousseau says, “Savages are not evil precisely because they do not know what it is to be good; for it is neither the growth of enlightenment nor the restraint of Law, but the calm of the passions and the ignorance of vice which prevent them from doing evil.”³¹² For classical thinkers men are born into communities with moral orders and it is impossible ever to extricate ourselves from morality, however much most men will only ever have muddled and contradictory opinions about what morality truly consists in. For Rousseau, as for Montesquieu, man’s

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid., 35.

natural and original condition is one in which men are fundamentally amoral, without any opinions about how they should live with others. Morality at bottom is radically conventional and artificial. Men's true condition is one in which they care only for themselves with regard to others, with calm and significantly limited passions that incline them to take care of themselves.³¹³ According to Hobbes men's passions are naturally inflamed and the overpowering passion of the fear of death leads men to try to kill others before other men kill them. According to Hobbes, men need the restraints of laws—as in Hobbes' proposed commonwealth and its powerful sovereign who secures men's bodies and property, and enforces covenants between men—in order to guarantee peace, that which men most want, but which they are bad at bringing about by themselves in the absence of Hobbes' enlightened political science. Rousseau thinks, by contrast, that men's passions are not naturally inflamed and violent, and Hobbes' political prescription would be inappropriate for their original condition. As Rousseau says, "With such inactive passions and such a salutary restraint, men—more untamed than evil, and more attentive to protecting themselves from harm they could receive than tempted to harm others—were not subject to very dangerous quarrels."³¹⁴ Because of men's calm passions, men have a natural "restraint" that prevents them from harming one another, as opposed to any conventional restraints in laws.

It is worth looking more closely at what social passions men lack in the state of nature (and which ensnare social men) as well as the radicalness of Rousseau's position on men's natural lack of understanding of or participation in morality or justice.

³¹³ Consider Rousseau, *Emile*, end of book III.

³¹⁴ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 38.

According to Rousseau, men in the state of nature “know neither vanity, nor consideration, nor esteem, nor contempt,” and they lack “any notion of thine and mine [and] any genuine idea of justice.”³¹⁵ The reason why this is the case is that men in such a state lack any understanding of wills others than their own that desire to do them harm. Men in such a state do not consider any harm done to them as insults, and they lack almost any desire to exact revenge against harmful aggressors who may arise. Because men do not regard other men as a threat either to their lives or to their social standing, “their disputes would rarely have had bloody consequences.” However, though men are naturally asocial and amoral, there is a passionate link that unites, if only temporarily, human beings: the desire for sex, which is directly linked to men’s individual passion for self-preservation, though in the case of sexual reproduction the preservation of “the human Race” rather than the perpetuation of an individual human being simply is the goal. According to Hobbes, men’s hearts become inflamed in an anxious and painful way, and they desire to kill and domineer over others in the pursuit of vainglory, as well as mere survival. Such desires can never be fully satisfied. Rousseau, however, emphasizes how men’s hearts become inflamed by the desire to have sex, a much more pleasurable desire that can be repeatedly satisfied, and which is fundamentally peaceful, despite the power of the passions that drive human beings to satisfy it. As Rousseau says, “Among the passions that agitate the heart of man, there is an ardent, impetuous one that makes sex necessary to the other, a terrible passion which braves all dangers, overcomes

³¹⁵ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 38.

all obstacles, and which, in its fury, seems fitted to the human Race it is destined to preserve.”³¹⁶

Rousseau agrees with Hobbes that once the passions that Hobbes describes arise, laws must be made to constrain men’s disorderly passions, but Rousseau rejects Hobbes’ prescription as bound to fail. All men are subject to these passions and because of the unnaturalness of politics, all political solutions to men’s unruly passions will not last. For Rousseau, men’s powerful and even violent passions cause “disorders and crimes” that never can be fully removed from society. For Hobbes, by contrast, a solution *can* be found that leads to enduring peace, even if it will eventually decay and disintegrate over time. Paradoxically, Rousseau is less sanguine than Hobbes about a political solution to men’s passions because he thinks men’s social passions, once unleashed, are less manageable than Hobbes thinks they are, and in any case he denies that Hobbes’s solution will satisfy men in the way that Hobbes thinks it will. In Rousseau’s view, all men, even the rulers of any political community, are subject to potentially dangerous self-interested passions. There is a tension in Hobbes’ thought between men’s self-interested and passionate nature and the apparent cool absence of passions that an effective sovereign would seem to require, which Hobbes never fully resolves. According to Rousseau, all men, even the rulers of a political community, are subject to potentially harmful passions, which render Hobbes’ solution necessarily unstable.

Another point of agreement between Montesquieu and Rousseau is on the intrinsic goodness of men’s original passions. The classics though all men are naturally directed toward a higher *telos* or *summum bonum*, which, however difficult it may be to

³¹⁶ Ibid.

attain or even understand is *the* greatest goal for men, and progressing towards it constitutes the best way of life, the precise content of which, of course, is subject to dispute. To be on track for this right way of life requires, it is claimed, the overcoming of our base passions that prevent us from attaining the best way of life. The classics agree that men have very strong passions, which should be kept in check, even if most men fail to do so. As this account implies, the classics hold up men's *ends* as the fulfillment of men's nature, and the progress toward men's ends as most revealing of men's true nature. Men's beginnings are significantly less important because men's nature is inadequately developed. Rousseau, like Montesquieu, focuses much more than the classics on men's passions as they exist in men's beginnings, without focusing on any purported higher ends of the soul. As I have suggested, Christian thinkers followed the classics in their low estimation of the passions and it is apparently the harmful influence of Christianity's evaluation of the passions that Rousseau criticizes most sharply in *Emile*. Our passions, Rousseau passionately claims, are given us to God, that is, the God of nature, and it is a project bound to fail to try to destroy our passions, or to prevent their birth: "Our passions are the principal instruments of our preservation. It is therefore an enterprise as vain as it is ridiculous to want to destroy them—it is to control nature, it is to reform the work of God. If God were to tell men to annihilate the passions which he gives them, God would will and not will; he would contradict himself."³¹⁷ While Rousseau's deeper critique is of the classics' incorrect understanding of the passions and their place in the human soul, what is striking in this statement is Rousseau's bold attempt to reform theological opinions on the goodness of the passions, an enormous and daring attempt that has had

³¹⁷ Rousseau, *Emile*, 362.

significant effects.³¹⁸ In order to show men that their received theological opinions are false, he asks men to examine what is “written in the human heart.” On the surface this is a very traditional and theologically acceptable thing to do—to examine one’s soul to try to discover what God wants us to do. But traditional theology also claims that it is necessary, at least in many cases, to defer to other men’s claims about the divine and what it wants from us or calls us to do. According to Rousseau, though, each individual must consult his own heart without regard to any other men’s supposedly authoritative claims, and the result of such an investigation, Rousseau thinks, is to feel that we all have very strong and indestructible passions, the most powerful and consistent of which are at work in all men’s hearts as long as they are alive. As he says, “What God wants a man to do, he does not have told to him by another man. He tells it to him himself. He writes it in the depths of his heart. I would find someone who wanted to prevent the birth of the passions almost as mad as someone who wanted to annihilate them.”³¹⁹

6.4 THE CENTRAL PASSION: *AMOUR DE SOI*, OR LOVE OF SELF

According to Hobbes, *the* central passion is the fear of death, and especially the fear of violent and imminent death, a fear can be assuaged in various ways through human artifice, but which can never be fully removed from men’s minds. And for Montesquieu, as we have seen, the central and most powerful passion is the desire for security in order to “preserve life.” In Montesquieu’s view men do not originally have

³¹⁸ Melzer notes that Rousseau attacks “pretty nearly everyone in the Western tradition.” Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, 17.

³¹⁹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 362.

any knowledge of death, but they still are strongly attached to the preservation and perpetuation of their lives. Rousseau is very close to Montesquieu in claiming that the central passion is the desire to preserve one's life, rather than the desire to avoid death simply. Yet Rousseau places much more emphasis than Montesquieu does on this central passion, particularly as it exists in man's original condition. And Rousseau applies a particular term to this passion: *amour de soi*, or love of self. As Rousseau emphasizes, "the sole passion natural to man is *amour de soi* or *amour-propre* taken in an extended sense. This *amour-propre* in itself or relative to us is good and useful; and since it has no necessary relation to others it is in this respect naturally neutral."³²⁰ As will be explored below, in Rousseau's view *amour-propre* as Rousseau usually describes it is understood as an unnatural passion which makes comparisons with others, and desires and even demands others' approval. This passion is unnatural because it is rooted in unnatural opinions of ourselves and others. *Amour-propre* "in an extended sense," by contrast, has to do with doing as much good for ourselves as possible, without desiring to harm others. It is synonymous with *amour de soi*, or love of self, which is a calm natural passion that has to do with getting everything we need for our self-preservation. In addition, in Rousseau's account there is more emphasis placed on the passionate aspect of *amour de soi* than in Montesquieu's account of the passion for self-preservation. There is an almost prosaic quality to Montesquieu's account and his emphasis on the desire for security, the satisfaction of which is attained in a prosaic way through artfully designed political institutions. In Rousseau's view men have a genuine passionate *love* of themselves, particularly the sensual satisfaction of their bodies, and they genuinely love and enjoy

³²⁰ Ibid., 225.

being alive simply.³²¹ In addition, there is a sharp contrast between Montesquieu and Rousseau in that Montesquieu's natural men are less independent than Rousseau's natural men. Montesquieu's natural men may be briefly independent but they quickly lose the means to preserve their independence once they come into contact with other men and live together with them to provide for their security. Rousseau emphasizes that these original men, because they are so independent, are most concerned with themselves and are less "asociably sociable" than Montesquieu's natural men. They have no debts, duties, or obligations to any political community, religious community, or family, and each individual man regards what is good for him as the most important thing in the world, even if originally men have no conception of the wills of other men or compare themselves to others. As Rousseau emphasizes, men originally have "no necessary relation" to other men, and love only themselves.

Although elsewhere Rousseau says that sexual desire—and thereby the perpetuation of the species—is natural, there is one notable place where Rousseau suggests that men's true natural needs are even more limited and do not include sex, which would imply at least temporary and transient social ties, and all social ties, Rousseau seems to suggest here, are strictly speaking unnatural. According to Rousseau in this striking passage, "I see [natural man] satisfying his hunger, under an oak quenching his thirst at the first stream, finding his bed at the foot of the same tree that furnished his meal; and therewith, his needs are satisfied."³²² In this account, at least,

³²¹ As Melzer notes, Rousseau "exculpates men's lower, bodily nature, which had always been falsely condemned, showing it to have an unsuspected goodness upon which one might base the unity and happiness formerly sought in the 'higher.'" Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, 26.

³²² Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 20.

men's love of self, his core passion, can be completely satisfied simply by the simple desire for food, water, and sleep. In having such simple desires, moreover, Rousseau concedes that such men are hardly distinguishable from other animals. Such natural men do not seem to possess any mind, reason, spirit, or soul, but they like other animals are rather "ingenious machine[s]" to which nature has given senses in order to revitalize [themselves] and guarantee [themselves], to a certain point, from all that tends to destroy [them]."³²³ In this statement we can see clearly, too, how far Rousseau's understanding of men's passions is from classical and religious thinkers. Against the classics and traditional religious thinkers, Rousseau denies that there is any higher end or fulfillment of men's nature that is available to men. Men are not perfected by reason nor by humbly submitting to divine commandments. And far from the passions obstructing our way to the best way of life, our most powerful passions tell us, even if it is hard to hear them in our present condition, what are our most powerful needs as human beings.

In Rousseau's view, Hobbes was on the right track to understanding our passions by starting from nature. But Hobbes failed, in Rousseau's view, to see that "since the state of Nature is that in which care of our self-preservation is the least prejudicial to the self-preservation of others, that state was consequently the best suited to Peace and *the most appropriate* for the Human Race."³²⁴ All men naturally desire to stay alive, but this powerful passion does not incline them to try to kill each other, as Hobbes had thought.³²⁵ In this state of nature all men love themselves and far from being inclined to

³²³ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 25.

³²⁴ Ibid., 35; my emphasis.

³²⁵ Scott offers a thoughtful discussion of Rousseau's critique of Hobbes' account of the state of nature, especially with regard to men's passions. John T. Scott, "The Theodicy of the *Second Discourse*: The "Pure State of Nature and Rousseau's Political Thought," in

harm others they are completely neutral toward others. There is no motive to harm others when all that men truly care about is eating and sleeping, and for this reason far from being a state of interminable war, as in Hobbes, the state of nature is, according to Rousseau, a state of peace. What is most striking about this statement, however, is Rousseau's subtle and almost off-handed remark that the simple and peaceful state of nature in which men were barely indistinguishable from animals was "the most appropriate" state for human beings. Both Hobbes and Montesquieu point outward and upward from the state of nature to a more comfortable and secure, and indeed better, state of security guaranteed by political laws and institutions. While the state of nature cannot be considered to be strictly speaking a peak of human life it is nonetheless "the most appropriate" state for human beings because it is most in conformity with the core of their nature. For Hobbes and Montesquieu what men most desire and need can only be satisfied through leaving the state of nature and founding political communities that satisfy their needs and even many of their unnatural and superfluous desires. For Hobbes and Montesquieu there is a definitive practical answer to the question of the best form of government, and there is an easily crossable bridge from the state of nature to life in the best form of government. Rousseau denies that this is the case and thinks on the contrary that all political prescriptions are worse than men's original state. I will consider why precisely this is the case below.

Rousseau agrees with both Hobbes and Locke that man is a naturally free being who does not have any natural duties or obligations to any other human beings, even their

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Critical Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers, ed. John T. Scott (London: Routledge, 2006), 236-239.

natural parents. This is because, as Rousseau sees it, men are overwhelmingly self-interested beings who are not naturally inclined to do anything at all on behalf or in the explicit interest of other men to the detriment of their own. This self-centeredness—it cannot be called narcissism because it does not involve comparisons with others and their concomitant hierarchies—are a direct result of men’s natural self-love. As Rousseau says, “Our first duties are to ourselves; our primary sentiments are centered on ourselves; all our natural movements relate in the first instance to our preservation and our well-being. Thus, the first sentiment of justice does not come to us from the justice we owe but from that which is owed us.”³²⁶ Rousseau observes how children—perhaps our best “real world” access to what is natural in the human heart—naturally chafe at fulfilling duties that go against their immediate interests and self-love. The classics and traditional religious thinkers teach that men have natural social bonds and men owe much, in various ways, to others, from the beginning of their lives. Rousseau insists that to speak to children of duties is to tell them “the opposite of what is necessary, what they cannot understand, and what cannot interest them.” On this point Rousseau agrees with Montesquieu’s portrait of natural men in that men naturally chafe against duties and established laws.

Perhaps Rousseau’s clearest statement about *amour de soi*, and the one that most emphasizes that it is *the* central passion for human beings is when he writes, “The source of our passions, the origin and principle of all the others, the only one born with man and which never leaves him so long as he lives is self-love, a primitive, innate passion, which is anterior to every other, and of which all others are in a sense only modifications.” As I

³²⁶ Rousseau, *Emile*, 231.

will consider below, Rousseau thinks that humans acquire innumerable passions—perhaps, as he indicates here, only modifications of the initial passion—within society. But the strongest and most persistent passion is our love of ourselves. Every person who has ever lived is the one being that person cares about most. It is literally impossible for human beings to lose or sacrifice this predominant passion, however much their acquired passions alter their original natural condition. The love of self, moreover, is according to Rousseau in conformity with natural order: “The love of oneself is always good and always in conformity with order. Since each man is specially entrusted with his own preservation, the first and most important of his cares is and ought to be to watch over it constantly. And how could he watch over it if he did not take the greatest interest in it?”³²⁷ Far from being a sin, vice, or disorder, our natural self-love and desire to pursue what interests us is the strongest part of us, which can never be fully removed from our nature.

6.5 COMPASSION: A NATURAL LINK TO SOCIABILITY AND MORALITY

Given Rousseau’s emphasis on the power of self-interest in the human soul—a position he shares with all his modern predecessors, going back to Machiavelli—it is somewhat surprising to see the passion of self-love in tandem with another passion that seems, at first glance at least, to go against out self-interest. This is the passion of compassion, or pity, as Rousseau sometimes calls it. Compassion softens, Rousseau claims, the “ferocity” of other passions, even self-love, and “tempers the ardor [natural

³²⁷ Ibid., 344.

man] has for his own well-being by an innate repugnance to see his fellow suffer.”³²⁸

Virtue for Rousseau as for Montesquieu implies the existence of social relations and, as we have seen, for Rousseau men have no natural social relations. But when men do come into contact with other men and recognize a being like themselves who is suffering, Rousseau claims that men feel an innate repugnance at seeing others like them suffer. It is a “kind” of “virtue” because it involves doing something for others that is not strictly speaking to advance one’s own exclusive interest, but paradoxically it is not against one’s own interests either. When one inspects more closely, it turns out to be not a virtue but rather a sentiment that is rooted in our natural passions. And Rousseau claims that ultimately compassion originates in men before any rational reflection. That is, it is a feeling or passion that men are naturally inclined to follow before any rational reflection. In Rousseau’s account, moreover, this natural link to other men’s well-being is a source of morality.³²⁹ Yet morality is usually thought, by common opinion, to have to do with freely doing the right thing, and of overcoming our natural inclinations, if necessary, in order to do so. How can we truly be acting morally if we do something without thinking about it, without having to will something freely that might be in tension with our natural inclinations or interests? Precisely because it does not necessarily involve reflection on this tension Rousseau thinks compassion is a good or effective source of morality, or of doing good for others. I will explore this particular problem below in my chapter on the development of Emile’s compassion. In any case, Rousseau insists that compassion is

³²⁸ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 36.

³²⁹ Grace provides a useful discussion of the link and tension between compassion and morality. Grace, “Built on Sand,” 173-175. See also Clifford Orwin, “Rousseau and the Discovery of Political Compassion,” in *The Legacy of Rousseau*, ed. Clifford Orwin and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 296-320.

deeply rooted in the human heart and that even “the most depraved morals” have difficulty destroying “the force of natural pity.”³³⁰ But Rousseau strongly emphasizes that compassion or pity is *the* best natural basis for morality, the one that can most seamlessly unite self-love with concern for the well-being of others. As he says, from pity “flow[s] all the social virtues....In fact, what are generosity, Clemency, Humanity, if not Pity applied to the weak, to the guilty, or to the human species in general.”³³¹

Rousseau contrasts the strength of compassion in natural men against the way it becomes obscured and weakened in social men, in whom even more powerful and unnatural passions predominate. And it is the first passion about which one could make the case that is puts social men on the road to other, less natural passions. This is because, as a social passion, it induces the phenomenon of “living outside oneself,” a phenomenon that will be explored more fully below. Compassion, according to Rousseau, is “a feeling that puts us in the position of him who suffers—a feeling that is obscure and lively in Savage man, developed but weak in Civilized man.”³³² Men are originally individuals who are not directed to concern themselves with anyone but themselves, but compassion is a passion that leads men to have a genuine concern for others once they enter into unnatural social relationships with others. And yet it is a passion that becomes progressively weaker as men’s social ties multiply, as we will also explore below. Strictly speaking, natural man is an individual who cares for himself and lives entirely within his own psyche or awareness of the world. But when men become aware of other beings who are similar to themselves they are led perforce by the sentiment of compassion to identify

³³⁰ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 36.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

³³² *Ibid.*

with them, especially when one perceives that another being like oneself suffers—indeed, the feeling of compassion intensifies the more one sees oneself in this other being’s position. Compassion gains force “as the Observing animal identifies himself more intimately with the suffering animal.” What is perhaps most striking is that compassion inclines us to help others without even reflecting or calculating what we gain or lose by identifying with the sufferer. For this reason we do not feel compassion to be in tension with our own self-interest or well-being, even if in some cases it might be, once we subject the case to rational reflection and analysis. For instance, why would we feel compassion for a being who we feel is taking advantage of us? Yet according to Rousseau as long as we feel pleasure in helping others who suffer, we will indulge the pleasurable sentiment of compassion. Compassion is even attractive because it causes us to feel strength and pleasure in recognizing that the one who suffers is not us. We are safe while the other person, regrettably, suffers. And while each individual cares most for his own self-preservation, Rousseau suggests that compassion “contributes to the mutual preservation of the entire species.”³³³ The violent passions of Hobbes’ natural men would seem to tend to the destruction of the human race, or at least a very large part of it in the absence of the institution of the commonwealth. But Rousseau’s discovery of the natural basis of compassion suggests that there is a natural passion that contributes to the preservation of all human beings. This suggests, moreover, that while we are fundamentally atomistic individuals and not part of natural communities, let alone a universal community of all humanity, there is something at work in each individual that works toward the preservation of humanity as a whole, and that human beings do not

³³³ Ibid.

ineluctably tend toward the destruction of the human race, as Hobbes seems to suggest. Compassion is indeed sufficiently strong in us, at least in its natural condition, that “it will deter every robust Savage from robbing a weak child or an infirm of his hard-won subsistence if he hopes to be able to find his own elsewhere.” Compassion restrains strong human beings from harming those weaker than themselves. However, if one’s own self-preservation is at stake, self-preservation trumps compassion: if a strong human being does not expect to be able to find a meal elsewhere, he will not hesitate to rob a child or an infirm man of his meal. While the Christian virtue of self-sacrificial charity may go against the grain of our self-interestedness nature, compassion does not, and compassion “inspires” in us the maxim, “Do what is good for you with the least possible harm to others.” While this maxim seems on the surface perfectly reasonable, if slightly unorthodox, it is striking how little it actually demands of us morally. It requires none of the self-sacrificing virtue that ancient cities demand of their citizens and that traditional religions demand of their followers. It acknowledges the power of our natural self-interest and does not demand of us anything that goes against our naturally self-interested passions, and it conforms to our natural revulsion against seeing other human beings suffer. And it is also striking that it amounts to what Rousseau calls a “restraint.”³³⁴ According to Hobbes, men desperately need artificial restraints to keep the peace in light of their fundamentally violent natures. For Rousseau, men originally have a natural “restraint” that flows from their originally unreflective natures, and that restrains them from doing violence to one another. It is only later that men need the artificial restraints of laws, after the acquisition of unnatural passions, and even then Rousseau suggests that

³³⁴ Ibid., 48.

Hobbes is wrong about the artificial laws that are needed given our situation, as will be explored below.

6.6 *AMOUR-PROPRE*

While compassion is a natural passion that links naturally individual beings to each other without sacrificing their natural self-love, Rousseau indicates that there is another passion that is intrinsically unnatural, but that arises necessarily once men live together in society. This passion is what Rousseau calls *amour-propre*, which translates as self-love, but which is significantly different than *amour de soi*. Whereas *amour de soi* is exclusively self-regarding and has only to do with satisfying a few calm passions, like nourishment and rest, *amour-propre* has to do with comparing one's worth to others and indignantly demanding that others value ourselves highly, indeed higher than themselves. As Rousseau says, once natural men begin to live together, "Each one began to look at the others and to want to be looked at himself, and public esteem had a value."³³⁵ According to Rousseau, men have unequal natural faculties—some men are more intelligent, better looking, stronger, or otherwise more naturally gifted than other men. Yet in competing with each other and demanding a sense of superiority, men become necessarily unhappy and dissatisfied, since it is impossible for each man to abandon his own self-love and recognize another as more important than himself. Because men's desires in society exceed their powers, in this case they are necessarily unhappy, striving for that which is always out of reach. According to Rousseau, from men's preferences for

³³⁵ Ibid., 47.

themselves originate vanity and contempt, on the one hand, and shame and envy, on the other: and because of this “the fermentation caused by these new leavens eventually produced compounds fatal to happiness and innocence.” It might seem strange that independent and asocial natural men would need anything at all from other individuals who are not, at least initially, dependent on them. Yet paradoxically, according to Rousseau, “By dint of seeing one another, they [could] no longer do without seeing one another again.”³³⁶ In coming to contact with others men start to need and depend on others. Originally, but only briefly, men feel pleasure and enjoy a new, incipient social life. Yet this calm state does not last long, and with the birth of *amour-propre*, “Jealousy awakens with love; Discord triumphs, and the gentlest of the passions receives sacrifices of human blood.”³³⁷

While natural men are easily satisfied and have no incentive to be other than what they are naturally, *amour-propre* causes social men to try to be and especially to appear to be different from, indeed superior to what they really are. This tendency leads to a split between one’s natural core, which becomes more and more obscured in society, and one’s social appearance, the image that men contrive and present to others in society. From *amour-propre* and its necessity to appear to be better than one is emerges “conspicuous ostentation and deceptive cunning.”³³⁸ What is important to note about *amour-propre* is that it is *the* passion that is the source of how men become enemies with one another: “That universal desire for reputations, honors, and preferences, which devours us all, trains and compares talent and strengths, how much it stimulates and

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Ibid., 51.

multiplies passions; and making all men competitors, rivals, or rather enemies, how many reverses, successes, and catastrophes of all kinds it causes daily by making so many Contenders race the same course.”³³⁹ In Hobbes’ view, men are naturally enemies simply by being alive, and the striving for glory and even mere preservation cause a continual war of all against all. For Rousseau, by contrast, men are not originally enemies—indeed they initially regard each other with indifference. They only *become* enemies once the intoxicating passion of *amour-propre* has become inflamed within society. *Amour-propre*, however, is an ambiguous passion, one that can be used for both bad and good ends. Rousseau suggests that *amour-propre* is the source of “what is best and worst among men, our virtues and vices, our Sciences and our errors, our Conquerors and our Philosophers.”³⁴⁰ We today tend to think that something like *amour-propre*, or competition for honors (or money, or various kinds of power, real or illusory) are a good thing, and bring out the best in us—even if the satisfaction for which we hope in this pursuit is always just out of our grasp. While Rousseau seems to have some sympathy for this line of thought, he also thinks *amour-propre* is on the whole a negative influence on human beings: it is the source of “a multitude of bad things as against a small number of good ones.” In any case, it is only with the introduction and development of *amour-propre* in society that the core of men’s nature begins to change fundamentally. Throughout history, from men’s beginnings to their current state, “the soul and human passions, altering imperceptibly, change their Nature so to speak.”³⁴¹ While one can perceive this development in slow motion, in Rousseau’s portrayal of the hypothetical

³³⁹ Ibid., 63.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 65.

development of the human species, we can also see human nature change rapidly, by paying attention to the development of a human being, from its natural beginnings in childhood to its social development in adulthood. I will consider Rousseau's analysis below, in the educational project of the imaginary human being, Emile.

Amour-propre must be distinguished from both *amour de soi* and compassion because Rousseau makes clear that it is a fundamentally unnatural passion. All men may be susceptible of acquiring it in society, but strictly speaking the passion does not exist in the state of nature. As Rousseau says, "*Amour-propre* is only a relative sentiment, artificial and born in Society, which inclines each individual to have a greater esteem for himself than for anyone else, and inspires in men all the harm they do to one another, and is the true source of honor."³⁴² This statement makes explicit a great difference between Montesquieu and Rousseau on the theme of honor. According to Montesquieu, too, honor is an unnatural passion, but it is a passion that improves or adds to our natural passions and generally makes us better or more impressive human beings; it is a salutary and artificial passion that can have praiseworthy social consequences. While, as we will see, Rousseau thinks *amour-propre* might in some cases have praiseworthy benefits, he emphasizes that *amour-propre* has enormously harmful social effects in a way that Montesquieu never does. In any case, Rousseau suggests that in society *amour-propre* can be directed toward good or bad ends, and its proper guide is reason, a faculty, according to Rousseau, which is not as strong as the passions, and which itself is powered by the passions themselves: *amour-propre* "becomes good or bad only by the

³⁴² Ibid., 91.

applications made of it and the relations given to it.”³⁴³ I will consider the ways in which *amour-propre* might be directed toward good or bad ends in the case of Emile’s education below.

A major point of emphasis for Rousseau, then, is the distinction between natural and unnatural passions, and the way in which unnatural passions ensnare us in society and multiply themselves, causing greater unhappiness as we move further away from our natural state, with seemingly no way back nor an alternate path to happiness or psychic wholeness. Rousseau provides a powerful and vivid image to describe the current state of our passions: while the source of our passions is natural, “countless alien streams have swollen it. It is a great river which constantly grows and in which one could hardly find a few drops of its first waters.”³⁴⁴ What is striking in this passage is the way in which Rousseau makes such a sharp distinction between natural and unnatural passions, and claims that so many of our passions are unnatural even though they seem so natural to us and in any case they are impossible to avoid in society. And it is striking too that men, according to Rousseau, are so powerfully deluded by their intensified passions and the path to their apparent happiness (or unhappiness). In Rousseau’s understanding, at least in the *Second Discourse*, it seems as though men were capable of happiness—in the sense of having very basic physical satisfactions easily satisfied—only when they resembled sub-rational and unreflective animals. The images of happiness that men create and pursue in society with the aid of their unnatural passions can lead only to greater and greater misery.

³⁴³ Rousseau, *Emile*, 225.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 362.

6.7 THE UNNATURALNESS OF SOCIETY

While both Montesquieu and Rousseau draw a distinction between the state of nature and society, Rousseau intensifies this distinction and seems on the surface to have a clear preference for man in his original natural state against the highly unnatural and miserable men in society, divided against themselves by innumerable and multiplying passions, which make them ever more miserable. For Montesquieu, as we have seen, the acquisition of unnatural passions is either a matter of indifference or a good: with their acquisition men learn how society works and how they can advance in it. All that men need for their satisfaction are the political institutions and easygoing commercial way of life to secure their lives and their ever-burgeoning properties. For Montesquieu, as for Hobbes, the institutions of society are the fundamental preconditions of the peace, security, prosperity, and happiness of all. For Rousseau, by contrast, the violence of Hobbes' state of nature that Hobbes and Montesquieu had thought we had left in forming society in fact continues in society in the form of the violence of the strong in society who inflict harm upon the weaker members of society. As Rousseau says, "When human society is considered with calm and disinterested attention, it seems to show at first only the violence of powerful men and the oppression of the weak; the mind revolts against the harshness of the former; one is tempted to deplore the blindness of the latter."³⁴⁵ Rousseau emphasizes much more powerfully than Montesquieu or Hobbes that men's positions in society—and their relative and concomitant strength—is the result of artificial convention, and for this reason a source of enormous social and political instability. One of the great attractions of Hobbes' and Montesquieu's proposed best

³⁴⁵ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 15.

forms of government is their apparent stability, and the way in which they purportedly benefit all members of society in the most important ways, even if men still remained socially unequal despite their original natural equality. By contrast, for Rousseau, “nothing is less stable among men than those external relationships which chance produces more often than wisdom, and which are called wisdom or power, wealth or poverty.” For this reason social conventions “appear at first glance to be founded on piles of quicksand.”³⁴⁶ As we have seen, according to Rousseau, men are in some ways naturally equal and in others naturally unequal, so there may be some ground for legitimate inequalities in society, to the extent that natural differences are ineradicable. Yet as will be explored in greater detail below, for Rousseau that vast majority of social inequalities are conventional and a source of great instability.

Whereas Hobbes and Montesquieu emphasize the weakness of natural men’s passions—in particular, his inability to achieve that which he most deeply desires, the secure preservation of his life—Rousseau draws a sharp distinction between a natural man’s physical strength and self-sufficiency, including his ability to secure his own life in the state of nature, and the weakness of social men. While the institutions of society may indeed keep men alive, the emergence and multiplication of unnatural passions in society cause men to lose their natural strength, and become softer: weaker of body and soul, and less vigorous and self-sufficient than they were in their natural state. As Rousseau says, the “immoderate ecstasies of all the Passions” inevitably enervate social men.³⁴⁷

Rousseau goes so far as to oppose the natural freedom of men in the state of nature with

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 23.

social “slavery” characterized by softness and weakness, a result of men’s exhausted passions: “In becoming sociable and a slave [man] becomes weak, fearful, servile; and his soft and effeminate way of life completes the enervation of both his strength and his courage.”³⁴⁸ In Montesquieu’s view, good political institutions put men’s natural freedom on a firm footing, with due allowance for the practical necessities of representative government. Whereas Montesquieu associates despotism with certain unfortunate climatic necessities, Rousseau seems almost to conflate despotic slavery with life in society as such, even those Montesquieuian commercial societies that are purportedly devoted to political freedom. And he opposes the simple satisfaction and happiness of men in their natural state with the continual discontent and even misery of men in society, even that society that Montesquieu and Hobbes (and Locke) put forth as the society that is *most* productive of pleasure, contentment, and human happiness. Natural men, characterized by calm and peaceful passions and strong healthy bodies are contrasted with social men, whose unnatural and exaggerated passions produce perpetual discontent, leading to the extreme, in some cases, of suicide, a phenomenon of immense psychic pain that is completely unknown to natural men: “We see around us practically no People who do not complain of their existence, even many who deprive themselves of it insofar as they have the capacity.”³⁴⁹

One of the most powerful charges that Rousseau levels against society is that it weakens men’s natural freedom by subjecting them men to dependence on other men. And the more populous a society, the more men become dependent on others. This is one

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 24.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 34.

of the greatest sources of unhappiness in society. According to Rousseau, in society men's natural independence and their original passions are weakened because men "subject themselves to a universal dependence" and "oblige themselves to receive everything from those who do not obligate themselves to give them anything."³⁵⁰ Rousseau here analyzes an element of living in society that his liberal predecessors emphasized: fulfilling one's contracts that we freely enter into. However, in differing from his predecessors he emphasizes that in freely entering into contracts we come to owe a great deal to other men who in turn may not necessarily owe us much of anything. In thus becoming dependent on others we lose something of our natural freedom and our natural passions are thereby weakened.

While society makes men in some ways weak, dependent, and soft, however, in other ways it makes men harsh and cruel, leading men away from their natural state in another direction. As we have seen, compassion flows from a pre-reflective state that instinctively identifies with a being similar to oneself who suffers. The more one learns to develop one's reason in society, however, and as *amour-propre* and the desire for distinction develop, the weaker compassion becomes, and the more men become self-interested, isolated from others, and incapable of identifying with other men's suffering, who they see as social inferiors. This results in a kind of harshness of the passions and a concomitant indifference toward others. As Rousseau says, "Reason engenders *amour-propre* and reflection fortifies it;" and "Philosophy isolates [man]; because of it he says in secret, at the sight of a suffering man: perish if you will, I am safe."³⁵¹ These are insights

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 35.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 37.

into the harmful nature of society with respect to men's natural passions that Montesquieu had either failed to see or thought were unimportant, since society on the whole seems to benefit all men. What Rousseau seems to be describing when he describes men's position in society is fundamentally an intricate web of unnatural strength and weakness in which all men are dependent on others, necessarily weakening their natural independence and passions. The effectual result of so many bonds of dependence is indeed a kind of slavery of all social men.³⁵²

The web of extreme dependence and enervation combined with harshness or indifference toward others is only a relatively recent development, however, according to Rousseau. Whereas Montesquieu presents a historical development of forms of government, beginning with ancient republics, Rousseau presents the genesis of society as the family, a quasi-natural society that introduces the first bonds of dependence. According to Rousseau, this is on the whole a happy state, especially when compared with other later, more developed social states. Men and women's sexual passions become linked and "the first developments of the heart"—as opposed to strictly physical sexual satisfaction—came into being and men and women developed the unnatural habit of living together. This is opposed to the natural state of men and women going their separate ways after their sexual appetites are satisfied. If there is a social state for which the case can be made it represents an improvement on men's natural state, it is the state of the first families in which men enjoyed conjugal and paternal love, "the sweetest sentiments known to men."³⁵³ These sentiments are strictly speaking unnatural, and

³⁵² Ibid., 42.

³⁵³ Ibid., 46.

introduce men to a new web of dependence, but men thereby taste a new pleasure that their coarse taste in the state of nature was incapable of feeling. Rousseau goes so far as to describe this state of incipient social relations and morality as a “state of golden mean” between men’s naturally isolated state and “the petulant activity of *amour-propre*.” This state was indeed “the best for man” and it is only due to a regrettable accident that men ever left it.³⁵⁴

As we have seen, Montesquieu thinks the passions of commerce necessarily produce a salutary development beginning from being able to provide for men’s necessities—food, clothing, shelter, and so on—to being able to provide for superfluous pleasures and comforts, which in turn become “necessities,” at least by popular opinion. We saw this in the development from primitive commercial republics—particularly the Jesuits’ Paraguay—to the full flowering of commerce in England. In Montesquieu’s view, both Paraguay and England represent a clear improvement over men’s condition in the state of nature, and England is a clear improvement on Paraguay. Rousseau, however, seems to think that even Paraguay’s limited commerce is too decadent, since even in this state men necessarily depend on one another, destroying their natural independence and enervating them. According to Rousseau, men can *only* remain fully “free, healthy, good, and happy” as long as they limit themselves to working and providing for themselves alone. In this state they enjoyed “the sweetest of independent intercourse.” Natural independence and equality were lost, and men’s passions were subsequently weakened, once men began to develop commercial ties for unnecessary superfluities and thereby began to depend on other men for what they falsely believed they now “need[ed].”

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 48.

Whereas for Montesquieu this development is an almost unqualified boon, this development seems to Rousseau to have been generally an unfortunate and irreversible accident. And whereas Montesquieu thinks this development represents a good for *all* men, even if social inequality may thereby be increased—because in principle such a state improves the security and material comfort of all men—Rousseau thinks this development marks the rise of massive and illegitimate social inequalities, a phenomenon that Rousseau criticizes much more harshly than Montesquieu ever does. In Montesquieu's view the commercial republic is the most natural regime because it guarantees all men's security and thereby satisfies what they most deeply desire, even if it destroys in many ways men's natural equality. This is simply the price we must pay for the material benefits commerce brings to all men. For Rousseau, men's natural inequality of talents—their strength, intelligence, and so on—leads perforce to an even greater “contrived equality” in society, and ever-greater differences and inequalities between originally equal men.³⁵⁵ Rather than Montesquieu's emphasis on seductive comforts and pleasures, Rousseau speaks of slavery, misery, and inhumane inequalities in society. One might think that there are winners and losers, haves and have-nots, and from Rousseau's perspective, and this is true. One might think, furthermore, that it would be a very good thing to be a powerful “have,” yet Rousseau denies that this is the case. Those with the most power and property in the commercial state are in a state of dependence on other men, and thus “slaves,” just as those weaker than them. A man becomes a slave, paradoxically, “even in becoming [a] master.”³⁵⁶ The poor need the rich men's aid to stay

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 47-51,

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 51.

alive, and the rich depend on the poor men's services. This new neediness compels men both to need others slavishly, and to act harshly and try to tyrannize over others who they think they might be able to manipulate to their advantage, literally to their profit. Men then become "deceitful and sly with some, imperious and harsh with others," and a social man learns "to abuse all those whom he needs when he cannot make them fear him and does not find his interest in serving them usefully."³⁵⁷ Montesquieu sees in the commercial republic a salutary softness and an improvement, in particular, in his view, over the harshness and painfulness of the passions in ancient republics. At bottom it fully satisfies, in his view, men's natural core natural passions. In Rousseau's view, society makes men weak and needy, and also, and for this very reason, harsh and imperious toward others to the extent that they are able to tyrannize over others. Society then destroys men's core passions and leads to new, enervating passions. Just as the weak and needy baby in *Emile* attempts to manipulate other humans' wills to his own advantage—and feels both pleasure and increased dependence in doing so—Rousseau think weak social men of all social positions will try to tyrannize over others and manipulate other men's wills for their own advantage. When all men in society necessarily act in this way, natural freedom and equality seem to be irreparably destroyed.

The portrait that Rousseau paints of society is one where there is an ineluctable tendency toward tension and conflict between individuals—because of their natural individualism and the necessary development of their *amour-propre*—as well as a tendency toward despotism in government. Yet whereas Rousseau's portrait of men in the state of nature tends to emphasize the equality and uniformity of men's passions, a

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 51-52.

major source of the ills in society is the variety and diversity of men's passions within society.³⁵⁸ Montesquieu had no qualms with, he even celebrates the emergence of diverse new passions in commercial society, as long as they did not interfere with peace and security. And whereas Montesquieu boldly celebrates the emergence and development of the arts, sciences, and various forms of luxury in commercial societies, Rousseau—at least on the surface—blames the “useless arts,” the “frivolous Sciences,” and the “scores of prejudices” that emerge in commercial society, the latter of which especially are “contrary to happiness and virtue.” As we saw in Book I of *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu too thinks that social prejudices obscure human nature. But while Montesquieu thinks the development of unnatural and prejudicial passions can be compatible with happiness, Rousseau virulently disagrees. He, at least on the surface, takes the side of ancient virtue that Montesquieu eventually abandoned. And whereas Montesquieu sees enough homogeneity and stability to perpetuate a unified society, Rousseau nothing but burgeoning individuals interests—the result of unnatural passions—and consequently political discord, with the government, because those who control it are subjected to self-interested passions, also tending more and more toward the despotism that Montesquieu feared in Hobbes' framework, but which Rousseau thinks Montesquieu has failed to escape. According to Rousseau, if one looks closely at commercial society, apparently so productive of stability, pleasure, and happiness, one will at bottom perceive seeds of division among men and even “mutual hatred” between men. And whereas Montesquieu praises the commercial society as the most “natural” because despite the multiplication of unnatural passions such societies guarantee men's

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 64.

core passion, the desire for security, Rousseau powerfully criticizes the new “artificial” men of such societies, full of artificial passions: “Original man vanishing by degrees, Society no longer offers to the eyes of the wise man anything except an assemblage of artificial men and faculties, passions which are the work of all these new relations, and have no true foundation in Nature.”³⁵⁹ The difference between natural and social men is so great that social men no longer even recognize what once made them happy, or at least perfectly satisfied them: “what constitutes the supreme happiness of one would reduce the other to despair. [Natural man] breathes only repose and freedom, he wants only to live and remain idle....On the contrary, the Citizen, always active, sweats, agitates himself, torments himself incessantly in order to seek still more laborious occupations; he works to death, he even rushes to it in order to get in condition to live, or renounces life, in order to acquire immortality.”³⁶⁰ In this statement Rousseau collapses the distinctions between citizens of all societies, for instance between ancient republics and modern commercial republics, in order to highlight the differences between natural and *all* social men.³⁶¹

One of the most powerful and insightful critiques that Rousseau levels against the condition of social men is, as I have suggested, that they live “outside of themselves.”

Rousseau agrees with Montesquieu that men are completely self-regarding in the state of

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 66.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Yet this is only one of Rousseau’s perspectives. As we will see, he is also a frequently eloquent defender of good morals and virtuous citizenship as possibly the best roads open to men. Todorov calls attention to one difficulty in entering Rousseau’s thought when he notes what could be called a kind of “perspectivism” in Rousseau’s thought. At different times Rousseau adopts, for example, the perspective of a citizen, a solitary man, or a moral man.” Todorov, *Frail Happiness*, 19.

nature, but Montesquieu does not seem to think that men are fundamentally transformed and lose something important by turning their gaze outward to other men and living according to the opinions of others in society. In Rousseau's view, by contrast, this social phenomenon has terrible consequences, because it tends to lead men to judge their worth according to wildly fluctuating and highly irrational public opinion, and because they seek happiness according to opinion that can never satisfy them. For Montesquieu, accumulating material comforts and striving to rise according to the standards of happiness as judged by the public opinion of commercial society is tantamount to happiness. For Rousseau, by contrast, this is a life of misery, because it takes men "outside" of who they truly are by nature and compels them to submit slavishly to standards of value that they did not create. As Rousseau says, "the Savage lives within himself; the sociable man, always outside of himself, knows how to live only in the opinions of others; and it is, so to speak, from their judgment alone that he draws the sentiment of his own existence."³⁶² In such a state men must necessarily be discontent, since in society all men depend on the opinions of others who necessarily prefer themselves to him and by dispensing judgment on others one cannot make oneself happy. The natural man, by contrast, with his limited needs, was perfectly content, lived entirely "within himself," and (unreflectively) felt the pleasurable sentiment of existence that social men feel only in a warped form. In practice, such a state results in nothing but contrived appearances and greater and greater deception.³⁶³ In living in the light of

³⁶² Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 66.

³⁶³ Starobinski notes the fact that the movement from our natural state to society entails a movement from what he calls "primordial transparency" to a world of false social "appearances." Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, 24-29.

others' opinions of ourselves, our true nature becomes artificially transformed and buried underneath "a deceitful and frivolous exterior, [displaying] honor without virtue, reason without wisdom, and pleasure without happiness." In sum, our original nature with its passions and inclinations is modified for the worse in society in a way that Montesquieu neither anticipated nor feared.

One of the greatest points of disagreement between Montesquieu and Rousseau with regard to the status of social men is their respective judgment with regard to men's pride and vanity. While according to Montesquieu pride may contribute to social prejudices, it is a useful tool for men to advance in society and to pursue goals other than killing each other, like making money. And for Montesquieu there is a real pleasure associated with unleashing men's pride, even though it is strictly speaking an unnatural passion. Rousseau concedes that there is a real pleasure associated with men's social pride and vanity, but he thinks such pleasures are small and not lasting, and that men in such a state are at bottom more miserable than lastingly content: social men are at bottom plagued by "foolish pride," and "an indefinable van admiration for [themselves], [which make them] run avidly after all the miseries of which [they are] susceptible, and which beneficent Nature has taken care to keep from [them]."³⁶⁴ The more that men's pride and vanity are inflated, in fact, the more their individual interests conflict with each other, and the less the passion of compassion affects them, and the more that they tend to hate each other. While such a state may not be as overtly bloody as Hobbes' state of nature, it is hard not to see a resemblance between Hobbes' state of nature that the commonwealth claims to rescue men from, and Rousseau's depiction of society, in which the clash of

³⁶⁴ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 74.

wills results in a universal hatred toward others. Hobbes' and Montesquieu's political prescriptions, according to Rousseau, in effect fail to get us out of the state of nature, and it is impossible to prevent aggression, exploitation, and instability once men's social passions have been unleashed. Because of men's natural self-interest and the ways in which social passions warp natural ones in society, "each man finds his profit in the misfortunes of others."³⁶⁵ While contemporary men may blame men's bad treatment of others on various opinions about men's supposedly correctable bad morals or bad policies, Rousseau traces men's badness to the irreversible emergence of unnatural and harmful passions that on the whole cause men misery despite men's addiction to their illusory pleasures.

6.8 THE EMILIAN PROJECT OF PRESERVING NATURE IN SOCIETY

Although Rousseau is clearly pessimistic about the overall trends of the passions within society, he does undertake an imaginary project that consists of raising and educating a natural man with the ultimate intention of having him live in society, to see what a man who naturally lives only for himself—as we all originally do, due to our *amour de soi*—might be for others in society. It is a kind of long-term psychological experiment to see what is fixed in human nature and what is malleable, and to see how natural passions might be preserved and how unnatural passions might be directed in positive, healthy, or wholesome ways, if this is even possible, or if this is possible for

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

very long.³⁶⁶ While the chapters that follow will investigate individual passions as they emerge in *Emile* in-depth, I want to sketch some of the broad outlines of this imaginary education here, especially some of its main themes or tensions as Rousseau describes them in *Emile*. To begin with, Rousseau explicitly states that men in their present state—that is, as social beings—are hopelessly divided against themselves and necessarily find themselves in a contradictory state: “Man is in contradiction with himself; He cannot pursue two opposite goals at the same time.”³⁶⁷ That is, a man cannot be naturally self-regarding and “for himself” exclusively, while also having obligations and being duty-bound to others. In Rousseau’s view, this division between our natural inclinations and our social duties is a major source of our present unhappiness. Yet somehow it is precisely this tension that Rousseau apparently wants to try to overcome or resolve in *Emile*’s education. How can this be? It is unclear if this is merely a provisional observation of the problem of our present state that *Emile*’s education might overcome, or if this statement will hold ultimately for *Emile*’s case as well. Rousseau would then be either extremely pessimistic about all men’s prospects for happiness in society, or just extremely pessimistic for almost all of us, while holding out some glimmer of hope for the education of a particular man who undergoes a singular and, as we will see, a somewhat bizarre education. That a very peculiar education in current circumstances is necessary is made clear by Rousseau’s thought that simply introducing a naïve savage into a contemporary city would be disastrous: “In the present state of things, a man abandoned to himself in the midst of other men from birth would be extremely

³⁶⁶ According to Melzer, Rousseau is one of the first thinkers to recognize “the extreme malleability of [man’s] nature over time.” Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, 49.

³⁶⁷ Rousseau, *Emile*, 158.

disfigured.”³⁶⁸ Contemporary prejudices and social institutions would “stifle nature” while putting nothing in its place. Unnatural passions would “bump” into such a man from all sides and cause him to “bend in every direction.” While Montesquieu focuses on emphasizing dominant passions or “springs” in various forms of government, in Rousseau’s primary account of the form of government, *The Social Contract*, Rousseau focuses very little on passions or springs of the government. In Rousseau’s view in order to know our nature more clearly, we need to focus even more than Montesquieu did on what we are in the state of nature, and then to see how we are transformed by society as such. Here I follow Rousseau’s lead examining an individual, Emile, rather Montesquieu procedure of examining the animating passions of governments as wholes.

One of Rousseau’s most revealing statements with regard to the difference between natural and social men is where he compares men to numbers. Natural men, entirely for themselves, are “numerical unities,” whereas social men are “fractional unities,” dependent of the denominator, that is, the particular society of which they are members. And whereas Rousseau is clearly pessimistic about society as a whole, he indicates that “good social institutions” are in principle possible, at least near the beginning or founding of a community, and those institutions are best that best know how to “denature” man, or to “take his absolute existence from him in order to give him a relative one, and transport the *I* into the community, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but a part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole.”³⁶⁹ In this statement, Rousseau continues to insist that at bottom nature and

³⁶⁸ Rousseau, *Emile*, 161.

³⁶⁹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 164.

society move in fundamentally different directions, but he makes it seem here at least that there is not necessarily a descent from the state of nature into society, if the right social institutions are put in place. As Rousseau presents it here, the political problem can be solved through social engineering, with the right institutional framework in place, to restrain and direct men's passions. In this Rousseau follows in the line of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu in focusing on institutional solutions (or palliatives), although, as we will see, Rousseau's apparent institutional solution is considerably different from those of his predecessors. Rousseau more than Montesquieu focuses on the artificial nature of society. In a "good" society men must falsely believe that they are no longer individuals but fundamentally members of a particular community (to the exclusion of all other communities), and must no longer have individual feelings, but feel only as their whole community feels. It is hard not to perceive some connection between Rousseau's analysis and Montesquieu's account of ancient republicanism, or even of modern "totalitarianism," even if a deeper understanding of his thought exculpates him from being a narrow partisan or even much of a defender at all of such regimes. In addition, another powerful statement that highlights the divide between nature and society is one where he portrays social men "floating" aimlessly between their natural inclinations and their social, moral, and political duties. This is the state of contemporary society where one is neither truly a man nor a citizen. Rousseau goes so far as to rate contemporary's men's value at "nothing." An attempt to preserve natural sentiments in society is bound to prove futile. Such a man will be good neither for himself nor others: "He will be one of these men of our days; a Frenchman, an Englishman, a Bourgeois; He

will be nothing.”³⁷⁰ Yet, despite this condemnation, it is precisely the project of preserving natural sentiments in society that Rousseau undertakes in Emile’s education. Rousseau makes this explicit when he suggests that “perchance” a natural education and a social education may be united and coherent. If, he suggests (a very big if, as we will see), “the double object we set for ourselves could be joined in a single one by removing the contradictions of man, a great obstacle to his happiness would be removed.” The vast majority of Rousseau’s statements imply that an individual natural man is the only being who is capable of happiness: he is perfectly content because he does nothing but follow his natural inclinations and there are no obstacles to the satisfaction of his inclinations except natural necessity, to which he peacefully resigns himself.³⁷¹ A social education demands unnatural devotion to the common good and the will of the community as a whole, and because this goal is necessarily in tension with our own exclusive good, we are artificially in contradiction with and divided against ourselves. We are apparently necessarily doomed to a lack of wholeness and consistency in our lives and therefore to unhappiness. Yet, as I have suggested, Rousseau proposes to embark on a kind of psychological experiment in the education of a man’s passions to see if a natural man raised in a particular way and through a particular method might be happy by doing what is naturally good for himself while also doing good for others, that is, by completely fulfilling his social, moral, and political duties. In order to do this, Rousseau proposes a natural man whose psychology would have to be fully known as he develops: “his

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Melzer provides a useful discussion of the theme of “unity of inclination.” Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, 67-68.

inclinations would have to be observed, his progress seen, his development followed.”³⁷² This is precisely the experiment that Rousseau proposes to follow in the education of Emile. Yet Rousseau provides no assurance at all that this experiment will turn out well. It is a big if indeed that Emile’s inclinations will be unified for his whole life, thereby ensuring that his happiness will endure. It may turn out in the end that Rousseau’s pessimistic vision of the unnaturalness and harmfulness of society on human nature will be vindicated, and that we cannot have it both ways, that is, live happily both for ourselves and with and for others. What is most important for the prospective success of this project, though, is the correct ordering of the passions in Emile’s education, “according to man’s constitution.”³⁷³ Whereas according to Socrates’ presentation in the *Republic* the correct education requires the correct ordering of the soul—a being the full of knowledge of which may ultimately be out of our grasp—Rousseau seems to think, like Montesquieu, that men’s most fundamental passions can be known, and can be ordered correctly according to nature and well according to good social institutions.

In the chapters that follow I will trace the development of Emile’s passions to see if a man raised entirely for himself might be good for others, and to see to what degree this project might be successful, if at all. In doing so, I will try to make the themes of the chapters line up as closely as possible with Montesquieu’s presentation of the most politically salient passions. In the next chapter I will begin by considering Rousseau’s account of virtue, both natural and moral (and closely related to this, political) virtue, to examine Rousseau’s complicated account of this passion, which has much in common

³⁷² Rousseau, *Emile*, 165-66.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 210.

with Montesquieu's analysis of virtue, even as Rousseau in the end comes to much different conclusions about the goodness and praiseworthiness of virtue than Montesquieu does. Whereas Montesquieu initially seems to praise virtue in *The Spirit of the Laws* only later on to discard it as a political standard for being too harshly unnatural, Rousseau begins *Emile* by saying little about virtue only to go on later in the book to praise moral virtue in a complicated and paradoxical way. As I will show, in *Emile* Rousseau attempts to put moral virtue on a more natural footing, an attempt that he may know to be ultimately unsatisfactory.

7.0 THE AMBIGUITIES OF VIRTUE IN EMILE

One of the most important shifts in *The Spirit of the Laws* was from Montesquieu's apparent praise of virtue (in his novel understanding of it) and its effects, to a near total abandonment of praise for virtue in the new model commercial republics. As I will try to show in this chapter, Rousseau agrees with Montesquieu's paradoxical understanding of the phenomenon of virtue, but rather than investigating its effects only to discard it as unhealthy or at least undesirable and unnecessary, the movement of Rousseau's treatment of virtue moves in the opposite direction. Emile's education begins with a near total silence about traditional virtue, yet by the end of the book Rousseau seemingly praises virtue to the skies, and Emile is seen to possess a certain kind of virtue, if on a different basis from that of the ancient Spartans or Montesquieu's famous ascetic monks. In this chapter, then, I will investigate Rousseau's understating of virtue in *Emile*, and virtue's new, more natural and humane basis, which will be in the service of the naturally individual Emile's being able to live well with and potentially even for others.

7.1 THE DEFINITION AND NATURE OF VIRTUE

One of the most important features of Emile's education is that it unfolds in successive stages, each part of which corresponds to Emile's age at the time. And one of the strangest features of Emile's education is that it takes him a very long time to be put in position to understand what virtue is, and its place in his education. To best understand the development of this understanding I will begin at the end—with Rousseau's

presentation to Emile of the meaning of virtue, as well as consider some of the reasons why Rousseau thinks virtue is so necessary to Emile's education. Bearing this understanding in mind, I will then trace the early stages of Emile's education that contribute, in various ways, to his being capable of virtue, both in his physical education, and in his falling in love (and thereby the development of his affections), both of which, I will argue, are necessary for Emile's ability to possess virtue. In doing so, I will try to show how Emile's virtue is similar to and differs from Montesquieu's exemplars of virtue.

As we recall, in *The Spirit of the Laws* Montesquieu argues that virtue, at its core, has to do with overcoming and denying our inclinations and desires in devotion to a certain understanding of the common good. This phenomenon, Montesquieu suggests, is very difficult and painful (and unnatural), but it produces a certain kind of strength and even a kind of residue of pleasure even in the moments of greatest apparent pain and self-denial. In addition, there is a kind of love connected to it—e.g., the monks love their order and ultimately, God—but this love, as Montesquieu presents it, has to do with otherworldly hopes and rewards that Montesquieu hints, through his silence, will most likely not be rewarded after we die. It is better to try to live in security and maybe even luxury now, than to wait and see if the divine will reward us for painful self-sacrifice when we are dead. And the pleasure we may feel when we deny ourselves is nothing to compared to the pleasure we can find as a byproduct of commercial hard work and thrift.

In any case, Rousseau agrees with Montesquieu about the content of virtue, but he comes to very different conclusions about its praiseworthiness, as well as about the appropriate rewards for it. As Rousseau says, “The word *virtue* comes from *strength*.

Strength is the foundation of virtue. Virtue belongs to a being that is weak by nature and strong by will.”³⁷⁴ As I have suggested, according to Rousseau one of the most lamentable features of our life with others stems from the fact that our natural inclinations and desires on the one hand and our moral and political duties on the other often diverge, causing a painful dividedness of soul. It is due to weakness of soul and the strength of our often-unnatural passions that we often succumb to doing what we are not supposed to do morally. As Rousseau suggests to Emile at the culmination of his education in virtue, Rousseau has not “preached” duties to Emile but rather attempted to train Emile’s body and soul in order to strengthen him so as to enable him to do his duties with ease. Yet Rousseau also suggests that while Emile has been raised to be naturally good rather than virtuous, “Goodness is broken and perishes under the impact of the passions. The man who is only good is good only for himself.” Part of the challenge of Emile’s education is to try to make a moral man who might be both good for himself and others. As Rousseau suggests, if all we do is pursue immediate pleasure at the expense of others, we cannot help but hurt others insofar as we are attached to them, as well as become entangled in unnatural passions. The challenge for Emile, Rousseau indicates, is for him to be able to “sacrifice inclination to duty to hold out [his] heart in order to listen to his reason.”³⁷⁵

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 633.

³⁷⁵ Ibid. As I indicated in my chapter on Montesquieu and virtue, my understanding of Montesquieu’s analysis of virtue is informed by Manent’s analysis and his insight about the similarity of Montesquieu’s and Rousseau’s conceptions of virtue. See Manent, *The City of Man*, 21-31. However, I think Manent fails to appreciate some of the nuances of Rousseau’s treatment of virtue. For instance, Manent is right that “By a singular reversal, the repressive and unnatural character of virtue that Montesquieu had delicately suggested in order to steer his readers away from it, was emphatically proclaimed by Rousseau to the great acclaim of his readers.” Manent, *The City of Man*, 30. Yet more than anything, I think, Rousseau seeks to bring out the *tension* between natural goodness and moral virtue for social men, and to reduce this painful tension, if it is possible to do

Emile will in some ways resemble Montesquieu's monks who know how to sacrifice their inclinations to their duties, even as Rousseau tries to preserve Emile's nature as much as possible, or rather tries to denature him in the healthiest way possible. A major challenge in Emile's education, as I will show, is to strengthen Emile's soul, but also to induce him to *want* to do his duty, so that his inclinations and his duties are as little in tension with each other as possible.

Rousseau's task is to try to create a moral man who will be devoted to others, but he wants to reform the content of morality to be more humane than the virtuous ancient Spartans and monks. As Rousseau says, while it is inevitable and unfortunate that all patriots are harsh to foreigners, "the essential thing is to be good to the people with whom one lives."³⁷⁶ The Spartans were ambitious, avaricious, and iniquitous to foreigners, while within Sparta disinterestedness, equity, and concord ruled. This inevitable division arises because while it is a necessary result of the nature of politics that different

so. And even where it exists, Rousseau seeks to transform our perspective on this potentially painful tension in such a way that we can praise it for causing us to feel more keenly the sentiment of our own existence. The strength it takes to do the right thing in the face of contrary inclinations causes moral men to feel keenly the strength of their own existence, in a way that social men "floating" between their inclinations and duties cannot. This is to say that Manent is absolutely correct to state that "Montesquieu seems to envisage a society where the repressive law the modifies nature would be abolished, while Rousseau thinks that man cannot live in society without obeying a law that deeply mutilates his soul," Manent, *The City of Man*, 31. However, Emile's self-chosen duties will cohere as much as possible with his natural inclinations and sentiments. He will enjoy doing his duties, and he will feel the sentiment of existence in doing them. One of the experimental projects Rousseau has in mind of Emile's education is to reduce this psychic pain as much as possible, and to put the demands of moral virtue on a new, humane basis. Emile will not completely resemble the ascetic monk and if he will eventually be in a position to consent to being a citizen, I doubt that he would consent to be a member of a community like Sparta. And his sexual passions are such that he would never join a monastery.

³⁷⁶ Rousseau, *Emile*, 163.

communities care for different goods, goods which conflict with one another because they are rooted in different opinions about what is good for them, all men are at their core are similar, free and equal beings in the state of nature. Every man who has ever lived is similar in some ways to Emile, however, and similar, in some ways, to each other. While Emile may be eventually a kind of patriot, Rousseau seems to want to develop him in such a way that his membership in a community does not necessarily incline him to be harsh to others or to want to harm them. Yet while Rousseau clearly distances himself from ancient models of virtue as a model for Emile's education, he, like Montesquieu, clearly has some degree of admiration for the effects of ancient virtue. He holds up as a kind of model citizen the Spartan Pedareetus, who cheerfully defers to the judgment of the city as a whole when he loses an election to a council. And he declares a model female citizen to be a Spartan mother who is told by a Helot that her five sons had died in a battle and who reproaches the Helot for delivering this information, demanding to know instead whether Sparta had won the battle.³⁷⁷ The submission of inclination to duty, so harsh and even inhumane in the case of the Spartan mother, is what Rousseau wants to try to recreate in Emile, albeit on a more humane basis.³⁷⁸

Yet immediately after putting forth these models of citizenship as exemplary, Rousseau punctures any hope that such impressive figures might be found anywhere on

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 164.

³⁷⁸ Todorov makes a thought-provoking distinction between three ideal "ways" open to mankind, according to Rousseau: that of the citizen (e.g., Cato), the solitary individual (e.g., Rousseau himself), and the moral individual (e.g., the imaginary Emile). Todorov's brief discussion of "the moral individual" is useful, but I think there are more problems and tensions in the example of Emile than Todorov's brief account considers. Rousseau, I think, is ultimately less sanguine than Todorov about what will happen once Emile's education is "complete." See, for instance, Todorov, *Frail Happiness*, 55-66.

the earth. Whereas Montesquieu emphasizes the introduction of new kinds of regimes to be the reason why we cannot go back to the way of life ancient republics (i.e., it is historically impossible to return to them), Rousseau hints but does not say explicitly that the reason ancient virtue will never be seen again is because of the introduction of Christianity, which introduced, new otherworldly duties—which are exaggerated and highly unnatural, Rousseau suggests—and which were in significant tension with men’s this-worldly civic duties, thereby introducing a new, contradictory division of soul in men. As Rousseau says, “Public instruction no longer exists and can no longer, because where there is no longer [a] fatherland, there can no longer be citizens. These two words, *fatherland* and *citizen*, should be effaced from modern languages. I know well the reason why this is so, but I do not want to tell it.”³⁷⁹ Yet even if it were in principle possible to go back to ancient models of citizenship, there is good reason to think that Emile’s education is ultimately not to be a citizen simply but to be a man, or rather to be a natural and then a moral man: “All that a man *should be* [Emile] will in case of need know how well to be as well as anyone.”³⁸⁰

One of the paradoxes at the core of Rousseau’s understating and praise of virtue is that it increases the sentiment of existence of those who possess it. As I suggested in the preceding chapter, the core of our nature is our ability to feel the sentiment of our own existence, which natural man feels without being able to reflect on the experience, and which is obscured in manifold ways after the introduction of new, unnatural passions in society. The new, unnatural passions tend exhaust our strength and soften us, whereas the

³⁷⁹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 165.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 166; my emphasis.

strength and vigor that virtuous men possess help men to preserve or to recover some degree of men's natural sentiment of their existence. For this reason, while virtue may appear to be a mechanism that provides greater social harmony, the real reason Rousseau praises virtue is not simply for its moral effects but rather as an instrumental means for men and women to be able to feel more powerfully and keenly the pleasurable sentiment of their own individual existence. According to Rousseau, "It is less a question of keeping [Emile] from dying than of making him live. To live is not to breathe; it is to act; it is to make use of our organs, our senses, our faculties, of all the parts of ourselves which give us the sentiment of our existence. The man who has lived the most is not he who has counted the most years but he who has most felt life"³⁸¹ In this chapter, I will try to explain the paradox of how virtue, even when it is understood as a kind of overcoming or self-possession of our inclinations, can contribute to feeling life more fully and deeply.

In *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu had noted that whereas the ancients had spoken of virtue and attained impressive political results, the apparently petty moderns of today speak of nothing but commerce and industry. Yet as the book unfolded, Montesquieu revealed his unambiguous preference and praise for modern commercial regimes which dispense with virtue as much as possible over the ancient republics and the painful duties they preached. Rousseau too deploys a similar rhetoric, but in order to construct a new kind of respect for virtue on a new basis. Rousseau laments "these degraded times," and wonders "to what point of virtue humans can still attain?"³⁸² But Rousseau intends not so much to turn back the clock but to use resources that were

³⁸¹ Ibid., 167.

³⁸² Ibid., 176.

always there, but not fully understood, for new ends. One sign that Rousseau does not intend to turn back to the clock to the old model is his emphasis on humanity, and his insistence that men's "first duty" is to be humane, a largely painless duty seen from the perspective of the peaceful men of the state of nature.³⁸³ If it is our first duty, it is one that is not at all in tension with our original, unmarred inclinations. The challenge is to try to find way to unite social and moral life, which necessarily involves a kind of "denaturing" of our nature, as Rousseau understands it.

One of the problems with the old way of trying to make men virtuous was that men often had no interest in being virtuous, and so the effectual truth, as Machiavelli would say, was for men simply to be vicious to each other. For Rousseau as for Montesquieu, men are naturally self-interested beings who chafe against rules and laws that they had no hand in creating or perceive to go against their own interest or advantage. Former attempts to induce men to be moral often failed because, "Always sermonizers, always moralists, always pedants, for one idea you give them, believing it to be good, you give them at the same time twenty that are worthless."³⁸⁴ And, as we have seen, according to Rousseau our first duties are to ourselves, that is, to our own self-preservation and well-being. Preaching irrational duties to children leads them to love vice because what is demanded of them is either painful or simply annoying, like listening to boring sermons or mumbling meaningless prayers as quickly as possible, just to get them over with. Vice is not intrinsic to children's souls but is introduced into them

³⁸³ Ibid., 209. An exception to this is that it pains Emile to some degree to leave Sophie in order to be humane and adhere to his duties.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 229.

by failing to give children an interest in doing what they ought.³⁸⁵ Yet Rousseau maintains a sharp distinction throughout the book between the amorality of the state of nature, and the morality, whose content at this point remains necessarily ambiguous, of social and moral men, which Emile will become a part of once he enters the social and moral world. A major difficulty from the point of natural men is that morality necessarily destroys our natural freedom in the strict sense: “Promises to do or to forbear are conventional acts which depart from the state of nature, and impair freedom.”³⁸⁶ A child, like a natural man, is completely incapable of conceiving what a duty is, and why it might be necessary or good for him.³⁸⁷ The reason that the natural man is so far from virtue, according to Rousseau, has to do with an unnatural self-denial and even in some cases a “disposal of life” of virtuous men. Throughout *Emile*, Rousseau rarely explicitly describes virtue in such a negative light, which echoes Montesquieu’s portrayal of the virtuous monks who love their painful order more than their own inclinations and even the honor-loving nobles who sacrificed their lives in a monarchy for everlasting (so they believed) glory. Such an image cannot but help disgust us to some degree with the painful unnaturalness of virtue. It may turn out that there is at bottom an unbridgeable gap between natural goodness and the painful demands of virtue and morality, yet the task of Emile’s education is to see if this tension can be overcome or at least possibly relaxed.

Although Rousseau never explicitly names who such people may be, he praises “the happy people” “among whom one can be good without effort and just without

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 227.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 236.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 304.

virtue.”³⁸⁸ In this account at least, it seems as if virtue can be dispensed with under ideal social circumstances. Yet not long after this statement Rousseau suggests that social life as such, or real social life outside Rousseau’s imagination, requires painful work, we necessarily have duties to others due to our necessary dependence that we have on each other in society: we owe something simply by being genuine members of a community. Instead of praising a possibly imaginary people who can remain natural good and independent without needing to have any painful duties that they must fulfill, Rousseau’s characterization of society here resembles his condemnation of society in *The Second Discourse*, in which society destroys men’s natural freedom and equality and enslaves them in enervating dependence on others. Whereas in the amoral state of nature every man can live as he pleases independently of the wills of others, “in society, where [a man] necessarily lives at the expense of others, he owes [society] the price of his keep in work. This is without exception. To work is therefore an indispensable duty for social man. Rich or poor, powerful or weak, every idle citizen is a rascal.”³⁸⁹ No man, or at least no social man, in this presentation, at least, is exempt from sometimes painful duties, and this necessarily includes Emile. Rather than being a dreamer who lives as much as possible in his imagination, the imaginary Emile is “a savage made to inhabit cities,” who “will live, if not like [other men], at least with them.”³⁹⁰ Emile will then be “made,” that is artificial denaturing will be necessary, and his passions will be directed in such a way

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 342.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 344.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 355-56.

that his inclinations and duties may coincide so as to reduce the painful nature of duties.³⁹¹

As we recall from *The Second Discourse*, according to Rousseau what distinguishes men from other animals is their capacity to be free agents, that is, their ability to choose to follow or resist, with varying degrees of strength, their inclinations. This, I suggested, constitutes a new kind of freedom that is different from the natural freedom of following (freely) natural necessity. From the point of view of this new kind of moral freedom, one can only be truly free by possessing some degree of virtue, by being able to conquer and control or direct one's own inclinations. In teaching Emile about this freedom, Rousseau goes so far as to say prior to his entering the moral world—that is, through the first three books when Emile most resembles an independent man in the state of nature—Emile, was only “apparently” free and had only the “precarious freedom of a slave to whom nothing is commanded.”³⁹² From this view, moral self-possession and freely following one's self-made commands constitutes genuine freedom, as opposed to the slave-like freedom of freely following natural necessity. From the moral perspective Emile is more free than was when he was in something like the state of nature, because he has activate a faculty that allows him to control and order his natural inclinations, even if he loses his simply natural freedom once he forms attachments with others in society. This teaching in some ways resembles the ancient teaching in which

³⁹¹ As Bloom notes, “*Emile* is the canvas on which Rousseau tried to paint all of the soul's acquired passions and learning articulated in such a way as to cohere with man's natural wholeness. It is a *Phenomenology of the Mind* posing as Dr. Spock.” See Allan Bloom, “The Education of Democratic Man: *Emile*,” in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Critical Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers*, ed. John T. Scott (London: Routledge, 2006), 89.

³⁹² Rousseau, *Emile*, 633.

higher parts of our soul like reason and spiritedness ought rightly to rule our base passions. Yet Rousseau's teaching on this point is not as critical toward the passions as the ancient teaching was and even makes use of the passions in activating and directing this faculty of moral freedom. The passions are paradoxically put in service of overcoming the passions, and control them in the service of or even in the hope of satisfying greater passions in the future. According to Rousseau, we cannot help but experience powerful passions since they are intrinsic to our nature, and the power and seduction of the passions necessarily increase in society when we are passionately attracted to different objects. These passions are not immoral in themselves, since we cannot help but feel them. But they tend to draw our passions out of our natural, individual or solitary state and weaken us apparently satisfying them. What makes us moral, according to Rousseau, is our ability to conquer our affections, thereby preserving ourselves at bottom: "All the sentiments we dominate are legitimate, all those which dominate us are criminal. A man is not guilty for loving another's wife if he keeps this unhappy passion enslaved to the law of duty. He is guilty for loving his own wife to the point of sacrificing everything to that love."³⁹³ Rousseau criticizes here the harshness of the biblical injunction against loving another's wife (in one's heart), as long as men honor the "law of duty," presumably to one's own wife. Yet Rousseau also criticizes sacrificing one's own inclinations in the service of loving one's own wife. Men presumably have duties to their wives, but even here it is illegitimate to love them at the expense of "everything," presumably by sacrificing completely one's nature. Emile's marriage, as will be seen below, is to be seen in the light of how his love or devotion is related to his

³⁹³ Rousseau, *Emile*, 636.

inclinations and the degree to which he is capable of sacrifice, and for whom. Or, possibly, can we love without sacrificing anything of ourselves? From this point of view, virtuous self-overcoming is seen in the service of our own well-being, and being a means to preserve our own individual nature and well-being in society. The goal, then, is not so much to overcome our passions because they are evil or sinful, or prevent us from seeking the perfection of our nature, but in order to help Emile preserve his nature and natural strength within society, amidst new, often artificial passions. This strength will allow him to “restrain [his] heart within the limits of his condition,” and have his faculties and desires be in proportion.³⁹⁴

Where, then, ultimately, does this psychic strength come from and what is the motivation behind it, either from the perspective of Emile or his tutor? As it happens, much of Emile’s early education—his pre-moral natural education—is spent precisely in building up the strength, physical and ultimately psychological, that will allow him to possess virtue—understood as the strength to be in control of one’s passions—a term whose true content he never learns of until near the very of the book. It is to that preparatory education and training that I now turn.

7.2 EMILE’S EDUCATION IN NATURAL STRENGTH

As I have just suggested, Emile’s slowly unfolding education in the true content of virtue is long in the making, and the seeds of this education are planted very early on in the book. This section, then, will consider what I will call’s Emile’s education in or

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 634.

toward natural strength, which will provide him with the ability to be able to exercise the kind of virtue or psychological strength or soul that it will be necessary for him to possess once he enters the moral world. In Rousseau's presentation, strength is a necessity for living that we completely lack at birth: "We are born weak, we need strength."

Everything we lack at birth and which we need, moreover, is given to us by education, and therefore we need an education in strength to be able to acquire the things that we need. Rousseau divides education into three kinds: that of nature, of men, and of things. The internal development of our faculties and organs is the education of nature, the use we make of this development is the education of men, and what we acquire by our experience of the things that affect us is the education of things.³⁹⁵ What is striking about this list is the omission of any education in our moral duties to anyone beside ourselves.

The focus is completely on ourselves: first, on one's physical body, second, the use we can put it to for own advantage, and finally, the education of those things *outside* of us that affect us individually. There is no indication of being taught to do what we morally ought to do, or to sacrifice one's own good for an apparently greater future good.

Moreover, there is no talk of a soul that we naturally possess, or a second substance in addition to one's natural material body, which must be educated to overcome one's bodily inclinations. The traditional view, of ancient philosophy and tradition religion, was that what needed to be known and educated was the soul, a being thought to be separate from the body which we possess at some early yet possibly indeterminate point in our existence, and which is capable of commanding the body and understanding nature as a whole and even possibly the divine. While Rousseau speaks of an apparent soul and

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 162.

particularly strength of soul when describing what a moral man need to be in control of with regard to his inclinations, it is not clear that Rousseau thinks there such a substance as the soul, at least in the core and beginning of our natures. And in any case what is more important to education or train, at least particularly in Emile's early education, is his body. If there is a soul, it is more important to educate the body before the soul (if it emerges later), in opposition to the classical teaching in *The Republic*, where the soul is educated before the body. And in any case, Rousseau seems to suggest that the stronger Emile is physically and later mentally, and if his passions are ordered in the right way, the less need will he have to overcome his inclinations: his inclinations will control his inclinations, as it were, and he will preserve natural wholeness in society to the degree that this is possible. Emile will be less susceptible to the kind of dividedness of soul or mind that plague the vast majority of social men, which Rousseau thinks is one of the greatest sources of the misery of social men.³⁹⁶

At the beginning of *The Second Discourse*, Rousseau paradoxically compared the physical strength of natural men with the strength of soul and toughness to be found in ancient republics like Sparta. Like the virtuous Spartans who are hardened through the compulsion of artificial institutions, nature exercises men and naturally strengthens them.

³⁹⁶ Melzer lucidly suggests that in "becoming 'a moral being' [a social man like Emile] shifts the ground of his existence. He sheds his former, natural self based on what he feels and desires, and relocates his new, moral self, based on what he respects and wills. And on this new moral plane he is able to create and enforce a coherent self, a unified existence, despite the permanent conflict of his desires," Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, 103-104. Melzer emphasizes and is surely correct about the element of struggle involved in moral virtue. However, I do not think he pays close enough attention to the ways in which Rousseau tried to reduce this struggle and pain in Emile. I think Emile's natural strength contributes to his eventual strong will, and his passions are ordered in such a way that the struggle and pain that Emile might experience are minimal, even if he is in principle capable of conquering and controlling his passions more than most men.

As Rousseau says “Observe nature and follow the path it maps out for you. It exercises children constantly, it hardens their temperament by tests of all sorts, it teaches them early what effort and pain are.”³⁹⁷ Rather than follow an artificial regimen to compel men to love the common good, however much this love may be cultivated by appeals to self-interest (through honor or desire for glory, for example), Rousseau proposes to follow example of nature, that is, the example of natural inclinations and natural necessity outside of artificial conventions. And the result, according to Rousseau, will be that Emile will be just as physically strong, if not physically stronger, than the Spartans, without the artificial education that took them so far from nature. Rather than teaching the soul to overcome the supposedly base inclinations of the body, nature teaches children’s bodies effort and pain—a lesson in submission to necessity that Emile will continue to learn—and thereby compels them to strengthen their bodies. And Rousseau indicates the far-reaching consequences of this natural education in strengthening the body. It is necessary to “harden [children’s] bodies against the intemperance of season, climates, elements, against hunger, thirst, fatigue.” Yet the point of doing so is not simply to strengthen their bodies but in order to “exercise them...against the attacks that they will one day have to bear.”³⁹⁸ While this reference to future attacks is unclear at this point, it foreshadows Rousseau’s teaching to Emile about the content of virtue in Book 5. The development and training in Emile’s strength now will contribute directly to the kind of strength of soul that he will possess in Book 5, when he will be in command of his passions and able to withstand the “attacks” on his passions that he may undergo.

³⁹⁷ Rousseau, *Emile*, 172.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

According to Rousseau, there is a direct connection between an unnatural weakness of body and the weakness of soul of social men who are faced with a barrage of unnatural passions. In his view, while intemperance “excites the passions,” in the long run to also depletes the strength of men’s bodies. Yet while the traditional method was to educate the soul to control men’s lower bodily passions, Rousseau suggests paradoxically that training men to possess the natural strength and vigor of men in the state of nature can serve as a mean—the most effective means—to keep men’s passions moderate in society. Yet natural men had no conception of moderation and no need, morally, to be moderate. They simply followed their inclinations without trying to conform to a standard of moderation within a moral order. While an education in natural strength can help to contribute to moderation, its ultimate goal is to preserve the vigor of natural men in society to the extent that this possible. Yet with the unleashing of powerful “sensual passions” in society, it seems inevitable that men will lose to some degree their natural vigor. What is particularly striking, however, is that Rousseau suggests that extreme asceticism also leads to weakness of body: “mortifications and fasts also wear out men’s bodies.” On the one hand, then, satisfying one’s sexual passions frequently and thus unnaturally weakens the body, while on the other hand monk-like self-repression also produces weakness of body. In sum, while Rousseau agrees with Montesquieu as to the unnaturalness of self-repression of monks, he fears the loss of vigor of social men who satisfy their sensual desires too frequently, which Montesquieu does not fear, or at least fear very much (Montesquieu suggests that the men of southern climates are more susceptible to despotism, a suggestion I consider above in chapter four).

Rousseau also suggest a contrast between the calm passions of the state of nature, which are equivalent to moderate passions from the point of view of moral men, and the “inflamed” passions in society. In the state of nature men and women quickly and easily satisfied their sensual desires and there were no exaggerated longings for unattainable sensual objects (and therefore no love or distinctions and preferences for certain sexual partners). Men’s unnaturally “inflamed” passions arise not through any moral fault of their own (for instance, through original sin), but through the desire to possess more than they are able to possess. There is a disproportion between their exaggerated desires for many beautiful objects that might satisfy their fundamentally quickly and easily satiable sexual faculties, and their ability to satisfy those exaggerated desires. The inability to satisfy our desires causes our passions to be unnaturally inflamed and over time depletes our natural strength. One could also make the observation that due to men’s limited faculties, objects that are unable to be possessed by social men weaken them either by inflaming their imaginations beyond their faculties for possessing them, or, once possessed, by failing to live up to what was hoped for in their imagination, thereby disappointment about the objects of their desires. In both cases, there is a disproportion between what men desire and what they are able to satisfy, a disproportion that does not exist for natural men.

As we recall from *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu thinks that there is a relation between northern climates and an ability for independence and self-rule, and southern and warmer climates, which inflame and prematurely exhaust men’s passions, thereby weakening their natural vigor and rendering them susceptible to despotism. And it is hard not to notice some similarities in Emile’s education in natural strength and

Montesquieu's description of some of the characteristics of the vigorous men capable of self-rule. At birth, according to Rousseau, children's skin is soft and weak, and the temperature of the air profoundly affects them throughout their whole life. One of Rousseau's goals is to train Emile's to be able to bear all climates with ease and equanimity, and this is done by gradually accustoming him to being able to bear different temperatures' climactic conditions. One way to do this is to adjust the temperature of the water in which Emile bathes: "Diminish by degrees the warmth of the water, until at the end you wash them summer and winter in cold and freezing water."³⁹⁹ Rousseau seems to respond directly to Montesquieu's analysis of and emphasis on strengthening the skin's fibers to bear various temperatures when he write, "Make the texture of the fibers more flexible and able to adapt to various degrees of heat and cold without effort and without risk."⁴⁰⁰ The goal is to train and preserve Emile's natural strength while also keeping "his soul idle for as long as possible."⁴⁰¹ The soul, with its strictly speaking unnatural capability to reflect on oneself and one's relations to others and one's place in the whole of nature take us out of ourselves. While a strong body may lead to or strongly contribute, at least in principle, to a strong soul or mind, the goal, at least at this early stage, is to contain Emile in a natural or at least quasi-natural state for as long as possible.

Emile's education in natural strength when he is young is focused not on making him virtuous or good for others, but on preserving his natural goodness for himself, and developing his faculties so that he will be as powerful enough to take care of himself as independent from other human beings as possible. And while the long-term goals is for

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 187-88.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 188.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 227.

Emile to live in a society where there are duties he must fulfill—to which he consents—Rousseau denies that duties are natural, that a child can perceive their necessity or utility, or that duties can ever be effective without some kind of motive rooted in self-interest. For this reason it is necessary that Emile “always has a present and palpable interest in fulfilling his commitments.”⁴⁰² Yet a difficulty with basing morality on natural self-interest is that “He who keeps his promise for profit is hardly more bound than if he had promised nothing.”⁴⁰³ One might be able to induce someone to commit to a duty, but Rousseau suggests that basing morality solely on self-interest will not be effective, since free and self-interested beings will always be on the lookout for the next most appealing thing that appeals to their self-interest, and which may be in tension with the duty they formerly promised to fulfill. On the one hand we are naturally free and self-interested beings and any morality that ignores self-interests is bound to be ineffective. On the other hand, basing morality solely on self-interest alone will also be ineffective, since self-interested beings constantly and necessarily pursue their advantage, potentially at the expense of their duties. This difficulty has enormous consequences, since, as Rousseau says, “It is here that man begins to set himself in contradiction to himself.”⁴⁰⁴ It is here that our inclinations and our duties tend to diverge. This obstacle is a difficulty that Emile’s education will attempt to overcome, so that he will have an interest in fulfilling his duties to the extent that this is possible, and so that he will not have an interest in shirking his duties. And the development of Emile’s strength to make him as independent as possible contributes to Emile having to make, at least in principle, as few cumbersome

⁴⁰² Ibid., 233.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 234-35.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 235.

commitments to duty as possible, so that he will also have as little interest in breaking his promises as possible.

One of the shortcomings of attempts to make men moral in the traditional sense is that, according to Rousseau, it is intrinsically contradictory. *Every* man necessarily pursues his own conception of the good, even the wicked man who makes others miserable in the pursuit of his own good. Rousseau then introduces “the only lesson appropriate and the most important for every age”: do good for oneself while never harming another. What is strange, at least at first glance, is that Rousseau presents, here at least, “the most sublime virtues, which consist of doing good for oneself while harming no one” as “extremely difficult” since they lack “ostentation” and the self-congratulatory pleasure of sensing that we please others. Yet these “virtues” are difficult for social because if we really possessed them, they require us to abandon social pleasures associated with the artificial passion of *amour-propre*. At bottom, from the perspective of the natural man, these virtues are not very difficult at all, since he pursues his own good with as little need for others and their opinions as possible, and thus without an interest in harming them. It is for this reason that this principle of morality or “virtue,” is at bottom “negative.” While it may be difficult for social for men to fulfill, since it requires painful liberation from unnatural yet addictive passions, it follow from Emile’s natural inclinations, properly preserved, to do good for himself while having as little interest in harming others as possible.

One of the mechanisms for developing Emile’s strength is by appealing, against tradition, to his sense of pleasure, and in particular, at least early in his education, to the pleasures of taste. And one notable way that Rousseau does this is by leading Emile by a

passion appropriate for his young age: the passion for food, or gluttony. Rousseau's focus on the term "gluttony" is important because it is the same term used for an infamous Christian sin. Whereas the traditional view is that one will be damned for indulging in this or any forbidden act, Rousseau suggests that children are naturally driven, without being able by nature to stop themselves, to eat a lot of pleasurable food to help them grow, again according to nature. In claiming that gluttony is a natural passion, Rousseau then continues his attack on the notion that there is any sin or evil intrinsic to the human heart. Moreover, Rousseau suggests that what moves children is not any motive in their soul or spirit to pursue some higher end, but mere bodily preservation. In feeding their bodies with pleasant food children are unknowingly contributing, as if by natural instinct, to their self-preservation. Because gluttony is the major passion of childhood, it is then possible to "lead children by their mouths."⁴⁰⁵ Throughout Emile's education Emile is drawn toward various goals set up by his tutor that at bottom can be traced to some kind of physical appetite. To preserve Emile's natural freedom as much as possible Rousseau uses his natural appetites rather than moving him "by force," as a despot would, and as many conventional educations tend to do.⁴⁰⁶ The traditional view is that men, naturally possessing souls, have something within them that ineluctably tends toward the perfection of their nature, to the extent that they are able to do so. Rousseau denies that there is any "higher" motivation to the perfection of our nature, and to the extent that our nature does develop, the motives for developing if not perfecting our nature can be traced back in some way to the desire for self-preservation, or *amour de soi*. In Rousseau's

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 295.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 270.

view, what really pleases us and motivated us is physical pleasure, connected to self-preservation and not a kind of erotic longing for eternity or a desire for holiness or righteousness. Even when Emile's body does develop strength and become capable of virtue, his motive is always still pleasure, if a more refined pleasure, and not painful self-sacrifice: "the hard life [Emile's life from the perspective of his early natural education], once turned into habit, multiplies agreeable sensations; the soft life prepares for an infinity of unpleasant ones"⁴⁰⁷ Rousseau suggests in a very powerful image that with the aid of plain and pleasant tasting food, "armies of children can be led to the ends of the earth."⁴⁰⁸ This image must be borne in mind and compared to a later, similarly powerful image that illustrates another motive appropriate for a later stage in Emile's education.

If the first three books constitute Emile's natural education, including, as I have tried to show, Emile's education in natural strength, the end of Book 3 provides Rousseau an opportunity to show that Emile's virtue, at least up to this point, is completely "for himself." At this point he resembles the perfectly free and independent man in the state of nature, and Rousseau compares Emile's perspective to that of Robinson Crusoe living on an island, a perspective, moreover, which he will never abandon for his whole life. This is to say that Emile's virtue will always be to some degree and even primarily for himself, and while he may be to some degree for others in the moral world, his primary concern will always be for himself. To the extent that he does good for others he will also do good for himself, or at least "feel" a pleasurable sentiment that he is doing good for himself. He will never completely sacrifice his own good for the good of others, even for those he

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 269. Compare Julie's teaching on "refined Epicureanism" in Rousseau's *Julie*.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 297.

loves, as will be explored below. At this point, then, Emile is ready to enter the moral world and both feel and understand its relations, and at the end of Book 3 Emile has “all [the virtue] that relates to himself,” that is, the physical and mental abilities to provide for his own self-preservation and the ability to attain all that is useful for him.

An enormous shift, however, is about to take place. From Emile’s natural condition of looking out only for himself and his own advantage or utility, and looking to others with almost complete indifference—Emile will regard his sister as his watch (end Book 3)—Emile is about to learn to extend his relations, needs, and thereby his dependence on others (all unnatural things from the perspective of the natural man) and to feel first the sentiments, and then the “notions,” of good and evil, which “truly constitute Emile as a [moral] man.”⁴⁰⁹ The pleasurable sentiment of Emile’s connections with others will provide the basis on which Emile’s virtue in the moral sense will emerge. According to Rousseau, these sentiments, although they are strictly speaking unnatural—they awaken unnatural feelings of preference (they are rooted in *amour-propre*) and duties (rooted in the demand potentially to sacrifice part of our inclinations to the good of others or to the common good)—will contribute to transforming Emile from a natural man to a moral man. And because these new and unnatural ties are rooted in Emile’s newly emerging sentiments or passions, they must be made as pleasurable and attractive as possible, to cohere with his natural self-interest. Yet while Emile has not been pedantically taught to do good for others at his own expense, Rousseau’s intention seems to be to develop Emile’s body and mind to be as strong as possible, thereby making capable of feeling to a greater degree the pleasurable sentiment of existence, which will

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 371.

now be extended outside of himself toward other individual human beings, thereby engendering unnatural attachments and dependence. The challenge will then be to preserve or augment Emile's sentiment of his own existence even as he becomes denatured in the moral world in various ways.

Yet even as Rousseau hints at a path forward for Emile that will give him healthy or wholesome moral tastes and thereby denature him in a healthy or positive way, Rousseau points out ominously that morality not only takes Emile out of his natural state, but even that healthy morality which Emile is being directed toward is only a stopgap on the road to ultimate disorder and corruption, both natural and moral. The development of Emile's strength in body and mind is intended as a means to prevent for as long as possible this necessary corruption. And it is by means of new sentiments that extend Emile outside of himself that his affections and notions (or opinions) about morality will take their form. It is then to the development of Emile's sentiments, especially the sentiment of love, that I will now turn. As I will try to argue, it is by combining Emile's education in natural strength and self-sufficiency with an education in love and devotion to others (at least to one other), that Emile will become the moral being that Rousseau intends, possessing or capable of virtue. Yet as I will also try to show, Rousseau's goal is more to preserve or augment Emile's natural passions or sentiments, especially the sentiment of existence, within society and the moral order, than to make Emile moral or good for others simply.⁴¹⁰

⁴¹⁰ Cooper is correct in arguing that the ultimate goal for Emile is not happiness or virtue simply, but the maximization of the sentiment of existence. Laurence Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life* (University Park, PA: Penn State University

7.3 ROMANTIC LOVE AND VIRTUE

As we have seen, at the end of Book 3, Emile is presented as a free and independent natural man, possessing the rational faculties for taking care of himself solely, and he has no moral ties—and thus no moral obligations or duties to others. He is like Robinson Crusoe, free to roam, explore, and discover his place on his “island” and discover what is useful for him to know. Yet as we recall from Book 1, the long-term goal or experiment regarding Emile’s education has to do with examining what an independent natural man, as Emile is at the end of Book 3, might be for others. In proceeding with this experiment, Emile is introduced in Book 4 to the moral world of his conventional relations to other man—and women. In this way we can see precisely in what way and to what degree Emile’s passions might be directed for both his good and the good of others, while having this moral goodness be in little tension with his own good as possible. And as we soon discover, at the heart of this project is Rousseau’s contriving for Emile to fall in love—first, with an imaginary object of “perfection,” and next with a decent and wholesome female who Emile is persuaded by Rousseau to believe corresponds to the object in his imagination that Rousseau had carefully cultivated. The success of this project, I think, involves Emile’s prior natural education in virtue, or physical and psychological strength, which prepare him to be a moral being

Press, 2006), 12. However, I think Cooper is wrong by perhaps unwittingly revising his opinion by later writing, “Rousseau’s primary concern is the moral stature of human beings,” *Ibid.*, 26. I think we would be on sounder ground in thinking that Rousseau’s ultimate goal has more to do with the preservation or recovery (if by artificial means, if necessary) of nature and the sentiment of existence. Rousseau is on the whole less preoccupied with moral virtue as such that Cooper seems to think he is. This is to say that Rousseau’s understanding of virtue and morality are problematic in more ways that Cooper seems to think they are. Morality is always more conventional and ultimately contradictory for Rousseau than Cooper seems to think.

capable of the kind of moral strength needed for virtue, at least in Rousseau's understanding of the true nature of virtue rooted in strength. As I will try to show, however, Emile's attachment to his future moral duties, to his family and any communities he may consent to join, are rooted in his falling in love, and having his moral sentiments awakened first by a psychological image of perfection and then with a real woman. If, as Rousseau suggests, our sentiments and notions of morality are rooted in affections for others, Emile's sentiments must be awakened and directed toward other human beings, and the most visible and important attachment, according to Rousseau, is the sentiments of attachment and preference between the sexes, which corresponds to the natural or quasi-natural basis of the family, which in turn is the source of men's broader attachments to their communities. As we will see, Emile's attachment to and ability to possess moral virtue is significantly different from Montesquieu's self-repressing Spartans and monks. He will not hope for recompense for virtue in an afterlife, but he will fulfill his moral duties because of this-worldly satisfactions by being in love with and devoted to a real, flesh-and-blood woman. Emile will then taste "the sweetest sentiments known to man" and, at least temporarily, live with a family in a situation that resembles that which was according to Rousseau in *The Second Discourse* the most appropriate to humankind.⁴¹¹ From this perspective then, Emile will not be trained like a Spartan or a monk, but will have his sentiments directed toward a domestic life where there will be as little a tension between his inclinations and his duties as possible. Emile will then be seen to shift from men's original natural state to at least what is apparently the best possible kind of social and moral life, in his family. As I will also try to show

⁴¹¹ Rousseau, *The Second Discourse*, 35.

throughout my remaining chapters, however, there always remains some tension between Emile as a strictly natural man of the first 3 books, and Emile as a social and moral man of books 4 and 5. Rousseau's suggestions, however, that society always gives rise to competing (and ultimately weak and needy) wills and moral corruption may prove to be true, even in Emile's case. I think Rousseau intends to show to what degree it is possible to minimize the tension between natural inclinations and social duties, as Montesquieu thinks it is possible to do in the commercial republic, but I think Rousseau intends to show that this goal is ultimately unattainable.

Near the beginning of the book, before Emile's education has even begun, Rousseau strongly praises family life in much the same way that he praises a long past and unlikely to return state of healthy family relations in his hypothetical history of mankind. Indeed, even here he presents ideal family life to be probably chimerical. In our current corrupt state, natural sentiments of family life have been almost completely stifled by "bad morals." And at least on the surface, he exaggerates the case with which a return to old-fashioned good morals might be brought about. As he says, "But let mothers deign to nurse their children, morals will reform themselves, nature's sentiments will be awakened in every heart, the state will be repopled. This first point, this point alone, will bring everything back together."⁴¹² He thus wavers, at least on the surface, between an idealistic future that may be brought about with singular and therefore unbelievable simplicity, and even a kind of apparent revolutionary conservatism: we need to be "brought back" to a time when healthy morals reigned. At least at this early stage in his presentation, Rousseau intends to make domestic life appear as pleasant attractive as

⁴¹² Rousseau, *Emile*, 171.

possible. However, he subtly inserts the term “counterpoison” to describe healthy domestic life as compared to the corrupt situation in which we now find ourselves. This suggests that domestic life may not be the best state or way of life simply, but preferable to a situation in which corrupt morals reign. In any case, he conflates what is natural with what is morally healthy or praiseworthy: from the moral reform of women once again nursing their children “would soon return a general reform, nature would soon have reclaimed all its rights.” There is then apparently some natural basis for directing our natural sentiments toward healthy morals in domestic life. Yet Emile as a natural man must still be kept in mind, as opposed to Emile as a natural man made to live in society. For instance, Rousseau apparently deplores the unhealthy situations in which “fathers, mothers, children, brothers, or sisters...hardly know each other” and thus cannot love one another or have any ties of affection for each other.⁴¹³ Yet even the apparently natural state of the family is profoundly different from Emile’s state at the end of Book 3—when he is arguably at his most natural strictly speaking—where he “regards his sister as his watch” (Book 3, towards the end). In any case, Rousseau’s goal in Books 4 and 5 is to bring about at least in the reader’s imagination, the healthy and pleasant sentiments that Rousseau depicts in an ideal domestic life in Book 1, which is somehow but not completely natural.

At any rate, Rousseau makes it clear that if naturally individual men directed for themselves can become moral or good for others, it is only on the basis of family attachments. Every kind of political society depends on the sentiments of devotion for others, and the family provides a kind of blueprint for larger societies. Domestic

⁴¹³ Ibid.

sentiments of affection provide the basis for sentiments directed toward a state, even if the affections of the family are apparently more natural than the affections of the state, as the image of the Spartan mother who cared more for victory in battle than for the survival of her sons illustrated.

If Rousseau's praise of the family and hope for its regeneration in Book 1 is brief and allusive, Rousseau portrays the movement from Emile's position in his natural state (on a kind of island from which he may never leave) to the moral world with painstaking subtlety. As Rousseau presents it, in entering the moral world Emile begins to extend himself "outside" of himself and live outside of himself in the light of others, and ultimately develops "sentiments of love and hate."⁴¹⁴ It is in these early affections, according to Rousseau, that the notions of justice and goodness arise. Against the classics, Rousseau thinks that the ideas of justice and goodness are not "abstract words" and "pure moral beings formed by the understanding" but rather an "ordered development of our primitive affections." If Emile will then be good for others, it will be then by ordering his affections towards others, and thus developing his ability to love. He will be interested in the virtue necessary to be good to others, even at the expense of sacrificing some of his inclinations, because he will feel love other human beings to whom he is attached and for whom he cares. Pleasurable sentiments are the means by which human beings can attach themselves to each other in communities, because these sentiments literally feel good, and induce us to be devoted to others. Emile will then not fall in love with abstract notions of justice and morality, good and evil—much less have false opinions about their content, like most social men—but will be capable of loving, in

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 388.

particular, as we will see, one woman. Before Emile begins to fall in love, however, Emile enters the moral world and extends his being outside of himself.

While the best way, according to Rousseau, is for women to nurse their children and for domestic life to attract men and women by the pleasurable sentiments found within a home, Emile's sentiments are developed in a different order. Since Emile is an orphan, he does not grow up with domestic affections, but begins to develop interests and thereby affections for others through a kind of curiosity that he has developed during his earlier natural education. According to Rousseau, Emile develops an interest in his fellows, but this interest is not love or any kind of deep affection for them, but rather a kind of detached interest in them. But it is nonetheless a kind of benevolent or compassionate interest in what can contribute to their happiness. As Rousseau says, "Since he takes so much interest in his fellows," it is impossible that he not learn early to weigh and appraise their actions, their taste, and their pleasures, and to evaluate what can contribute to or detract from men's happiness more accurately than can those who are interested in no one and never do anything for others," for instance Emile at the end of Book 3.⁴¹⁵ In Emile's case, then, his affections for others begin not with his relationship with his mother but with a kind of benevolent concern for justice for a generalized common good: he wants to know if and in what way all men, himself included, might be happy, if this is possible. And since his sole moral lesson from the first 3 books is to do good for himself which doing the least harm to others, he has no motive to harm others, nor, for that matter, to prefer the interest of others to his own. At this point, however, it is important to note Rousseau's sharp distinction between Emile and others. Emile takes an

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 409.

interest in others, but it is still from afar, so to speak. He is not a member of a particular political community, and his affections are for humanity in the abstract, for the good of humans as such, with regard to how they might form healthy ties. The men in whom he takes an interest are nameless and faceless, a far cry from the way most men experience their affections for other, particular human beings, who we love because they are our own.

In directing Emile's newly awakened affections, in particular his new interest and desire for women, Rousseau appears at least to have a traditional goal in mind: to interest in Emile's chastity and give him a distaste in libertinism. Yet if the traditional aim of ruling the passions involved repressing the passions (as Montesquieu's Spartans and monks did), Rousseau makes use of the passions, even and especially the "base" passions to make chastity desirable if Emile is given a taste for desiring and loving one woman to the exclusion of all other women.⁴¹⁶ The traditional method was ineffective because it tried to reduce the force of powerful passions or even destroy them, and as Rousseau suggests, these passions cannot be destroyed, at least in healthy human beings. But they can be led and directed in such a way that their naturalness is given its due, and they can be enjoyed, not only in a distant future that promises us or gives us hope for happiness, but in every moment in which we are alive. As Rousseau says, "Far from combatting the inclinations of his age, I shall consult them in order to direct them."⁴¹⁷ And it is Emile's early education in natural strength that makes him capable of Rousseau's plans for him,

⁴¹⁶ Schwartz provides a thought-provoking account of Rousseau's analysis of sexuality, especially in relation to Freud. Joel Schwartz, *Rousseau and Freud on Sexuality and its Discontents*, in *The Legacy of Rousseau*, ed. Clifford Orwin and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 87-109.

⁴¹⁷ Rousseau, *Emile*, 496.

since a strong body and mind is the precondition of a strong soul and will, capable both of loving one particular person deeply, and having one's will do what it ought, even at the expense of one's inclinations. As Rousseau says, "It is only our lukewarm will which causes all of our weakness, and we are always strong enough to do what we strongly wish."⁴¹⁸ While the traditional goal of perfecting nature was partly to rule the base passions, in Emile's case his passions provide the motor, so to speak, for the project of possessing virtue and being devoted to a beloved, and thereby being in principle capable of being good for others. Emile will be good for others, in particular for one woman, which will form the basis for his moral ties, because he desires doing good for himself, in particular by enjoying without ever completely exhausting his passions. Emile will not be chaste because it is intrinsically desirable to delay or destroy his passions, but he will be given a taste for it because it procures other desirable goods that he sees are more directly and immediately desirable: "If, I say, one shows him clearly how the taste for chastity is connected with health, strength, courage, the virtues, love itself, and all the true goods of man, I maintain that one will then render this chastity desirable and clear to him and that his mind will be amenable to the means he will be given for preserving it, for so long as chastity is preserved, it is respected; it is only despised after having been lost."⁴¹⁹

Paradoxically, then, Rousseau develops in Emile a taste for chastity by contriving an image in his mind that will satisfy him, not now, or now in the way he may wish, but at an indefinite point in the future, and he will enjoy pursuing that image at every moment until that image appears to coincide with a real, flesh-and-blood woman. Indeed, as

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 494.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

Rousseau will later suggest, Emile will most likely enjoy his pursuit of this imaginary object more than he will enjoy possessing a real object. And as opposed to the traditional view according to which the passions must be resisted, Rousseau “shall not be afraid to indulge him in the sweetest sentiment for which he has such a thirst. I shall depict it to him as the supreme happiness of life, because in fact it is.”⁴²⁰ If Emile is persuaded, as indeed he will be, that a chaste love with a decent woman is “the supreme happiness of life,” he will in turn reject libertinism. Yet rather than reject libertinism on simply moralistic grounds—in fact, doesn’t libertinism resemble sexuality in the state of nature more than decent sexual mores?—Rousseau seeks to promote decent morality because it is the means by which Emile might be good for others, or at least one other. To be attached to and live for one woman, he must have an exclusive preference for one woman, which will fail to happen if one has fleeting sexual relations with many women. (I will develop this theme more in the following chapter on *amour-propre*.) If the classical view was to become moderate by having the soul overcome the supposedly base passions of the body, Rousseau suggests, “One has a hold on the passions *only* by means of the passions.” In this striking statement, at least, Rousseau suggests that there might not be a second substance—a soul—in addition to the body and which rules the body, but that physical passions are all that we feel and all we have to work with, in order to direct Emile’s passions: “It is always from nature itself that the proper instruments to regulate must be drawn.”⁴²¹

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 497.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

While throughout the first three books Rousseau has taken care to prevent the premature development of the imagination—which unnaturally takes us outside of ourselves and can create fantastic images in our minds that do not correspond to the natural, physical world—in the 4th and 5th books Rousseau gradually develops Emile’s imagination and depicts an image of a female that will attach Emile to virtue in the moral world. Whereas the classics in particular think that the two sexes are directed toward each in pursuit of a conception of a higher common good (e.g., Aristotle in the first book of *The Politics*), Rousseau thinks that while the sexes are physically attracted to each other, there is no enduring moral bond for staying together unless men and women are attached to each other by means of the psychological phenomenon of romantic love, which at bottom is artificial.⁴²² In leading Emile to love and thereby to virtue, Rousseau depicts an image of a kind of perfect female who is attractive because she possesses virtue, and he develops an artificial taste for a being that does not and cannot correspond to any real woman. Yet rather than being attached to this object of his imagination out of some intrinsic goodwill or love of virtue and morality in his soul, Emile is driven, it seems, more than anything by his nascent and powerful physical passions for the opposite sex, which up till now have never been consummated. In depicting a kind of perfect woman in Emile’s imagination, Rousseau makes Emile passionate in advance for decent women in general without knowing for whom in particular.

While Emile is unaware of it, at least during the stage of his education in which he is in pursuit of Sophie, Rousseau frankly tells the reader that love is, at bottom, mere a

⁴²² Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1252a.

“chimera, lie, and illusion.”⁴²³ The means by which Rousseau is going to attach Emile, a natural man who lives for himself, to other beings in the moral world and in particular to a natural woman, is by an artificial illusion, albeit an artificial illusion that powerfully acts on Emile’s passions. In the state of nature men and women are physically attached to each other only for a very brief period of time before separating, possibly never seeing each other again, never developing any preferences let alone love for each other. In attaching and attracting Emile to the moral world, Emile will be attached to one woman because he will be persuaded to believe that one woman will correspond to what he believes in an image of perfection but which Rousseau, puncturing the illusion, admits is a pleasant illusion, which can never actually correspond to a real woman. While most human beings who have been in love know that it is an extremely powerful and in many ways a pleasant sensation, most of us do not separate what exists in our imagination from the actual object of or love, even if that person may disappoint us and even if the pleasure we taste in our imagination fluctuates over time. While Rousseau’s almost clinical dissection of love may seem to rob the experience of love of its charm and power, Rousseau seems to think that an objective and theoretical understanding love can allow us to enjoy its effect on us to the greatest degree that it can, both enjoying it while it lasts, while softening the blow of potential heartbreak by showing us that the object in our imagination was not real or lasting. As Rousseau suggests, what we think we love does not actually exist, and “If we saw what we love exactly as it is, there would be no more love on earth.”

⁴²³ Rousseau, *Emile*, 499.

In any case, while Emile is not given this lesson on the illusion of love, he will learn later on of the fragility of love that is a kind of supplement to this lesson. At this stage, then, Emile's passions are awakened and directed toward an imaginary being whom he believes promises him happiness. Whereas Spartans loved their city simply (albeit on a religious basis, with hope for the rewards of virtue in the afterlife; and likewise the monks loved their order with the hope of reward for their sacrifices in an afterlife), Emile hopes for a this-worldly reward for his virtue with a real woman. For Rousseau, then, romantic love and his hopes and rewards in a way can be seen to replace traditional religion. In any case, if Emile saw Sophie as she really is, he would be as fleetingly attached to her as the men and women in the state of nature were attached to each other.

Any female is in principle capable of satisfying Emile's newly awakened sensual desires, though Rousseau seems to think that if Emile is going to be good for others, he must desire an exclusive woman and desire to remain attached to that woman because he believes that she will be good for and attached to him. In desiring to be exclusively attached to and devoted to this individual woman, Rousseau suggests that Emile must see other "imperfect" or somehow corrupt women as inferior, and to see one particular woman as superior, even to other decent women. In developing Emile's love for this image, Emile will then think that his image will be able to satisfy him to a greater extent than other, real objects, which he observes and evaluates. Paradoxically, then, Rousseau attempts to repress Emile's senses by his imagination.⁴²⁴ While both Emile and the corrupt men and women of contemporary society are motivated by sensual desires, Emile

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 500.

is able to remain chaste and prevent the premature satisfaction (and potential exhaustion and boredom) of his desires, by being led by the hope of a future and greater satisfaction. However, while both the corrupt social men of society and the moral Emile are both to varying degrees unnatural, Emile is starting to become “denatured” in what Rousseau thinks is a positive way by means of romantic love and attachment to virtue. Emile then will resemble natural men more than the corrupt social men will since his desires are limited and easily satisfied, and even his attachment to virtue helps him to preserve or augment his sentiment of existence.

Occasionally, Rousseau appears to preach harsh duties, despite earlier proclaiming himself to be an enemy of duties and virtue, and rejecting and even mocking those who prescribe traditional duties and virtue ineffectively. Yet by seducing Emile by depicting an imaginary woman who is attached to virtue, Rousseau suggests that duties can be made attractive, and can be attractive because the reward for being attracted to virtue can be rooted in the desire to satisfy our physical passions. As Rousseau says, “After the age of twenty continence is a duty of morality; it is important to learn to rule oneself to remain the master of one’s appetites.”⁴²⁵ This statement resembles on the surface traditional views of the soul needing to rule over the unruly passions. While as we will see, some degree of virtuous strength of soul will be necessary for Emile to be attached to morality, what drives Emile in his ability to rule over his passions is not an opinion about the wickedness of his passions, but his passionate desire for Sophie. Continence is less painful when there is a reward for it or when virtue appears to reward us. Emile is moderate and continent by means of depicting to him an object of physical

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 505.

satisfaction. To the extent that Emile is in love with the image of Sophie the less will there be the necessity to remain master of his appetites, because his continence will flow from his inclinations to possess Sophie and only Sophie exclusively. His continence will demand little to no pain. If most social men are divided by their preference for pleasurable inclinations over painful duties, Emile will not experience this painful division, or at least feel it to a lesser degree, because his love of Sophie will incline him to want to do his duties for their sake, that is, for a common good on a small scale, between the two of them. And while it may seem at first and to some degree always remain true that Emile's desire for Sophie—both the image and the real woman—is rooted in the desire and hope for physical consummation, his attachment to her will also be rooted in the emergence and development of moral, familial sentiments, which Emile will find pleasurable. As Rousseau says, "How much tenderness and care is required to maintain the union of the whole family.... This must come not from virtues but from *tastes*, or else the human species would soon be extinguished."⁴²⁶ The desires formed by taste lead to virtuous dedication and devotion so that Emile and Sophie are virtuous or devoted to each other almost despite themselves.

If Rousseau chooses not to "preach" painful duties to Emile, it is surprising to learn that in the case of his future beloved, Sophie, she will be inculcated with what appear to be painful duties. As Rousseau say, "Women by nature have austere duties," and "It is important that she be modest, attentive, reserved, and that she give evidence of her virtue to the eyes of others as well as to her own conscience."⁴²⁷ Sophie has no

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 535; my emphasis.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 35-36.

natural education, or rather her natural education in virtue is extremely different from Emile's. The only education Sophie receives is a moral education, which requires belief in a religious compensation for her fulfilling her duties or "display of virtue." Sophie's education in this sense resembles the Spartan education in virtue, where fulfilling one's duties to one's family and city was supported by belief in divine rewards for virtue. Yet in investigating the true function of Sophie's virtue, the effectual results of her fulfilling her harsh duties have positive natural rewards and effects on Emile and Sophie: "When women because robust men become still more so[, whereas when] men get soft, women get even softer."⁴²⁸ The effect of Sophie's virtue is to preserve to some degree virtue understood as natural strength, thereby heightening the sentiment of her own existence. And her virtue is not entirely unpleasant. Sophie's education in virtue involves a false belief in the naturalness of the family and about the divine, but it is on the basis of this education that the quasi-natural sentiments of the family can emerge, which in turn can in principle be extended outside of the family to the artificial state. As Rousseau says, "There is a natural base on which to form natural ties," and the love of one's nearest is "the principle of the love one owes to the State."⁴²⁹ As we recall from *The Second Discourse* and the first three books of *Emile*, a natural man owes nothing to anyone, but once Emile becomes a part of a community he will necessarily have duties and obligations to others, to which he has consented. While these are bound at times to go against the grain of his inclinations, the best way to reduce the tension between his inclinations and duties is to make his duties seem as pleasurable as possible and to root

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 537.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

them in natural or quasi-natural sentiments. According to Rousseau, men's hearts can be attached to larger communities by means of love for "the small fatherland, which is the family."⁴³⁰ The good family member and the good citizen are of course very different from the naturally good man who is good only for himself. The naturally good man lives entirely within and for himself, whereas the family members and citizens live outside of themselves, with love for the common good of the community on the basis of natural or quasi-natural sentiments of affection for others. We ultimately want to be friends as opposed to enemies with those in our communities, and to do good for others because we have sentiments for others in the disparate communities to which we belong. As we recall from Emile's earlier education, however, as a purely natural man Emile would look with indifference on his biological family members, and would look upon his sister as he would look upon a watch. Yet it is by allowing sentiments for others to emerge and directing them toward domestic life that Emile will be "denatured" well, without the harsh and inhumane constraints that characterized Spartan citizenship or the order of the monks.

One of the most striking paradoxes of Emile's education in love and virtue is that an imaginary object that does not and cannot completely correspond to any real object in nature is what at bottom stimulates Emile's natural passions. According to Rousseau, it is only by inducing Emile to fall in love with an imaginary object that he will be attracted to and attached to virtue. And it is only by fostering an illusion or chimera in his imagination, which he cannot possess, or rather cannot possess in the way he hopes and desires to possess it, that Emile falls in love. Desiring an object which one believes to be

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

beautiful and even perfect is that key to enlivening the passions to love and thereby to virtue: “There is no true love without enthusiasm, and no enthusiasm without an object of perfection, real or chimerical, but always existing in the imagination.”⁴³¹ To be sure, Emile cannot now or ever truly possess what he desires. As Claire suggests in *Julie*, true love only persists as long as there are obstacles set up for its consummation.⁴³² Physical consummation tends to dampen romantic enthusiasm. But what Rousseau suggests is that we feel genuinely pleasurable sentiments precisely when we cannot have what we desire. Whereas Montesquieu’s Spartans painfully and inhumanly sacrificed their sentiments for the common good, and his austere monks were ultimately motivated by otherworldly consolations for their virtue, Emile experiences pleasurable sentiments—which heighten the sentiment of existence—during every this-worldly moment in which he is in pursuit of Sophie. And while Emile may think his greatest pleasure exists in the future—a not too distant this-worldly future—Rousseau suggests that these moments of genuine love, inflamed by an image in his imagination, are the happiest moments that Emile will ever experience. His training in virtue in pursuit of an imaginary object contributes to him feeling as much of the pleasurable sentiment of existence that he may ever feel. He will develop a taste for virtue by being motivated by “lower” bodily passions, and this will be more in conformity with man’s nature than Montesquieu’s exemplars of virtue.

Rousseau goes out of his way to suggest that love never exists in the way in which we initially, or ever, think it does. He suggests that our experience of beauty is not in our

⁴³¹ Ibid., 570.

⁴³² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps*, trans. Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 1997), 263.

beloveds, but rather that our experience of beauty “is the work of our errors.” Even in the case of a love for another human being and all the experiences of such an attachment that that love involves, Emile’s experience remains within his own particular and natural perspective: he remains a natural individual like Robinson Crusoe on his island. Yet Emile will be attached to virtue because in its purest (and most extreme) form his love will want to “sacrifice all his low sentiments” to an imaginary model to which he attributes virtue. In falling in love he will want to devote himself fully, even sacrifice his inclinations for the sake of the good of his beloved. In desiring to sacrifice his own good for another, Emile set himself up for potentially being ruled arbitrarily by his beloved. However, Rousseau suggests that love forms the basis of genuine community, and for being able to desire a common good with one’s beloved. When ones genuinely loves and has affection for others, one can be virtuously devoted to a common good, and can submit our inclinations to our virtuous wills. As Rousseau says, in falling in love, Emile ultimately detaches himself from “the baseness of the human *I*.”⁴³³ As enchanting as Rousseau’s depiction of love is, however, we cannot forget how ultimately unnatural love is according to the standard of Rousseau’s understanding of nature. Love always draws us outside of ourselves and involves powerful and intoxicating illusions, at least for awhile. This is far cry from Aristotle’s account in the first book of the *Politics*, of the naturalness of the family and devotion to the polis.⁴³⁴ And Rousseau suggests that in the extreme, which may be *the* best case of the virtuous lover, there is a kinship with Montesquieu’s self-sacrificing exemplars of love. The true lover, he suggests, is “ready to immolate

⁴³³ Rousseau, *Emile*, 571.

⁴³⁴ Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1252a.

himself”—nothing could be further from the natural man’s primary inclination to preserve himself—and is perfectly willing to die for his beloved. Our most powerful passions then can artfully be directed to a communal life that makes us forget our *amour de soi* to such a degree that we die for the sake of others, even if our only reward is the pleasurable effects on our sentiments in this life (or possibly for the hope of future glory), and even if our devotion is at bottom to a beautifully and therefore unnaturally adorned object that exists only in our imagination. In this way the genuine love’s sentiment of his own existence is augmented despite himself, no matter what he believe his true motives may be.

Emile’s earlier education, I have suggested, involved training his body, which can contribute to a strength of mind or soul, which could then contribute to his ability to overcome his inclinations if need be in order to do his chosen duties. In describing Emile’s ability to love and be devoted to another, Rousseau uses terms that have to do with strength and power, directly echoing Emile’s early, natural education. The source of love itself, Rousseau suggests, produces a powerful “energy” and a powerful “force” when can inspire the desire to be virtuous oneself. If one has been corrupted in any numbers of ways by social and therefore unnatural passions one tends to be incapable of discharging the kind of strength of soul necessary to overcome potentially illicit inclinations in the name of virtue. But on the contrary, Emile’s body has been trained so as to have a strong mind and soul, and because he is inspired by love, he is not tempted by corruption.⁴³⁵ Yet Rousseau hints, if only subtly, that the strength one experiences in feeling virtue is not for a “higher” motive, but physical and in the service of satisfying

⁴³⁵ Rousseau, *Emile*, 583.

our passions, if even, from a certain perspective, our “lower” physical passions. Our desire to be virtuous when we are in love is not because it is intrinsically moral—since in Rousseau’s view all morality is conventional and there is no intrinsic reason to be moral apart from extrinsic rewards. We are virtuous because we hope to be compensated for being virtuous by romantic consummation, even if there is a further major difficulty in keeping human beings devoted to each other once romantic love has been compensated. As Rousseau suggests, it is not within our control to stay in love, and it is not clear why, by nature, two human beings who are not in love should be devoted to each other. Yet two human beings who have tasted love, Rousseau suggests, will be more inclined to be able to start a small and potentially enduring community in which they are both good for themselves and good for each other.

That one of the major goals of Emile’s education is the preservation and augmentation of the sentiment of existence is corroborated by Rousseau’s suggestion that Emile has not been raised to desire or to wait, but to enjoy every moment, even in pursuit of Sophie, when he believes that the future apparently rightly promises him his supreme happiness. As we recall from earlier in the book, one of the greatest sources of our unhappiness is the tendency for social men, whose imaginations have been inflamed by innumerable unnatural desires, to be pained when their desires outstrip their natural faculties or power to acquire what they desire. It is certainly not clear what it is realistic to think or imagine is within our power. We tend to think that if we simply work hard enough and “put our mind to it” we can achieve all that our hearts desire. And while this may be true up to a point, it is also true that none of us get all that we really want, and if it is true that what many or most human beings desire most deeply is to live forever or

somehow perpetuate our being into eternity, it is incontrovertibly true that no human being has it within his power to satisfy that desire, at least in the forms in which most human beings tend to want it. (Cf. Socrates' speech in Plato's *Symposium*.) In any case, Rousseau suggests that when our desires outstrip our faculties we feel pain, particularly psychic pain, at our weakness.⁴³⁶ However, in the same way that Montesquieu's image of the austere monks reveals an ambiguity about pleasure and pain in the struggle to be happy—the monks feel a sharp pleasure or residue of pleasure in denying all their inclinations in devotion to their order—Rousseau emphasizes in a fuller way than Montesquieu does that we can take pleasure, even great pleasure, in pursuing what we desire and cannot quite acquire (but which we realistically hope to acquire).⁴³⁷ As Rousseau says, when Emile “extends his desires beyond the present, his ardor is not so impetuous that he is bothered by the slowness of time. He will enjoy not only the pleasure of desiring but that of going to the object of his desires, and his passions are so moderate that he is always more where he is than where he will be.”⁴³⁸ If both the monks' and Emile's passions are directed toward a future satisfaction, Emile's passions will be compensated in this world, and not for any extreme self-sacrifice on his part. He will be moderate because his passions have been directed in such a way that his passion for his beloved has made him moderate. Rousseau has manipulated Emile's education so that in pursuing what he desires, he will always be following his most powerful (social) inclinations and will keenly enjoy every moment of his life, even when he only

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 211.

⁴³⁷ Melzer notes that Rousseau himself was never “genuinely capable of virtue because he [unlike Emile, for instance] was always incapable of real self-conquest,” Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, 258.

⁴³⁸ Rousseau, *Emile*, 594.

“possesses” the being in his imagination without “possessing” a physical woman he wants to possess. From Rousseau’s perspective, both the monks and Emile feel the sentiment of existence, as they both pursue a being that they perceive as perfect in their imaginations. Yet in Rousseau’s view, Emile’s passions are directed in a healthier direction, one more in conformity with healthy human nature.

According to Rousseau, Sophie is Emile’s first love and indeed his first passion, and on this love depends the final form his “character” is going to take. Once this passion has taken hold in his heart, “his ways of thinking, his sentiments, and his taste are going to assume a consistency which no longer permits them to deteriorate.”⁴³⁹ In feeling love Emile acquires a taste for (unnatural) decent things, and because he loves Sophie—and has an apparently durable bond with her—he will be insulated from corrupt tastes and desires. It is by forming his taste for decent things that Emile will develop sentiments and bonds of affection for his beloved and for decent communities to which he may be attached.

In *The Republic*, one of the difficulties uncovered by Socrates and his young interlocutors is that justice appears at once to demand the greatest sacrifices (or our inclinations in Rousseau’s terminology), and to offer again at least apparently, the greatest rewards for our sacrifices. In Book ten of *The Republic* Socrates recounts an improbable myth about what the just will receive in the afterlife for their sacrifices for morality in this life. As Socrates suggests, justice, or at least beliefs about justice rooted in opinion, require otherworldly support. While Rousseau seems to think that some kind

⁴³⁹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 600.

of religious belief about compensation for virtue may be necessary for most people—consider Julie’s religious beliefs, the teaching of the Savoyard Vicar, and the teaching on a kind of civil religion in *The Social Contract*—Emile’s compensation for virtue is at least as far as we are told, completely this-worldly.⁴⁴⁰ And to the extent that his inclinations and his duties cohere with each other, he possesses a unity of soul (or at least a quasi-unity of soul) that requires no extrinsic support. Emile resembles at least partially Glaucon in *The Republic* in that Emile “hopes for, he expects a return that he feels he is due.”⁴⁴¹ Emile’s compensation will initially be a very intense, if fleeting pleasure followed by an apparently lifelong domestic attachment to his beloved.

Yet Rousseau thinks that what may be the greatest pleasure for human beings to experience, or at least the greatest physical pleasure, opens the door to the “boredom” of the passions.⁴⁴² While men in the state of nature and Emile will know the pleasures of physical consummation, physical consummation punctures many of the illusions we

⁴⁴⁰ Melzer is not necessarily correct in suggesting so categorically that “Virtue, in Rousseau’s view, is absolutely inseparable from religious belief,” Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, 106. This might be true in most cases. However, Rousseau leaves it as an open question as to if Emile has any religious belief at all, yet alone what their content is. For one thing, Rousseau leaves it open to Emile to choose a religion, and he never tells us *if* he does, nor what it consists in, and Rousseau is clear that Emile never hears of the Savoyard Vicar’s profession of faith. One could note that Rousseau makes a brief and unelaborated reference to his leading Emile by the love of God, and the teaching on imperishable beauty may have some ambiguous religious implications. What can I think be said with confidence about Emile’s education as a whole, though, is that Rousseau intends to shift Emile’s attachment to virtue away from being supported by traditional religious belief and toward being based on romantic love and domestic affection. Emile’s attachment to his beloved is very this-worldly, and rooted, at bottom, in his natural passions. With this said, however, it must not be forgotten that Sophie’s (moral, and therefore not natural) education seems to depend necessarily on some kind of religious belief, however novel and unorthodox it may be (and we cannot forget that Rousseau ultimately reveals that Sophie’s moral education was somehow defective).

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 603.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 604.

experience when we are genuinely in love. The natural men who copulate with strangers and Emile with Sophie all physically feel the same thing, but in seeing Sophie “as she really is” and not as his image in his imagination Emile may then feel some degree of disappointment. As Rousseau candidly suggests, “By putting the crown on his happiness I would destroy its greatest charm. This supreme happiness is a hundred times sweeter to hope for than to obtain. One enjoys it better when one looks forward to it than when one tastes it.”⁴⁴³ In falling in love Emile lives outside of himself and looks to a future happiness, when at each moment he is feeling intensely the sentiment of existence despite himself, which he will feel in a different way after his passions have been consummated. A major challenge, then, is to keep Emile attached to Sophie—a real woman and not an “image of perfection”—after he can no longer taste the supreme happiness, when his passions are opened to boredom. The challenge, then, is to make Emile’s passion for Sophie and attachment to virtue durable. Yet as Rousseau suggests, an enduring bond of affection is in principle possible between men and women who love each other, and who are persuaded that the love that exists in their imagination coheres the physical being with whom they are united.

7.4 A NEW KIND OF VIRTUE AND THE ATTACHMENT TO IMPERISHABLE BEAUTY

As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, it is only near the end of the book, before Emile’s marriage to Sophie, that Rousseau reveals to Emile the true meaning and

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 603.

content of virtue. Rather than preaching it to Emile, Rousseau has tried to make virtue as unnecessary (or when necessary, attractive) to Emile as possible: Emile has been raised to be naturally good rather than virtuous, even if, Rousseau suggests, natural goodness is destroyed with the impact of new social passions, and genuine community with others necessarily requires the strength of soul necessary for doing one's duties despite what one's inclinations might want. However, Emile has also been raised to be capable of virtue almost despite himself. Virtue, as Rousseau reveals to Emile, consists in having the strength of soul or will to follow one's duties no matter what one's inclinations may incline oneself to do. And as I have tried to show, his education in natural strength combined with his love for Sophie—or at least her image combined with her real being—will make it relatively easy for him to love and remain attached to Sophie, and moreover to be attached to virtue. He will have minimal needs to depend on others, and because his taste is attached to decent things, he will be disinclined to stray from Sophie and domestic life. And if he consents to join a community, he will have the strength of soul to do whatever duties he has consented to do. Yet while Sophie has little reason to fear that Emile will stray from his domestic attachments to her, Rousseau warns Emile that despite the immense promise of happiness that an attachment to Sophie seems to entail, Emile requires possessing a novel kind of virtue, which will protect him from potentially immense psychic pain, now that his passions have been awakened in the moral world.

Rousseau's paradoxical understanding of virtue consists in this: while Emile's passions have been awakened and directed toward a being whom he loves and takes pleasure in loving, he cannot count on others to remain attached to him. Virtue is unnatural, and requires unnatural strength of soul, and we are naturally weak beings. He

cannot count on his beloved to remain always faithful to him, and in particular to remain incorrupt in a highly corrupt world where it is all too easy to be corrupted by innumerable unnatural passions. By desiring and feeling the passion of romantic love for Sophie—or his image of Sophie—Emile has become a potential “slave” to his passions, and is vulnerable to enormous psychic pain if his beloved should cease loving him. Love, Rousseau suggests, while promising the greatest happiness (indeed it is life’s greatest happiness, according to Rousseau) is also a kind of sickness, which Emile never could have conceived of if he were a completely self-sufficient and unattached man in the state of nature. To remedy this potential danger and to inoculate Emile from potentially immense psychic pain, Rousseau shifts Emile’s perspective so that he will not be attached to Sophie or even to her image simply but will be attached to what Rousseau calls “imperishable beauty.”⁴⁴⁴ In doing so, Rousseau persuades Emile to extend the law of necessity to moral things (Emile had learned of the law of physical necessity simply during his natural education in Books 1-3). Emile will then exercise virtue in the sense of being in control of his passions, which his education in physical and moral strength enables him to do. It is for this task, more than for domestic and civic life, that Emile must possess the strength of soul of virtue. The emergence of the passions can potentially lead to softness, weakness, neediness, and psychic pain due to the loss of cherished hopes. It is for *this* reason, more than any other, that Emile must know the true content of

⁴⁴⁴ Cooper conflates imperishable beauty with virtue simply, in a way that is unwarranted, I think, by the text. See Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*, 104. I am not sure precisely what Rousseau means by imperishable beauty but it is not simply virtue. Rousseau analyzes virtue in a precise way, psychologically and physiologically. “Imperishable beauty” seem more akin to an ambiguous and imprecise phantasm of the mind or soul, which differs for each individual.

virtue. This step in Emile's education puts his love of Sophie into perspective: while he does not have to cease enjoying loving Sophie, it reminds Emile to remember his psychological position as a unique individual who has unique but fragile and potentially fleeting attachments, and reminds him, moreover, of the necessity to keep his faculties and desires in proportion. Then he can fully enjoy the pleasures of love, human connections, and attachments, without being destroyed by heartbreak if they end, as all human things must. This might initially be a bitter pill for Emile to swallow; yet it enables him to enjoy the fragility of human attachments and the necessity of losing all human things. He will be then independent even in his attachments to others and in his affections for others. He will then be good for himself and good for those for whom he has affections, without ceasing to be independent and self-sufficiently good for himself if those whom he has affections for break his heart. The practical effect of this teaching is bound to loosen, to some degree, Emile's attachment to Sophie, yet it is a loosening in order to give Emile a greater clarity about his true situation and to teach him that love indeed is merely a "lie, chimera, and illusion" at bottom, which Emile must never forget. While Emile then must sacrifice his prior illusions about love, the reward for such a sacrifice is to see his true situation as it is, and to enjoy it for what it is, and to be happy insofar as a human being can be happy. One can then enjoy the pleasures of love nonetheless, while exercising the kind of true virtue—understood as being in command of one's passions—that will soften the blow when Emile's loves and affections necessarily fade and cease. If Emile is able to possess virtue, in this new sense, he will then "obey *only* the passion for virtue."⁴⁴⁵ He will then obey not Sophie, nor his

⁴⁴⁵ Rousseau, *Emile*, 634; my emphasis.

community, nor any divine commands, but the passion for virtue that, as it turns out, he is in command of: by possessing virtue he will be in principle completely and freely in command of himself and his passions. He will then be good for himself and for those he loves and has affections for, while remaining independent and in principle a kind of solitary, since he knows his attachments with others will not last. Emile will then be in a position to be “happy in spite of fortune and wise in spite of the passions,” which can so easily delude us, and will “find in the possession even of fragile goods a voluptuousness that nothing will be able to disturb.”⁴⁴⁶ The “rewards” for virtue then are immediate, and are goods that Emile can feel during every moment when he perceives beauty, either in Sophie or in other beings.

As I have tried to show, Emile has been induced to possess virtue by falling in love with an imaginary being and then a real woman, corresponding, to some degree, with his imaginary being. And his strength to do his duties and remain in control of his passions by recognizing their frailty has been possible due to his education in natural strength of body and mind, and the careful regulation of his imagination. I have tried to show, in addition, that Emile, while possessing a kind of virtue akin to Montesquieu’s account of the virtue of ancient republics and monasteries, is attached to virtue on a new, more natural and humane basis. Emile will enjoy virtue because it preserves and may potentially even augment the pleasurable sentiment of his existence, which men powerfully feel in the state of nature: the strength of soul he will possess will make him feel more alive than the vast majority of social men who “float” between their inclinations and their duties, and who feel weakness and boredom once their passions

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 635.

have been awakened. By contrast, once his perspective on virtue has been put on its proper footing, Rousseau suggests that Emile will feel a pleasurable voluptuousness even in the midst of fragile and transient attachments.

Emile's attachment to virtue by means of his love for Sophie, however, depends on a passion that I have largely ignored in this chapter, *amour-propre*, which, as we have seen in the previous chapter, has a highly ambiguous place in Rousseau's thought and indeed in Emile's education. Whereas Rousseau's account of Emile's virtue is a kind of response to and critique of Montesquieu's virtue, so too is Rousseau's account of *amour-propre* a response to and critique of Montesquieu's account of monarchic honor. It is to Rousseau's ambiguous account of *amour-propre* in *Emile*, then, that I now turn. As we have seen, and as I will explore more deeply in the next chapter, the management of virtue depends to a large degree on the management of *amour-propre* in social men.

As we have seen, Montesquieu's account of the passion of virtue is that it is highly unnatural and painful and, given the choice, wise legislators ought to dispense with the kinds of ancient republics animated by painful virtue in favor of forms of government more favorable to less painful and healthier human passions. And in Montesquieu's view a serious alternative to republics is monarchy rooted in the strictly speaking unnatural passion of honor, a passion which is nonetheless compatible with political life at its best, motivating human beings to greatness, and compatible at bottom with some degree of political freedom. As we will see in this chapter, Rousseau locates a passion—amour-propre or self-love—which is very close in some ways to Montesquieu's understanding of the passion of honor. Yet while Montesquieu's praise of honor is seemingly unqualified, Rousseau's account of amour-propre is highly ambiguous. According to Rousseau, it is *the* source of much of social men's misery and its birth must be delayed in Emile's education as long as possible, even if its birth is eventually inevitable for all social men, including Emile. Yet it is also an important element of some positive social phenomena, like romantic love, which, as we have seen from the previous chapter, is a key to Emile's sociability, to his capability of being good for others. Virtue and honor, two fundamentally unnatural passions, can then be directed, in Rousseau's view, to good or healthy social ends, even though, if they are badly directed, they can both lead to unnecessary pain and misery. In this chapter, then, I will investigate the passion of amour-propre: its nature, its negative side and its dangers, and its positive or

healthy side. Finally, I will give an account of amour-propre in the case of Rousseau's practical recommendations for the reform of the Polish government.

8.1 THE NATURE OF *AMOUR-PROPRE*

One of Rousseau's clearest statements with regard to the nature of amour-propre occurs in the fourth book, after Emile's "natural" education through book 3 has been completed and shortly after his "moment of crisis" or "second birth" takes place, when new passions resulting from his new relations with other human beings emerge. Rousseau contrasts the naturalness and calmness of amour de soi with the unnaturalness of amour-propre: "Self-love, which regards only ourselves, is contented when our true needs are satisfied. But amour-propre, which makes comparisons, is never content and never could be, because this sentiment, preferring ourselves to others, also demands others to prefer us to themselves, which is impossible."⁴⁴⁷ Natural love or amour de soi is easily satisfied by food, water, sleep, and sometimes sex, but amour-propre, in Rousseau's view, only arises once men live together in society, and is constantly and anxiously in motion, striving to prove one's superiority to others and demanding that others recognize our own superiority to them, which is impossible since it is impossible for them not to love themselves more than anyone else.⁴⁴⁸ In Montesquieu's view, there was a kind of

⁴⁴⁷ Rousseau, *Emile*, 364. Melzer highlights the paradox in Rousseau's thought that self-love "by no means leaves men neutral or innocent with respect to others." Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, 43.

⁴⁴⁸ Masters rejects Rousseau's argument for the unnaturalness of amour-propre by arguing that "What Rousseau calls amour-propre—social comparisons leading to competition for dominance—is an innate characteristic of monkeys and apes who provide evidence of our animal origins." Roger D. Masters, "Rousseau and the Rediscovery of

stability or security to monarchy, because each man, however lowly placed in society, received some degree of honor from the monarch, which fundamentally satisfied him. As will be explored at further length below, Montesquieu underemphasized the way in which honor demands that each man regard himself as the most important person in the world for himself, thus resulting in psychic and ultimately political instability. Montesquieu looks down at monarchy from above, and sees ultimately political stability and security. Rousseau, by contrast, investigates honor seekers from up close and sees an anxiety that cannot be satisfied, precisely because each man loves himself most of all, and can never achieve the satisfaction he desires. Because all men in society necessarily strive for higher positions in society to the detriment of other men, they become weaker—depending on others, including on fluctuating and irrational public opinion—and become harsh toward others, desiring others to fail and delighting in their failure. This is the genuine reason men become harsh to each other in society, as in Hobbes’ state of nature, which Rousseau thinks is really the state of society. As Rousseau says, “The hateful and irascible passions are born of amour-propre,” and further, “What makes man wicked is to have many needs and to depend very much on opinion.”⁴⁴⁹

During Emile’s natural education for himself Emile encounters almost no other human beings other than “Rousseau,” or his tutor. He know nothing of his relations with other men and consequently almost nothing of amour-propre. Yet Rousseau takes what appears to be a strange precautionary step of exposing Emile to the intoxicating pleasures and ultimately the harsh pains of amour-propre in order to try to inoculate Emile from the

Human Nature,” in *The Legacy of Rousseau*, ed. Clifford Orwin and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 117.

⁴⁴⁹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 364.

negative kind of amour-propre. The scene, completely foreseen and designed by Rousseau, takes place at a fair, under the gaze of many evaluating eyes. And in this scene a “sleight-of-hand artist” or “trickster-Socrates” teaches Emile, in collusion with Rousseau, a painful lesson in amour-propre, vanity, and the desire for glory that will remain with Emile throughout the rest of his education.⁴⁵⁰ In showing off a new scientific trick, Emile “would want the whole of humankind to be witness to his glory.” Yet Emile is shown up by the trickster-Socrates, and he learns that he did not know as much as he had originally thought. Emile thus learns a lesson in natural science while also learning a lesson in the pleasures and ultimately pains of amour-propre. Rousseau artfully arranged for Emile to feel the pleasures of amour-propre while also compelling him to feel its pains. And once Emile feels the pains of amour-propre, Rousseau suggests, he will be unlikely to seek his happiness in the opinions of others again, feeling that someone may again show him up and be more knowledgeable or skillful than him, which results in psychic pain. As Rousseau suggests, innumerable “mortifying consequences” arise from the first moments of vanity. Yet since Emile has tasted a dose of humiliation and disgrace he will be less attracted by the illusory pleasures of amour-propre.

Throughout the first three books of his education Emile is only rarely put in contact with others—for instance, the previously mentioned fair scene and the scene mentioned in the previous chapter in which Emile was led by his appetite to win a race with other children for which he was rewarded by cake. Yet Rousseau is adamant that Emile’s only real competitor throughout his whole education will be himself. Whereas

⁴⁵⁰ Melzer notes that Rousseau himself was partly motivated by a desire for glory rooted in amour-propre, which he was not able to completely transcend. Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, 256.

Montesquieu either praises or is indifferent to the motives of jealousy or vanity in monarchies, Rousseau wants to prevent their birth for as long as possible: as he says, “I prefer a hundred times over that he not learn what he would only learn out of jealousy or vanity.”⁴⁵¹ Vanity, in Montesquieu’s view, is especially praiseworthy because it does cause us some degree of psychological pleasure, and on the whole it has apparently peaceful and stable political effects. It is compatible with all men’s security, or at least bodily security. Vanity would give Emile a false sense of superiority and ultimately cause him misery, since he would eventually find that his natural talents or gifts are limited and cannot measure up to the gifts that a superior man would, and superior men according to various standard can almost always be found. Rousseau, against Montesquieu, focuses on men’s potential or even necessary psychological anguish if they seek their happiness in vanity. If Montesquieu thinks vanity will result in political stability, Rousseau thinks it will result in universal individual psychological instability. While Rousseau wants to avoid jealousy and vanity as much as possible, Rousseau praises the kind of pride that measures one’s ability against one’s abilities at a former stage of our lives. Emile will “want to outdo himself....I see no problem in being his own competitor.”⁴⁵² In this way a species of amour-propre or pride emerges, but which is kept in check and directed healthily because one compares oneself only to one’s own former abilities. Emile will thereby live within himself and not outside of himself, in the light of others.

By the end of book three Rousseau claims that “amour-propre, the first and most natural of all the passions, is still hardly aroused in him.”⁴⁵³ This statement regarding the

⁴⁵¹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 331.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 359.

naturalness of amour-propre is strange, since in Rousseau's account of men in the state of nature those natural men make no comparisons with others and therefore do not at all get entangled in amour-propre, which, from their perspective of independence, is highly unnatural. Yet what Rousseau suggests in this statement, I think, is that amour-propre *necessarily* arises once men live in society. Amour-propre is not natural for strictly speaking natural men, but it necessarily and therefore naturally arises once men begin to regard each other and compare their relative worth according to various standards. Amour-propre is natural in this sense, or natural in the way that the family is natural: these phenomena are not natural strictly speaking or are rather quasi-natural. And once amour-propre has emerged there is no turning back to earlier, more natural stages of humanity. Rousseau later revises this thought, qualifying amour-propre's naturalness, and he moreover adds a powerful moral condemnation of social men for the emergence of the passions of amour-propre: "Self-love, ceasing to be an absolute sentiment, becomes pride in great souls, vanity in small ones, and feeds itself constantly in all, at the expense of their neighbors. This species of passion, not having its germ in children's hearts, cannot be born in them of itself. It is we alone who put it there, and it never takes root except by our fault."⁴⁵⁴ Far from being strictly natural, then, the emergence of amour-propre is social men's fault, and does not exist intrinsically in children (the only passion they have is amour de soi). What this statement makes clear, however, is that self-love becomes transformed in society into pride and vanity, depending on a given person's quality of soul or nature. And while Rousseau had earlier claimed that amour-propre is natural—insofar as it necessarily arises in society—here he indignantly assigns blame to social

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 365.

men whose fault it is that amour-propre is put in the hearts of children. Given how much pain and misery amour-propre will cause human beings for the rest of their lives, it is only a slight exaggeration to say that Rousseau suggests that this is a species of (unwitting) child abuse: social men cause amour-propre to take root in children's hearts, which it would otherwise not happen if a child was raised entirely for himself.

Rousseau is clear that the point at which amour-propre necessarily emerges in Emile is the point where he enters the social and moral world, in which he compares himself to others. And this is where, as will be explored in the sections below, Emile's amour-propre will either be well or badly directed. If it is badly directed Emile's amour-propre will result in the harshness, covetousness, and envy that characterize Hobbes' account of the state of nature, and even Montesquieu's account of commercial republics. An important challenge in this regard seems to have to do with preserving in Emile the kind of independence and natural strength that was fostered in the first three books as much as possible. Harshness toward others is the consequence of weakness and neediness that arise in society, only when one compares oneself to others and discovers or imagines that others have something that one can acquire only at their expense. If Emile's natural independence and strength are preserved and if his amour-propre is well-directed he will not turn into the kind of person who desires to harm others, as in Hobbes, or in a softer way, in Montesquieu's commercial republics. However, despite this, Rousseau is not attempting to make or compel Emile to be humble. Because of our natural self-interest and the way we feel amour-propre in society, we all desire to be in first place, and Emile is no different. Emile will resign and content himself with being in his own place, which he regards as the best or first place, and which has nothing to do with his humility.

Rousseau does not attack amour-propre in the name of humility, but he does attack apparently common-sense opinions about merit. Our abilities, he suggests, are not due to any special efforts or merited abilities that we acquire because we somehow deserve them, but are rather the results of our individual natures, which we have done nothing to deserve, but have acquired at birth. The only thing that we can be legitimately be proud of, however, is moral virtue, or the strength that results from overcoming our inclinations by holding firm in our duties (which, in itself, seems to have to do with our nature, since not at all of us possess strong souls, not least Rousseau himself). As he says, “The good can be proud of his virtue because it is his. But of what is the intelligent man proud? What did Racine not do to be Pradon? What did Boileau do in order not to be Cotin?”⁴⁵⁵ We have done nothing to merit any natural gifts we may have and those who lack particular natural gifts have done nothing wrong morally. Feeding amour-propre on this basis, then, is a delusion of the naturally gifted who congratulate themselves for possessing gifts they did nothing to acquire.

8.2 THE NEGATIVE SIDE OF *AMOUR-PROPRE*

Throughout Rousseau’s writings one of the most recurrent themes is his powerful denunciation of amour-propre. It is depicted as being an extremely seductive passion, but one that leads perforce to the most painful misery of the soul. And *Emile* is no different: in it Rousseau ominously warns the reader to “Fear the specious attraction of lies and the

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 400.

intoxicating vapors of pride.”⁴⁵⁶ And Emile is particularly susceptible to vanity with respect to education since his knowledge compared to other men is so extraordinary. Yet according to Rousseau Emile is by nature not extraordinary at all—he is neither a philosopher nor a genius but by nature thoroughly average—and, as was suggested above, he has done nothing to deserve the education or nature he has. For this reason a negative result of amour-propre is the desire to acquire an education in order to be esteemed and admired, as opposed to learning out of natural curiosity, as a natural man would.⁴⁵⁷ And according to Rousseau, even the philosophic pride that results from overcoming our prejudices results in remaining subject to them, since amour-propre is one of our most deeply rooted prejudices. If Emile’s amour-propre is badly directed he will desire to progress in learning only to be esteemed, rather than out of the natural curiosity that motivated him during the nature education of the first three books.⁴⁵⁸

Whereas Rousseau’s natural man has calm passions that are easily satisfied and he “lives within himself,” the social man, dominated by amour-propre, possesses “unbridled desires” that “inflamm[e]” his heart, and he desires to dominate anyone that he might be able to, if he thinks it is to his advantage. The unlimited desires of amour-propre set in motion something within man, his self-love, that takes him out of himself in a way that Rousseau thinks is unnatural, unhealthy, and productive of unhappiness. Amour-propre, in Rousseau’s view, is an alluring yet devouring passion that in the end causes men to be “disconnected” from themselves, that is, from their original nature. Amour-propre is so all-consuming and causes disconnectedness with oneself because it sets up an external

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 311.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 351, 355.

goal that is unachievable: to be the best, and to have others recognize oneself as the best, which by their self-interested nature they will not be able to do. Rousseau then suggests that Montesquieu failed to understand the full nature of honor. Rousseau suggests that amour-propre is an example of the disproportion that can exist between our desire to be recognized as the best, and our inadequate faculties to satisfy this desire. Montesquieu in a way underestimated the dangerous side of honor. His portrait was of a peaceful kingdom in which each subject was given honors, and they were at least apparently fully satisfied with that honor. Montesquieu overemphasizes men's satisfaction with honor. Rousseau, by contrast, emphasizes the struggle and desire for domination in the pursuit of honor. Rousseau, in contrast to Montesquieu, emphasizes that men will be dissatisfied no matter how much honor they acquire. It is in the nature of honor, Rousseau suggests, against Montesquieu, never to be satisfied with the honor we receive, but always to desire more, resulting in dissatisfaction and unhappiness. And rather than ever making good on its promise of apparent glory and bliss, amour-propre necessarily results in a kind of muted if not overt war of all against all in the struggle for ascendance. And living outside of themselves causes men a kind of agitation and eventual exhaustion that stands in stark contrast to the peaceful and content men in the state of nature and even the peaceful and secure men in Montesquieu's account. If social men follow their amour-propre in the pursuit of happiness it is only a "deceptive image" of men's happiness that Emile's education will prevent him from falling prey to. Rousseau then draws a contrast between men's external appearances in society, and the genuine content of their hearts in relation to their happiness or misery. Whereas the natural man and Emile, lacking at least the negative form of amour-propre, are easily satisfied with few needs, unhealthy social men,

dominated by amour-propre, have endless unnatural desires that they can never satisfy. As Rousseau says, “He who does not stop at appearances but judges the happiness of men only by the condition of their hearts will see their miseries in their very successes; he will see their desires and their gnawing cares extend and increase in their fortune; he will see them getting out of breath and advancing without ever reaching their goals.”⁴⁵⁹ The apparent happiness of the social man dominated by amour-propre is a kind of mirage in the desert, forever disappearing on the horizon, no matter how much it seems to promise apparent satiation. In order to prevent this search of happiness outside of oneself in the world of prejudice, opinions, and whim, Emile must learn to be content with himself, as he was during his natural education, and to seek happiness in the light of his own opinion of himself. Emile will then not be dominated by gnawing social cares rooted in vanity but will be content being who he is by nature, capable of procuring his own happiness without living outside of himself. And as Rousseau warns, if Emile ever desires to live outside of himself and prefers to be someone other than himself (his examples are Socrates and Cato), “everything has failed.”⁴⁶⁰

8.3 THE POSITIVE SIDE OF *AMOUR-PROPRE*

While it is true that Rousseau powerfully attacks the influence of amour-propre in social men, calling its illusions “the source of our greatest ills,”⁴⁶¹ Rousseau paradoxically thinks that amour-propre can at least in principle and in some limited cases

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 397.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 399.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 623

be the source of good and healthy social and moral effects.⁴⁶² And the most noteworthy case of amour-propre being put to good effect is in the case of romantic love, and particularly Emile's love for Sophie.⁴⁶³ One of the tests of Emile's education is to see what he as an individual might be for others and it is on the basis of romantic love rooted in amour-propre that Emile forms an apparently enduring attachment to another human being, thereby becoming a part of a social and moral whole that is more than what he is as an individual. Whereas Rousseau thinks that amour-propre that is not well-directed is likely to result in social misery, well-guided and restricted amour-propre—between two individual who are romantically attached—can have positive social effects.

While Emile is exposed to the painful aspects of amour-propre in the scene with the trickster-Socrates, the healthy kind of amour-propre is the result of a kind of “new birth” of the passions of adulthood, that is, when Emile undergoes puberty and begins to “have need” of another human being. Once Emile has need of another, he will necessarily be a part of the moral world and its relations between men, which necessarily involves the preferences of amour-propre: “As soon as man has need of a companion, he is no

⁴⁶² Neuhouser offers a persuasive account of some of the “social and domestic remedies” for amour-propre as a positive response to the birth of amour-propre. One possible remedy that Neuhouser considers and that I do not is the “institutional sources of respect and esteem” that are found in the “equal legal respect” of *The Social Contract*. Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 155-183. Dent provides a thoughtful account of some of the positive sides of amour-propre. N. J. H. Dent, “Rousseau on *Amour-Propre*,” in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Critical Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers*, ed. John T. Scott (London: Routledge, 2006), 322-37.

⁴⁶³ Habib considers some of the implications of amour-propre with regard to “love and order.” Claude Habib, *Le Consentement Amoureux: Rousseau, les Femmes, et la Cité* (Paris : Hachette, 1998), 83-137. Cooper points to the necessary connection between amour-propre and romantic love. Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*, 123.

longer an isolated being. His heart is no longer alone. All his relations with his species, all the affections of his soul, are born of this one. His first passion makes the others ferment.”⁴⁶⁴ The passion that results from puberty then causes amour-propre to ferment since Emile will desire women, and he will begin to desire to be desired exclusively by one other woman.⁴⁶⁵ And as this statement implies, the social passions are unnatural since while the natural man’s passions are calm and easily satisfied, the social man’s passions ferment and thus multiply, leading social men away from their limited natural passions. On this point, Rousseau is especially critical of Montesquieu. Unnatural passions are usually not harmful for Montesquieu, whereas they often are for Rousseau. And as this statement also makes clear, it is through the passions that Emile will be attached to others in a community. He will have affections for others due to amour-propre, and being in need of others he will depend on others. And the preferences for others will attach him to the community or communities that he will consent to join and be a member of. Yet while Rousseau claims that the two sexes are naturally inclined to each other—as Montesquieu too had noted in Book 1 of *The Spirit of the Laws*—Rousseau makes clear that the preferences of choice and rank that are the basis of romantic love are highly unnatural. While the inclination of instinct is “indeterminate”—in desiring others by instinct our desires can in principle be satisfied by anyone of the opposite sex as they were in the state of nature—the preferences of amour-propre are “the work of enlightenment, prejudice, and habit. Time and knowledge are required to make

⁴⁶⁴ Rousseau, *Emile*, 364.

⁴⁶⁵ According to Orwin, one of the “perils of puberty” is that of a “precocious sexuality [that] would plunge Emile into a maelstrom of comparisons and render him dependent on the wills of others.” Orwin, “Rousseau and the Discovery of Political Compassion,” 302.

us love. One loves only after having judged; one prefers only after having compared.”⁴⁶⁶ To love one person exclusively is an artificial work of time, habit, and ultimately amour-propre, and is not at bottom natural. As this statement suggests, romantic love is unnatural yet it is praiseworthy because it directs our natural inclinations to be attached to another human being whom we judge to be superior to all other potential lovers. And whereas, as we have seen, Rousseau rejects amour-propre in many social cases—like vanity—he thinks the preferences, choices, and hierarchies of romantic amour-propre are the best way to denature men and channel their passions. A paradox involved in this view is that each individual is the judge of merit of what is suitable or best for them, which differs from all others’ judgments. At this point, at least, Rousseau does not emphasize the potential instability of shifting opinions or the potential psychological pains involved in romantic love. Yet here he does imply that romantic love depends on obstacles that did not exist in the state of nature with regard to sexual relations (one might consider in this regard the character Claire in *Julie*).

What is necessary for romantic love to emerge is for the part of amour-propre that emphasizes what is genuinely worth looking up to and admiring to be directed to an individual beloved. In this way Rousseau praises, in a limited way, Montesquieu’s conception of monarchy, where all subjects honor the monarch and the monarch honors all his subjects. This beloved appears to be preferable, from the lover’s perspective, to every other human being, and is seen as a kind of perfect being or even a quasi-monarch, deserving of honor and devotion. What this view implies, moreover, is that in estimating one’s beloved so highly—in a way that is not entirely rooted in the beloved’s genuine

⁴⁶⁶ Rousseau, *Emile*, 364.

self—the lover raises the beloved in his imagination to a kind of Montesquieuan monarch, who the lover consents to be ruled by, at least to some degree and in some instances (there will always be a tension as to who rules between two human beings who love each other). In the best-case scenario, then—requited and enduring love—two lovers see the other as estimable beings, who might rule each other, or somehow rule together; that is, they are no longer naturally independent and free. And this view must be kept in mind as we remember that only republicanism rooted in freedom and equality is a legitimate form of government. There would then seem to be some necessary tension between republican government rooted in genuine self-rule, and domestic life, which is rooted in a kind of co-monarchy, rooted in amour-propre. The link between these apparently opposed kinds of government seems to be free consent. The consent to be ruled by—or rule with—a beloved who one sees as preferable to every other member of the human species makes domestic government in some ways republican and quasi-monarchical at the same time. This view is different than Montesquieu's, who recognized only one monarch and many rungs of subjects below him. Rousseau recognizes many domestic monarchs, if amour-propre is well-directed.

Against Hobbes' conception of honor-seeking men living in a state of war that is continual at least until a sovereign has legitimate power over a commonwealth, Rousseau thinks that if Emile's amour-propre is well-directed, he will not have the desire to tyrannize over others. In seeking his own happiness in himself, and not in the desire to dominate others, Emile will be characterized by a "spirit of peace" and not Hobbesian war.⁴⁶⁷ How precisely does Rousseau manage this if he also seems to concede that social

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 207.

men whose passions are badly managed are led to want to dominate and harm others? Rousseau suggests that it is necessary to “extend amour-propre” to other human beings. Rousseau at first calls this a virtue, but then revises it because it has little or nothing to do with self-sacrifice on the part of the one who feels it. It is a kind of effectual virtue. After seeming to call it a virtue, then, Rousseau shifts to calling it an interest. Yet Emile’s interest in extending his amour-propre outside of himself results in him extending his amour-propre to all of humanity. Emile will then love all of humanity without wanting to exploit anyone.⁴⁶⁸ This benevolence toward others plays no part in Montesquieu’s political prescription. There, the effectual result is political peace, with all men pursuing their own material self-interest, without any apparent concern for the well-being of others.

One particularly surprising element of amour-propre is that Emile will feel both fear and shame, the latter of which is directly connected to amour-propre.⁴⁶⁹ These two passions are connected, according to Rousseau, to our “first desires.” Once our nascent passions are aroused, we will do what is morally demanded of us to satisfy them. In desiring Sophie, Emile will do what is morally respectable—in her eyes—to impress her and win her love. What is particularly striking about this, however, is the moral and even religious language (or moral language with religious implications) that Rousseau links to our first desires. Romantic love is akin to love of the divine, because we feel we must do the right thing in service to our beloved, and we feel shame and fear at doing the wrong

⁴⁶⁸ Melzer points out that Emile’s amour-propre is channeled in such a way that Emile feels genuine love for other men, rather than a desire to “use” them. Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, 93.

⁴⁶⁹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 502.

thing its presence. And we direct our amour-propre in such a way to impress it so as to win any favors that it may bestow on us. This suggestion that there is a connection between romantic love and religiosity is corroborated by Rousseau's claim that "Men who have morals are the true worshippers of women."⁴⁷⁰ Montesquieu, by contrast, tries to sever the link between honor and a sense of the divine. It could even be argued that in a Montesquieuan monarchy, religion can be dispensed with completely. For Rousseau there always seems to be a link between romantic love and some degree of awareness of the sacred.

While Rousseau denies that romantic love is natural, he argues that it can be made compatible with the natural complementarity of the sexes, between men's natural strength and women's natural modesty, which is directly related to amour-propre.⁴⁷¹ As Rousseau says, "The surest art for animating [men's] strength is to make it necessary by resistance. Then amour-propre unites with desire and the one triumphs in the victory that the other has made him win."⁴⁷² Women, according to Rousseau, are naturally modest because in society they have an interest in attracting a male to help care for their young with whom they reproduce, and they can only do this if they can assure men that their natural children are theirs. Women then cultivate an appearance of decency and modesty that draws men and their sexual potency in and heightens men's amour-propre and desire to possess an individual woman exclusively. If men are quickly and easily satisfied in the state of nature without amour-propre, in society women excite and satisfy men's amour-

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 509.

⁴⁷¹ Schwartz provides a thoughtful account of the relationship between sexuality and amour-propre. Schwartz, "Rousseau and Freud on Sexuality and its Discontents," 98-101.

⁴⁷² Rousseau, *Emile*, 532.

propre by compelling them to display their merit and win a “victory” over their at least somewhat feigned resistance. This victory, moreover, is “sweet” to men (which the coarse men of the state of nature could not taste), and it is directly related to men’s amour-propre. This is because the victory depends on obtaining women’s desire to be possessed by them. This wish in turn constrains men to try to please women and win their favor. Paradoxically, what causes men to taste this sweetness is a doubt, concerning “whether it is weakness which yields to strength or the will which surrenders.”⁴⁷³ The sweetness of romantic love is then tied directly to the anxiety and doubt of satisfying amour-propre—the anxiety and doubt of desiring to be desired above all other potential lovers.

As I suggested above, women are naturally inclined toward modesty in part because they have an interest in attracting men to help them raise their natural children, and women will be unable to induce this unless women can persuade men that her children are also his. Women are thus socially constrained by amour-propre and public opinion to be decent in a way that men are not. There is an enormous difference between Emile’s salutary independence from and even indifference to public opinion and Sophie’s necessary dependence on it. But it is tied to her interest in attracting and maintaining an enduring union with a suitable mate from whom she receives help in raising their children. As Rousseau says, a woman must be “judged to be faithful by her husband, by those near her, by everyone.”⁴⁷⁴ Rousseau goes so far as to call this form of amour-propre a “law of nature”: “By the very law of nature women are at the mercy of men’s

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 534.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 536.

judgments, as much for their own sake, as for that of their children. It is not enough that they be estimable, they must be esteemed.”⁴⁷⁵ While this law of nature seems not to have existed in the pure state of nature, with its complete absence of amour-propre and conjugal sentiments, it is a law of nature because it apparently necessarily arises once men and women begin to esteem each other, and the desire for exclusive possession of one’s spouse and one’s children begins to emerge. And yet Rousseau emphasizes how this is not such a difficult task for men and women. While he does not go so far as to call for the elimination of virtue—for reasons I have pointed to in the previous chapter—Rousseau thinks the amour-propre involved in romantic love is a phenomenon that can be enjoyed just as in Montesquieu’s depiction of the pleasures of monarchy: “Is it so hard to love in order to be loved, to make oneself loveable in order to be happy, to make oneself estimable in order to be obeyed, to honor oneself in order to be honored?”⁴⁷⁶ In this way amour-propre that is related to romantic love can seem to cohere quite well with our own self-interest and inclinations for pleasure. Whereas virtue can be very hard, the pleasures of honor as they relate to love can be very sweet and easy to follow, since they are apparently so directly connected to our happiness.

In *Emile*’s natural education Rousseau had said that the particular passion of childhood is for food; *Emile* was shown to be a glutton racing off in pursuit of good food. Rousseau had even suggested that children could be sent to the ends of the earth if their stomachs demanded it. After puberty, however, Rousseau suggests that *Emile*’s adult passion is for women and because he desires and honors women he might be able to do

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 539.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 569.

great things if he were directed to do so by a woman: “How many great things could be done by this motive if one knew how to get it in motion?”⁴⁷⁷ And as Rousseau also puts it, “Women can send their lovers with a nod to the end of the world, to combat, to glory, to death, to anything she pleases”⁴⁷⁸ Rousseau suggests that women might not use and direct this motive well, but that they have a greater hold on men’s passions if they compel men to honor them, which is not that hard to do. It is hard here not to recall Montesquieu’s depiction of a monarch’s ability to send men to do “all the hard things”—including dying—in return for everlasting glory. And whereas there is a sole monarch in Montesquieu’s form of government, women as such take the place of the single monarch. Each individual woman acts the role of a monarch and has a kind of psychological power over all those who love her.

In addition, Rousseau emphasizes that the measure of genuine honor is the ability to sacrifice on behalf of honor. This, then, is ground for agreement between Montesquieu and Rousseau. In many ordinary cases, honor can be displayed without self-sacrifice, or doing “the hard things,” like dying. Yet Rousseau seems to think that genuine honor rooted in love does induce one to be willing to do difficult things, like die on behalf of one’s beloved. According to Rousseau, in honoring his beloved, the “true” lover is completely ready to “immolate himself” for his beloved.⁴⁷⁹ This formulation is a clear echo of Montesquieu’s depiction of a monarch’s ability to induce his subjects to sacrifice themselves on his behalf in pursuit of honor. So great is the honor that in principle one may have for a woman that one may consent to lose one’s life on a woman’s behalf. Yet

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 570.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 573.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 571.

whereas Rousseau praises this phenomenon, it disappears or is significantly underemphasized in Montesquieu's commercial republic. The apparent great appeal, the selling point even, of commercial republics, is that sacrifice can be dispensed with and pleasure pursued. This pleasure for Rousseau, however, is merely petty pleasure that is accompanied by profound miseries. This is, in addition, an example where honor causes men's concerns to transcend this-worldly concerns, even as they are rooted in very this-worldly concerns. Although the original motive seems to be sexual gratification, it seems to be elevated and redirected toward a kind of desire to be rewarded in the afterlife because of one's devotion to one's beloved. Men may be induced to honor women in such an extreme way that they may see their only happiness in death on behalf of one's beloved.

8.4 THE CASE OF POLAND

As we have seen, according to Rousseau amour-propre is an unnatural passion that necessarily arises when human beings live together in society. From the perspective of nature its effects are largely negative—amour-propre leads men to live outside of themselves in a futile search for perfect satisfaction. Because it exacerbates the disproportion between our desires and faculties it necessarily leads to unhappiness. While amour-propre can in some cases be channeled in healthy directions, in *Emile* Rousseau limits himself to examining romantic love (and as we will see pity or compassion) as a healthy channel for amour-propre. In another of his writings, the “Considerations on the Government of Poland and of Its Planned Reformation,” Rousseau shows how amour-

propre can be directed in a healthy way by arousing a sense of individual pride in citizens' souls that will have good communal effects. In doing well for oneself one will do well for one's country. In the "Considerations," Rousseau responds to Montesquieu's typology of forms of government, and Rousseau's plan for Poland seems at first glance to be similar to Montesquieu's account of monarchy and its animating passion of honor. It is in some ways similar, but against Montesquieu Rousseau seems to want to reduce the tendency toward vanity and luxury in a society animated by honor and to increase patriotic devotion to the common good. In addition, while his emphasis on patriotic citizenship is similar to the effects of ancient republicanism, Rousseau seems to suggest that individual prideful zeal can have good public effects without introducing the harsh inhumaneness of ancient virtue into political life. The self-interest of individual pride is a surer means of producing good public effects than self-repressing virtue.⁴⁸⁰ And in his account of Poland Rousseau makes explicit reference to Montesquieu's model English government, with its emphasis on material gain and vanity, which in his view leads men away from public concerns and toward the way of the petty, vain bourgeois, who in *Emile* Rousseau describes as floating aimlessly between their inclinations and their duties, amounting, at bottom, to nothing substantial, and being all but indifferent to the common good as they pursue their own material gain. In this section then, I will examine Rousseau's planned reform for Poland as it relates to pride, and why he is apparently

⁴⁸⁰ Hassner suggests that one reason Rousseau does not want to rely on virtue in the case of Poland is that it is simply too large a state. Virtue can only be effective in smaller city-states. Pierre Hassner, "Rousseau and the Theory and Practice of International Relations," in *The Legacy of Rousseau*, ed. Clifford Orwin and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 208.

optimistic about Poland's political prospects, given his criticism of conventional monarchy and pessimism about politics more generally.

Rousseau begins his examination of the Polish constitution by noting how “bizarrely” constituted it is, and wondering how it could have lasted so long in such a state. And in contrast to Montesquieu and in conformity with his teaching in *Emile*, Rousseau is generally pessimistic about the possibility of a stable and healthy politics for any political community. It is categorically impossible, he suggests, for men's passions not to abuse the laws under which they live, and he compares the challenge of having men live under law to the problem of squaring the circle in geometry.⁴⁸¹ Rousseau, then, begins on an extremely pessimistic note, in contrast to Montesquieu's generally positive vision regarding the problem of politics. For Montesquieu, the remedy for men's potential abuses of power—rooted in their passions—is an enduring institutional framework that channels men's passions a way that Montesquieu thinks will bring stability, security, and comfortable prosperity. Despite his initial pessimism and distance from Montesquieu, however, Rousseau nonetheless has some degree of optimism regarding the reformation of Poland's constitution. And as I will try to show, Rousseau's prescription for Poland resembles to some degree Montesquieu's prescription for monarchies, even if there are important differences between their political prescriptions. The most noteworthy example of their similarity is that Rousseau borrows Montesquieuian language in describing what can potentially animate the Polish constitution: he specifically uses the term “spring,” as Montesquieu did. And the spring

⁴⁸¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Plan for Perpetual Peace, On the Government of Poland, and Other Writings on History and Politics*, trans. Christopher Kelly and Judith R. Bush (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2011), 170.

he wants to animate in Poland is pride, and the desire to emulate others in order to rise in the government: emulation in zeal and glory for the benefit both of oneself and of the government is “a powerful spring over great and ambitious souls.”⁴⁸²

A good constitution, according to Rousseau, is one in which the law rules over human hearts. Modern legislators fail to see this problem, and to the extent that they think about political problems they tend only to think about force, punishment, and material benefits. Modern politics aims at preserving men’s natural freedom and equality, but it necessarily tends toward despotism. In speaking of legislators who think only of force and punishment Rousseau refers to despotic government or governments tending toward despotism. On this point Montesquieu would agree with Rousseau’s diagnosis. Yet, in speaking of material gain, Rousseau seems to refer to Montesquieu’s model commercial republics. While the citizens of a commercial republic pursue material goods, they tend to lack a sense of prideful public-spiritedness that leads to “a good and solid constitution,” or at least as good a constitution as can be made. Material pursuits tend to lead to a private life away from concern with the common good. In his praise of commercial republics Montesquieu had thought it possible to dispense as much as possible with a concern with the common good, or his understanding of self-sacrificing virtue. Or rather, the common good comes about as men pursue a comfortable life of luxury as the government ensures their safety and security. Men are thus led away from public-spirited concern for the common good. Rousseau suggests that such a lack of concern with the common good will lead to weak and petty souls. Yet Rousseau seems to agree with Montesquieu that the methods of ancient legislators were indeed harsh and inhumane. In

⁴⁸² Rousseau, *Considerations*, 231.

his entire plan for Poland, Rousseau almost never speak of virtue or its necessity, in the way the Montesquieu sometimes does and in the way that Rousseau sometimes does, in a paradoxical way, in *Emile*: as a painful passions of self-repression in the name of the common good. Rousseau's prescription, like Montesquieu's, is more humane than that of Lycurgus, although in a different way than Montesquieu had intended. Rousseau, like Montesquieu, relaxes the spring of men's souls to some degree, but Rousseau thinks that enlivening pride and emulation can have good political effects in a way that Montesquieu thought was dispensable. Rousseau's plan, he suggests, is "adapted to the human heart" in a way that Montesquieu's plan for commercial republics, in Rousseau's view, lacks.⁴⁸³ Yet even as he praises pride and emulation Rousseau's largely negative analysis of amour-propre in *Emile* must be kept in mind. There Rousseau wants Emile's amour-propre to be restrained as much as possible, and to be directed if anywhere in the direction of romantic love, thereby limiting it to a very small scale, between two individuals. Emile at the end of Book 5 of *Emile* is in a position to become a citizen, although he consents to join no community except the natural family he starts with Sophie, and he emulates no one in order to rise in any society. Rousseau wants Emile to be as free and independent as possible from other men's opinions about him, since opinion would cause Emile to live outside of himself and feel his being only according to the whim of others. Rousseau's plan for Poland involves a different ordering of the passions than in *Emile*, then, and in the plan for Poland Rousseau downplays the tensions and problems of a patriotic education to citizenship. Unlike the natural or minimally social man Emile, the Polish citizens will feel their whole beings only in the whole of the

⁴⁸³ Rousseau, *Considerations*, 240.

community, and will not know, as Emile does, of the problematic and potentially painful nature of amour-propre.

Part of what makes Rousseau's prescription for Poland so striking is that it turns Montesquieu's pessimism regarding Poland on its head. While Montesquieu is generally optimistic about founding new commercial republics devoted to liberty around the world in as many places as possible, Montesquieu is pessimistic about Poland's chances in this regard. And while Rousseau is generally pessimistic about any healthy politics anywhere, Rousseau is relatively optimistic about Poland. Throughout *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu is consistently pessimistic about a healthy politics emerging in Poland, in particular with regard to a healthy commerce. Even where Poland might resemble Montesquieu's description of monarchy, with its principle of honor animating the government, Montesquieu has virtually nothing good to say about Poland. To begin with, he laments that in Poland the peasants are the "slaves" of the nobility.⁴⁸⁴ In addition, in Poland, not only is there an extreme inequality of fortunes, but Poland on the whole is quite poor compared to other nations, and it is unable to enjoy the luxury of richer states.⁴⁸⁵ The Polish constitution, moreover, is badly ordered since while it aims at the independence of all, it includes a *liberum veto*, a vote of one over all, which according to Montesquieu results in "the oppression of all."⁴⁸⁶ The Poles were once enslaved to ambitious despots from the east (the Tartars), and they have not been able to recover from this unfortunate state.⁴⁸⁷ And Poland sadly lacks what a healthy commercial life needs

⁴⁸⁴ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 17.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 287.

most to flourish: “movable effects,” such as silver, notes, letters of exchange, shares, ships, and commodities. Almost any people is in principle capable of acquiring movable effects, and they can be acquired if one is blessed with natural goods and the ability to labor for them and trade with others to one’s advantage. According to Montesquieu, however, since the Poles are not blessed with any of these things, it would be far better to give up hope in enriching oneself, since attempting to engage in commerce will necessarily lead to poverty. The only movable effect that Poland has is “the grain of its fields,” which only a tiny minority of nobles possesses. Because of this natural penury, “If Poland had commerce with no nation its people would be happier.”⁴⁸⁸ A very pitiful happiness compared to more fortunate commercial nations, to be sure.

There are several broad points on which Montesquieu and Rousseau both agree with regard to Poland, as well as a couple points where they disagree. To begin with, Montesquieu and Rousseau both agree that Poland’s political institutions are hierarchically structured. It is therefore inegalitarian and not a democracy or a republic. Furthermore, they both agree that Poland is afflicted with widespread poverty, and that there are not any viable ways for the Poles to lift themselves out of poverty, even if they were to wish to do so. They therefore agree that the Poles have very bad commercial prospects, and that they cannot look to enriching themselves to improve their situation. And Montesquieu and Rousseau both agree that Poland has a badly ordered constitution. However, there are some broad points where Montesquieu and Rousseau fundamentally disagree about Poland’s political prospects. First, although they both agree that Poland is in a bad position with regard to commerce and enriching themselves, Rousseau disagrees

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 353.

with Montesquieu and thinks that Poland is not doomed because it is not able to advance itself commercially. And Rousseau also disagrees with Montesquieu with regard to the ability of the Poles simply to reform their constitution well. Montesquieu thinks that the Polish constitution is so badly ordered that it is hopeless to try to reform it. On the other hand Rousseau thinks that the Poles' are in a unique situation whereby even though they do have a badly ordered constitution their constitution can be reformed well with the right institutions.

Montesquieu's prognosis for Poland is bleak coming from a philosopher who relentlessly promotes the spread of commerce in most other occasions. By contrast, whereas Rousseau is generally pessimistic about the prospects for a healthy politics in virtually any circumstance and he is especially critical of conventional monarchy, Rousseau is surprisingly sanguine about the Poles' ability to reform their government in a healthy way, given their current circumstances. As Anne Cohler notes, "For Montesquieu, Poland is a corrupt society with corrupt laws; for Rousseau, it is an imperfect nation lacking proper political form."⁴⁸⁹ In Poland, distaste for luxury and a healthy attachment to patriotism can be taken advantage of to improve what might be only temporarily a bad situation. Montesquieu was pessimistic about Polish success in acquiring money. By contrast, Rousseau likes that the Poles are bad at making money since strictly economic motives prevent the development of a healthy national patriotism. Rousseau is critical about modern politics in general because while Hobbes, Locke and Montesquieu claim that it can preserve our natural freedom and equality and make us quite comfortable and generally peaceful in doing so, Rousseau thinks that modern

⁴⁸⁹ Anne Cohler, *Rousseau and Nationalism* (New York : Basic Books, 1971), 31.

politics in fact destroys our natural freedom and equality and leads to greater fear and ultimately despotism. (I will deal with this theme more thoroughly in the following chapter on Rousseau's treatment of fear.) According to Rousseau, modern politics involves nothing but "arms and cash."⁴⁹⁰ Whereas modern politics promises freedom, the effectual truth is that it necessarily leads to despotism. Because of his cynicism about modern politics, Rousseau is fond of contrasting the greatness of soul of the ancients against the pettiness and narrowness of soul of we moderns: according to Rousseau, the ancients were great, seemingly a species apart and superior to ours: "They did exist, and they were humans as we are: what prevents us from being men like them? Our prejudices, our base philosophy, the passions of petty self-interest, concentrated along with egoism in all hearts by the inept institutions that genius never laid down."⁴⁹¹ Yet the Poles have remained relatively inoculated against the bad effects of modern politics. According to Rousseau, Poland is the one nation that comes closest to possessing the spirit of the ancients.⁴⁹²

Rousseau encourages the Poles to avoid the example of modern legislators—such as those influenced by Montesquieu—and instead to imitate the ancients in some regards. In looking for ways to attach the citizens to each other and to their country, the ancients encouraged games and exercises, which increased men's pride and self-esteem and attached them to each other and to their country. This method, Rousseau suggests, "inflamed [men] with a lively emulation," which kept them "ceaselessly occupied" with

⁴⁹⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music*, trans. John T. Scott (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2009), 332.

⁴⁹¹ Rousseau, *Considerations*, 171.

⁴⁹² Rousseau, *Considerations*, 174.

their country.⁴⁹³ What is striking in this analysis is that Rousseau suggests that the ancients were making use of a part of the soul—self-interested pride—when they thought that they were training men in virtue. And whereas Montesquieu’s typical men in a commercial republic are concerned with their private life and wealthy, Rousseau shows how men might be induced by their care for their own self-interest to be “ceaselessly” concerned with their country’s good. Yet this self-interest is noteworthy in that it causes men to be concerned with something greater than themselves, their country. Unlike commercial men they will not be motivated simply by material self-interest and unlike ancient republican citizens they will not be led exclusively by a sense of stern duty. According to Rousseau, the Poles will “do out of taste and passion what is never done well enough when it is done out of duty or interest.”⁴⁹⁴ If the Poles’ constitution does not emulate Montesquieu’s ancient republics or modern commercial republics, however, nor does it resemble exactly Montesquieu’s monarchies, even if, on the surface, they may appear to be similar, as both are rooted in a conception of honor. Rousseau’s goal for the Poles is much more public-spirited on the whole than Montesquieu’s example of monarchic honor.

One major difference between Emile’s natural education and the social education of the Poles regards their self-esteem. In *Emile*, Rousseau prevents for as long as possible comparison between Emile and other men, and to the extent Emile compares himself with anybody, he compares himself with himself at earlier stages of his education. Emile

⁴⁹³ Todorov emphasizes that festivals, ceremonies, and games are to be specific to Poland: “The more various forms of social life are specific to one country, and to no other, the more they help attach the citizen to his fatherland.” Todorov, *Frail Happiness*, 26.

⁴⁹⁴ Rousseau, *Considerations*, 175.

learns that all men are at bottom in some way inferior to other men and that neither he nor anyone is responsible for any natural abilities. By contrast, Rousseau wants the Poles to “begin by giving [themselves] a great opinion of themselves and of their fatherland.”⁴⁹⁵ Whereas Emile is a natural man made for living in society, the Poles are meant to be, from the beginning of their lives to the end, citizens, that is, a part of the whole and they will feel themselves continuously to be part of a whole. This identification with the social whole gives the Poles a kind of psychological strength or strength of soul that they would not have if they saw themselves as merely isolated individuals. The Poles will identify both with their ancestors, with their contemporaries, and with future generations. In addition, Rousseau’s depiction of Poland seems to have a different effect than Montesquieu’s account of honor. For Montesquieu, the emphasis is on the honor that the subject of the monarch receives from the monarch, which preoccupies and apparently fully satisfies the subject. The effect of pacifying the subjects in this way is that the monarchy will be peaceful and all the subjects satisfied, with honors, even down to the lowliest subject. Yet Rousseau, in contrast, encourages activity and mobility, and constantly striving for greater and greater honors, which has good effects from the point of view of citizenship. Part of Rousseau’s critique of amour-propre in *Emile* is that it causes men to strive ceaselessly for a happiness that can never be achieved, yet it is precisely this kind of ceaseless striving that Rousseau wants to implant in the souls on the Poles. For Montesquieu the subjects of the monarch will be inclined to turn inward, away from public life, and many will be preoccupied with luxury and vanity. For Montesquieu, monarchy is a kind of transition government on the way to commercial republics with

⁴⁹⁵ Rousseau, *Considerations*, 175; my emphasis.

very little public spiritedness. Indeed, monarchies point the way to commercial republics in that they are in principle capable of producing political freedom. Rousseau, by contrast, wants to slow the perhaps inevitable progress from public-spirited citizenship to the kind of bourgeois life of Montesquieu's commercial republics, where the emphasis is not on citizenship but on individual luxury and vanity and the secure preservation of the individual. This reorientation promises the Poles no less than a "different kind of happiness" than that of getting rich.⁴⁹⁶

Rousseau offers a number of specific practical reforms for introducing the positive effects of pride in public life. One is to have open-air spectacles where ranks are distinguished and in which the non-noble take part, in the hopes of joining the nobility by distinguishing themselves. Next, there are to be theaters of exercise where the young might emulate the strongest and most skillful, and thereby acquire, if they are successful, honors and rewards. Scholarships are to be given to children whose fathers have served the state well. The profession of lawyer should only be a step to being a judge, and judgeships should only be temporary posts on the way to higher ranked positions within the government. What all these practical reforms have in common is that the Polish citizens will be in constant competition with each other, emulating those possessing higher ranks, yet rather than work for their individual monetary profit the practical effect will be the common good of all. Using Montesquieuan language, Rousseau argues that the desire to rise ever higher in the government will be a great "spring" for the government. Rousseau here downplays the psychologically painful side of amour-propre. In *Emile*, Emile was made to taste the intoxicating vapors of pride only to be pained by

⁴⁹⁶ Rousseau, *Considerations*, 176.

the futility of constantly striving to satisfy his amour-propre. Amour-propre in this way highlights the disproportion between our faculties and our excessive desires. Yet whereas in *Emile* Rousseau examines the effects of amour-propre from the perspective of the individual, in the “Considerations” he considers the good effects of amour-propre from the perspective of the social whole. And while this perspective reminds the reader of Montesquieu’s perspective on monarchy, a major difference between their perspectives is that Rousseau emphasizes the constant striving for higher ranks and greater honors—any citizen can in fact in principle rise to the position of elected king—while Montesquieu emphasizes the peace and calm that result from the monarchy’s dispensing various honors. There must be a greater psychological agitation that must exist among the Poles than Rousseau lets on in this essay, yet the psychological anguish of the natural perspective that he highlights in *Emile* is apparently a price worth paying for the good political effects of this plan, which are healthier, in Rousseau’s view, than any practical alternatives.

Rousseau indirectly criticizes Montesquieu when he blames the moderns as a whole for failing to appreciate the full effects of pride in political life. It is by being directed to the common good that the ancients, Rousseau suggests, acquired “vigor of soul,” and “patriotic zeal.” As we have seen, Montesquieu had admired the ancients’ virtue and strength of soul while denying that it was possible ever to reacquire those attributes, due in large part to the effects of Christianity on modern morals. Rousseau suggests that such strength of soul is still available to men as men, without exhorting self-sacrificing virtue backed up by religious hopes. The ancients, Rousseau suggests, used pride rooted in self-interest more than they thought. What really motivated the ancients

was not virtue simply but pride. And whereas Montesquieu thinks that ancient virtue is not only lost but in some way morally repulsive, Rousseau suggests that the pride that the ancients unwittingly made use of is available to all legislators at all times, even if there is as yet no example of this vigor of soul in modern times.

The closest that Rousseau's description of Poland comes to Montesquieu's description of monarchic honor is when he recommends distributing "purely honorific recompenses appropriately."⁴⁹⁷ The Montesquieuian monarch too judiciously distributes honors among the subjects, but here too Rousseau emphasizes public spiritedness and citizenship as the byproducts of the distribution of honors more than Montesquieu does. The Montesquieuian monarchy allows and even encourages vanity and luxury. By contrast, Poland will have public-spirited "heroes for citizens," who are honored by an inexhaustible "treasury of honors." The importance that Rousseau assigns to citizenship is in accord with his broad condemnation of material profit that is part of Montesquieu's praise of the movement from monarchy, where luxury and vanity play a role, to commercial republics, where profit, luxury, and vanity play a large role, and where public spirited citizenship is almost an afterthought. Indeed, Montesquieu's hope with the rise of commercial republics is that devotion to the common good can be dispensed with as much as possible as individuals live in comfortable luxury and security. One of Rousseau's critiques of material profit is not profit itself—after all, citizens striving for greater honors is a kind of striving for greater profit—but rather that it turns individuals inward away from public life. According to Rousseau, pecuniary recompenses are not public enough, they disappear as soon as they are granted, and they do not leave "any

⁴⁹⁷ Rousseau, *Considerations*, 212.

visible trace that excites emulation by perpetuating the honor that ought to accompany them.”⁴⁹⁸ In praising public life to such a great degree, Rousseau explicitly contradicts his condemnation of social life in *Emile*. In *Emile*, as we recall, Rousseau blamed society for necessarily compelling men to live unnaturally outside of themselves, and according to irrational public opinions. In the “Considerations,” by contrast, Rousseau praises “external signs” of honor as leading to good social effects. On the one hand external signs are praiseworthy because they are good for the Polish nation as a whole: the state will be stronger for it. On the other hand, however, it indirectly benefits individual men since the strength of soul that is a byproduct of prideful patriotism increases the intensity of each individual citizen’s sentiment of his own existence.⁴⁹⁹ The Montesquieuan alternative of a private life devoted to material profit decreases men’s sentiment of their existence as men seek material profit in a life of enervating luxury, and the pleasures of profit are always just beyond their grasp. Whereas *Emile* as a natural man is only concerned with his own well-being and his own opinion of himself, and Montesquieu’s commercial men will be preoccupied with their private profit and vain and superficial opinions, the Polish citizens will constantly be under the public eye, striving incessantly for higher and more praiseworthy offices, and feeling the psychological strength of pride.

This emulation of those occupying higher offices and pride in occupying the offices one acquires with integrity has, I have tried to show, a twofold purpose: on the one hand, a public and patriotic good of concerning citizens with something greater than themselves opposed to material profit and a zeal and even “intoxication” that enlivens the

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁹ Cooper points to the positive connection between patriotism and the sentiment of the citizen’s existence. Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*, 25.

souls of all the citizens and their sentiment of their existence as they strive for greater offices. Whereas the Poles and Montesquieu's commercial men will both be occupied with a kind of profit, the commercial men will be occupied with cupidity while the Poles will be consumed with ambition, from the lowest peasant to those in the highest offices of government administration. There is an equality of opportunity for all Poles, even the peasants, to be admitted to the nobility, and from there to rise by means of emulation to the highest governmental offices. Those in public affairs will be given tests and if they succeed at the each stage they will rise from servants of the state to deputies of the Diet, deputies to the courts, commissioners of the chamber of accounts, and upwards to the kingship. By rising, any citizen can in principle reach the top of the republic gradually, and all can "draw nearer to [the crown] by dint of merit and of services."⁵⁰⁰ Whereas Montesquieu emphasizes content with one's station and the honor that one receives from the monarch, Rousseau emphasizes a constant mobility (rooted in equality of opportunity).

In Book 1 of *Emile*, Rousseau had criticized the modern tendency toward a bourgeois way of life in which men float between their inclinations and their duties, and they lack any genuine substance of soul, either as natural or social beings. As I have tried to show, we can see this movement in Montesquieu's depiction of both monarchies and commercial republics—Montesquieu advocates or at least does not blame the tendency toward luxury, vanity, and a turn away from public life in which men are neither wholes nor genuine citizens. Rousseau's planned reformation for Poland seeks to overcome this—in Rousseau's mind—lamentable modern tendency, at least to the extent that this is

⁵⁰⁰ Rousseau, *Considerations*, 231.

possible. By means of an appeal to self-interest, Rousseau seeks to enliven Polish public life as much as possible in a way that is good for the nation as a whole as well as for the souls of individual citizens. And he does this even despite his powerful and unforgettable condemnation of *amour-propre* in his other works.

Having now given an account of Rousseau's ambiguous analysis of *amour-propre*—and the ways in which it is similar to and differs from Montesquieu's analysis of monarchic honor—I will now turn to Rousseau's account of the passion of fear in Emile's education, and the ways to prevent its emergence or direct it well. In doing so I will keep in mind Montesquieu's analysis of despotic fear in order to see where Montesquieu and Rousseau might agree or disagree as to the status of the passion of fear. As we will see, according to Rousseau fear is a more natural passion than *amour-propre*, but like *amour-propre*, enlightened foresight must be able to manage fear as best it can in order to prevent it from excessively harming men's souls.

9.0 FEAR, FORCE, AND DESPOTISM

In Montesquieu's account of the passion of fear, men are naturally inclined to be fearful and because of this, in his view, unfortunate tendency, they are inclined to submit to despots, who then keep their subjects in a state of perpetual fear. Because fear is so natural, according to Montesquieu, men are particularly susceptible to despotism, which is the most common and the most natural form of government. Montesquieu's analysis of fear is fundamentally political: Montesquieu's primary concern is to highlight how natural and common despotism is, while proposing a political solution—a more enlightened political science—as the appropriate remedy for the natural tendency toward despotism. Rousseau's analysis starts in a similar place as Montesquieu's: he admits that men are naturally inclined to be fearful of unknown objects, at least without the appropriate knowledge to overcome this fear.⁵⁰¹ Yet Rousseau's analysis is significantly different from Montesquieu's because on the surface at least it does not seem to be as political as Montesquieu's analysis. Montesquieu's solution is explicitly political in that it proposes an alternative form of government to supplant despotisms. To be sure, part of Rousseau's response to preventing despotism is in his analysis of *amour-propre*: Emile's *amour-propre* will be managed in such a way that he will not desire to dominate and keep others in fear as a despot would. Yet there is no explicit political proposal in *Emile* as there is in Montesquieu. Instead, Rousseau focuses on Emile as an individual with a view to the management of his passion of fear with regard to the fear of death and the fear of

⁵⁰¹ Rousseau, *The Second Discourse*, 21.

darkness. By increasing his knowledge by habituation and regulating his imagination, Rousseau intends to prevent Emile from being dominated by fear. One of the byproducts of this education, however, will be a courage and intrepidity (that natural men eventually have) with regard to the fear of darkness that have some political implications. While Rousseau does not explicitly equate fear with despotism in the way that Montesquieu does, after Emile's education in the prevention or management of fear, Emile will be less inclined to be susceptible to despotism, because of his independence, courage, and lack of fear. In this chapter I will first give an account of Rousseau's view about the dangers of fear, give an account of Rousseau's critique of the vulnerability of even liberal forms of government to despotism in some other more explicitly political works, and then give an account of some of his proposed remedies.

9.1 FEAR AND CIVIL SOCIETY: THE DANGERS OF MODERN POLITICS

For Rousseau, modern politics as a whole, from Machiavelli and Hobbes onwards, relies on fear. This is despite the fact that the primary goal of modern politics is to secure citizens against the fear of death. Security is the goal or end of government for both Hobbes and Montesquieu. Yet modern politics cannot ever fully banish fear—it must use fear wisely and judiciously in order to prevent a return to the state of war. Hobbes makes clear that the sovereign must keep his subjects in a state of constant terror precisely in order to secure them and assuage their fear of death at the hands of other

men.⁵⁰² Montesquieu thinks that he has produced an institutional remedy that can thwart the tendency towards despotism that he thinks Hobbes' solution necessarily tends towards. Yet according to Rousseau, even Montesquieu's solution itself leads—if ever more subtly—toward the use of greater fear on the part of the government, for this reason: according to Rousseau, Hobbes and Montesquieu ultimately follow Machiavelli in basing politics on self-interest. By reducing morality to self-interest, their political projects tend to erode social ties and lead to the manipulation of others. When every individual wants to advance his interests, he does so at the expense of harming others. It is for this reason that Montesquieu thinks enlightened monarchies and commercial republics need fixed laws to prevent the abuse of power. Yet these laws will necessarily have to become harsher and more repressive, and ultimately more despotic, according to

⁵⁰² Douglass pithily distinguishes between Hobbes' and Rousseau's political projects when she writes, "For Hobbes, above all else, it was man's fear that needed to be rightly ordered in the commonwealth; for Rousseau, it was man's love." Robin Douglass, *Rousseau and Hobbes: Nature, Free Will, and the Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 10. And as she later writes, "For Rousseau, [healthy] politics was about appealing to the hearts of citizens by way of their passions, and the passion to be reckoned on was love." Ibid., 178. I would add that behind the apparent passion of (romantic) love is the more fundamentally the passion of *amour-propre* and still more fundamentally *amour de soi*, the passion to which Rousseau thinks all other passions can ultimately be reduced. Both *amour-propre* and *amour de soi* are at least somewhat natural passions, according to Rousseau, and healthier than fear. Douglass later argues that while Hobbes did not intend to present an Augustinian conception of man's nature, "his depiction of man in the state of nature in many respects resembled the Augustinian account of man's post-lapsarian state." Ibid., 185. While this appearance may in fact have been intended by Hobbes and served his rhetorical goals, Hobbes' account of human nature is very far from Augustine's. Douglass also later argues that Rousseau accepts a significant part of Augustine's account of man's natural sinfulness, and that for Rousseau, "Only post-lapsarian men need to be governed by fear, whereas naturally good men may be governed by love." Ibid., 187. I think it would be more accurate to say that for Rousseau all social men in the long run tend to be governed by fear, according to the historical development of social passions, without regard to Augustinian theology, despite any superficial appearances. Love is appropriate for those who have been denatured well, like Emile.

Rousseau, in order to prevent people from harming each other. And according to Rousseau, modern politics fails to provide an effective remedy to potential abuse on the part of the ruler or ruling class. Modern politics tries to abandon virtue—understood as selfless devotion to the common good—but once virtue has been abandoned as a motivating force (in addition to honor), economic self-interest is not a strong enough a motive to avoid despotism, and the government needs ever tougher politics in order to prevent people from harming each other. As Rousseau says, modern nations “do not know any other bonds than those of their self-interest; when they find it in fulfilling their engagements they will fulfill them; when they find it in breaking them, they will break them; it would be just as worthwhile not to make any.”⁵⁰³ Montesquieu, then, thinks that he has an effective alternative to Hobbes’ solution—political freedom and commerce—that can avoid despotic government. Rousseau, on the contrary, thinks that even Montesquieu’s solution can only tend toward greater fear and despotism.

9.2 ROUSSEAU’S ACCOUNT OF THE LIMITS OF SELF-INTEREST AS A MOTIVE FOR MODERN POLITICS

In addition to the more small-scale educational program of preventing the emergence and dominance of fear in Emile’s psyche, Rousseau also treats more broadly the more explicitly political significance of fear, especially in showing the limits of the earlier modern political solutions based on self-interest. This treatment occurs explicitly and implicitly in the *Political Economy* and in the *Considerations on Poland*. In these

⁵⁰³ Rousseau, *Considerations*, 237.

two works, Rousseau attacks earlier modern political solutions—from Machiavelli to Montesquieu—that sought to establish stable political orders based on self-interest. While Rousseau ultimately agrees that human nature necessarily inclines men to follow what they think is their self-interest, he thinks these kinds of regimes have a tendency to lead, paradoxically, to fear-driven forms of government, like tyrannies and despotisms. In the *Political Economy*, Rousseau points to the dire political consequences of the earlier modern political solutions, while in the *Considerations*, Rousseau urges Polish legislators to slow down the perhaps unavoidable slide toward despotism with the means at their disposal, and by avoiding the solutions adopted elsewhere in Europe that tend toward fear-based despotisms. I argue that Rousseau claims that the liberal solution Montesquieu recommends necessarily becomes despotic.

Throughout the *Political Economy*, Rousseau consistently points to the destructive power of self-interest to upend even the most carefully constructed regimes based on enlightened self-interest—liberal commercial republics and even his best political regime, articulated most fully in the *Social Contract*. Any regime based on self-interest, Rousseau thinks, will in the long run be corrupted by men’s selfish nature. And he strongly suggests that in the ruin of all these regimes will necessarily arise despotisms, where the strongest ruler will exploit others and rule them through fear. Rousseau contrasts a just regime in which all keep their promises, rooted in their freely given consent, to the way men actually act, where no scruple constrains those who perceive it to be in their immediate interest to break their promises and evade the laws. In a natural family, a parent may be constrained by “natural feelings,” which tends to prevent a parent from abusing its power. In a government, however, rulers are not obligated to the people

in this way, and as there is no natural restraint against abuse, they are more inclined to break their promises and to pursue their interests at the expense of the common good.⁵⁰⁴ As Rousseau says, “Far from the leader’s having a natural interest in the happiness of private individuals, it is not unusual for him to seek his own happiness in their misery.”⁵⁰⁵ Rousseau goes so far as to suggest that claims of justice and moral restraint are completely ineffective in the face of the power of self-interest, and that there is a direct line from this ineradicable feature of human nature to tyranny or despotism. Rulers, he indicates, have no natural or moral reason to love their subjects, and as “abuses are inevitable,” “their consequences [are] disastrous in all societies, where the public interest and the laws have no natural force and are continually assailed by the personal interest and passions of both leaders and members.”⁵⁰⁶ In short, whereas a parent has a natural restraint to untrammelled and potentially abusive power, at least in principle, a political ruler has no such restraint and by simply obeying his nature he will acquire and abuse power.

According to Rousseau, any healthy social or political life as such demands self-sacrifice to the good of the community, and members of any particular community are

⁵⁰⁴ Although he does not discuss the passion of fear explicitly, Knippenberg argues persuasively that the power of self-love in Emile—as in any human being—renders any genuine cosmopolitan political order chimerical and ineffectual. The base case, for Rousseau, is that “allegiance to most regimes will follow from attachment to a family, and the latter will condition and restrict the scope of the former.” Joseph M. Knippenberg, “Moving Beyond Fear: Rousseau and Kant on Cosmopolitan Education,” *Journal of Politics* 51 (1989): 824. Yet as I try to argue in this chapter, the corruption of the passions makes these more natural passions more and more ineffectual, and makes necessary the political deployment of fear and force. Emile’s family and unorthodox republicanism cannot serve as realistic models for modern politics.

⁵⁰⁵ Rousseau, *Political Economy*, 140-41.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

obligated, through their consent to joining that community, to fulfill their duties to that exclusive community. By nature men, because they are originally and naturally apolitical and even amoral, owe no obligation to others, since they belong to no political community. But conventional societies stand or fall on the degree to which members defer to the obligations to which they consent, and in order to fulfill their duties they must sacrifice some degree of their self-interest. The natural force of self-interest, in seeking to acquire rather than to sacrifice power, therefore tends to cause the deterioration of the precondition of society: “Unfortunately personal interest is always found in inverse ratio to duty, and it increases in proportion as the association becomes narrower and the engagement less sacred.”⁵⁰⁷ While self-interest is then a requirement of a just society, since it grounds legitimacy on freely given consent, which in principle preserves the wholly unconstrained freedom of the state of nature, self-interest is also an accompaniment of political *injustice*. Self-interest, or at least apparent self-interest, seduces men to find ways to shirk their duties to which they had previously assented, without constraint.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁷ Rousseau, *Political Economy*, 144.

⁵⁰⁸ As Masters puts it, “Mutual needs may explain why men have a common interest in uniting, but as long as needs alone—and the self-interested calculation of how to satisfy those needs—are the sole basis of unity, no society or even friendship can last. Insofar as one joins a group only for one’s selfish motives, as soon as self-interest or pride dictates one can also leave it. Indeed it could be said that Rousseau’s entire political teaching is directed, at least in part, against what he saw to be the weakness of the Hobbesian-Lockean derivation of civil society from self-interest alone; for Rousseau, such a theoretical position destroyed any bond of affection within the city, and thus replaced true patriotism and civic virtue with a base and selfish bourgeois calculation.” Roger D. Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 44-45.

It is possible, Rousseau suggests, for republics to go to war unjustly or for democratic counsels to pass bad laws and condemn innocent men.⁵⁰⁹ Yet rather than attribute these failings to a lack of wisdom on the part of the rulers of a republic, Rousseau attributes them to the seduction and rise of private interests within the rulers of a republic, that is, those elected to representatives legitimately elected to represent the interests of citizens, and to pursue, at least in principle, the general will. When the private influence of a few rulers prevails at the expense of the will of all, then “The public deliberation will be one thing and the general will a completely different thing.”⁵¹⁰ Injustice arises, and legitimate government collapses, when the private interests of a few trump the general will of all, to which all had previously submitted, including those with the most politically powerful private interests, since those with genuine power have no natural restraint to using that power for their private ends. In this way natural self-interest provides the moral basis for legitimate government, yet it also necessarily leads to the destruction of legitimate government. In the long run the most powerful private interest or interests will acquire power and seek to exploit those without power, and in Rousseau’s view there is nothing that legislation or political institutions can do to avert this tendency. Any institutional arrangement, even the best and most just, tends towards despotism, and any foresight will be ineffectual in preventing this over the long run. Even one of the most highly esteemed classical exemplars of democracy, Athens, Rousseau reveals to be merely an apparent democracy. Behind the façade of Athenian democracy was “a highly tyrannical aristocracy, governed by learned men and orators.”⁵¹¹

⁵⁰⁹ Rousseau, *Political Economy*, 144.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

Rousseau makes a clear distinction between the way things actually are in politics, and the way they really ought to be, if justice and morally had the power to come into being. While the true general will promotes the true common good of society, Rousseau thinks clear-minded political observers should have no illusions about the effectual power of the general will. Indeed it would be senseless to think that the self-interested wills of those in power will bow to the common good. While we can know something about what the general will or justice ought to be, it is in vain to expect that it can ever be brought into being, given both men's ignorance and their natural motives.⁵¹² As Rousseau says, "It would be sheer madness to hope that those who are in fact masters will prefer another interest to their own."⁵¹³ Rousseau explicitly articulates this difference when he points to the difference between what he calls popular and tyrannical political economy. Popular political economy, rooted in the general will, is legitimate, where "the people and the leaders have the same interest and the same will." By contrast, tyrannical political economy is where the people and the government have "different interests and consequently opposing wills."⁵¹⁴ At first glance it might appear that Rousseau is hopeful that justice and a legitimate political order can in principle triumph over the depredations of the powerful and corrupt. Yet Rousseau points to the power of tyranny by suggesting that the maxims of tyrannical political economy are seen "all through the archives of history and in Machiavelli's satires." While taking the heterodox position that

⁵¹² According to Masters, "*The Second Discourse* reveals a generally pessimistic view of the historical evolution of civil society; Rousseau shares neither the quietism of a moral critic for whom political action can never have salutary effects, nor the doctrinaire optimism that human progress is necessarily beneficial and can be readily secured by enlightenment or revolution" Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau*, 197.

⁵¹³ Rousseau, *Political Economy*, 145.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

Machiavelli might not have actually recommended cold-blooded and inhumane tyranny in his own voice, Rousseau thinks Machiavelli was indeed right about tyrannical rulers being more the rule than the exception in politics, and that all political history confirms the fact that those who have political power are unconstrained by scruples about fealty to legitimate government, and necessarily tend to exploit those who do not have political power. The narrow interests of the rulers acquiring and maintaining power without restraint is the effectual truth of all political life, as Machiavelli boldly and accurately suggested. But despite the immorality and corruption of politics, and the impossibility of changing these facts, legitimate government, that is, government rooted in a genuine general will, is according to Rousseau the moral standard that ought to guide all political life. Despite their political powerlessness, popular political economy is “found only in the writings of philosophers who dare to defend the rights of humanity.” Political legitimacy is ultimately grounded in the unconstrained wills of all the members of a political community, each of whom will try to constrain the wills of others if their private will is unrestrained by a power that enforces the general will. As Rousseau says, “It is certain that if someone can constrain my will, I am no longer free, and that I am no longer master of my goods if another can meddle with them.”⁵¹⁵ It is this universal desire to be unconstrained by the wills of others that grounds the rights of humanity. Yet underneath Rousseau’s rhetoric about the rights of humanity is an indication that the desire not to be constrained by others more powerful than us leads to the desire not to be constrained by any legal or moral limits; he tacitly suggests that Machiavelli is right when he suggests that it is a very natural and ordinary thing to desire to acquire, and that while men in the

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., 145.

state of nature would not seek to profit from harming others, since they would have no motivation to do so, social men in their quest for power will not be restrained by any natural limits—like self-sufficiency and compassion—or moral limits. Those who acquire power will necessarily tend toward tyranny.

Basing the principle of government on self-interest leads to the necessity of tyranny in order to prevent the dissolution of the government. Following one's self-interest, a natural inclination and the basis of morality, leads perforce to corruption: "For the republic is on the brink of ruin as soon as someone can think it a fine thing not to obey the laws."⁵¹⁶ Rousseau then agrees with Montesquieu's account in Book I of *The Spirit of the Laws* where Montesquieu suggests that social men tend to evade established moral laws by nature. Naturally men do not follow any natural moral or political order that demands selfless devotion to the purported common good. In order to prevent political dissolution, the result of anarchic amoral self-interest, the rulers must become more heavy-handed and forceful to prevent citizens from eluding the laws. As self-interested men elude the laws, tyrannical severity becomes necessary, even if "Severity of punishment is merely a vain expedient thought up by small minds in order to substitute terror for the respect they cannot obtain."⁵¹⁷ As self-interest follows its natural course and established laws become ineffectual, since they fail to command respect, greater force becomes necessary to preserve political order, a political order that becomes inexorably more despotic in the rulers' attempt to maintain their power and prevent a return to the chaotic and violent state of nature. When a despotic ruler is able to maintain power,

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., 146.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 147.

“There is no art to making everyone tremble; and not even very much to winning men’s hearts; for experience has long taught the people to be very grateful to its leaders for all the evil they do not do to it, and to worship its leaders when not hated by them.”⁵¹⁸

According to Rousseau, and as with Montesquieu, not just illegitimate tyrannies and despotisms make use of heavy-handed force to maintain order and power.⁵¹⁹ Even legitimate governments use force and subjugation to maintain political order and prevent the return of political chaos.⁵²⁰ A legitimate government must use force to “subjugate men in order to make them free.”⁵²¹ This is because men are self-interested and they will seek to elude what they previously willed and agreed to do if it appears to them advantageous for them to do so.⁵²² When an apparent new interest comes to light that

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

⁵¹⁹ As Affeldt points out, “What is distinctive and original about Rousseau’s thought [with regard to political compulsion] lies entirely in his claim that the use of coercive power to force individuals to comply with the law, which in a clear sense infringes the freedom of individuals, amounts to forcing them to be free.” Stephen Affeldt, “The Force of Freedom: Rousseau on Forcing to be Free,” *Political Theory* 2 (1999): 303.

⁵²⁰ Simon-Ingram suggests that Rousseau hypocritically promotes a kind of “totalitarianism” in his project for Corsica that he deplors in earlier modern thinkers Julia Simon-Ingram, “Rousseau and the Problem of Community: Nationalism, Civic Virtue, Totalitarianism,” *History of European Ideas* 16 (1993): 23-29.

⁵²¹ The caricature of Rousseau as an unabashed totalitarian leads Bluhm to go so far as to connect Rousseau’s idea of the legislator with Hitler’s project. William Bluhm, *Force or Freedom? The Paradox in Modern Political Thought* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 126. Schwartz more soberly and I think accurately suggests that “Rousseau is more concerned with sustaining the legitimacy and cohesion of a modern society of diverse individuals than he is with promoting the ideological conformity and frenzied mobilization characteristic of totalitarian regimes.” Joseph T. Schwartz, *The Permanence of the Political: A Democratic Critique of the Radical Desire to Transcend Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 199), 64. And later: “Rousseau is too suspicious of concentrated state power and of political and social mobilization to be the unequivocal philosophical founder of modern totalitarianism.” Ibid., 217.

⁵²² Affeldt argues that “the private will [of citizens] is a threat to society because it represents a continuous temptation within the individual towards the state of nature.” Affeldt, “The Force of Freedom,” 311. Yet it is this “natural” inclination for freedom that leads in fact to a necessarily sociable and Hobbesian state of nature in which force rules.

diverges from what one previously desired and agreed to do, the original contract must be forced to be fulfilled, in order to prevent politically legitimate contracts and the freedom on which they are based from being meaningless. For this reason even a legitimate government must force men “to punish themselves when they do what they did not want.”⁵²³ While in a legitimate government, heavy-handed governmental force only *appears* tyrannical and in fact “no one loses any of his freedom except what would harm the freedom of another,”⁵²⁴ a government that can effectively preserve this freedom nonetheless possesses “the terrible restraint of the public authority.”⁵²⁵ Those who rule are compelled to act despotically even in trying to preserve political freedom.⁵²⁶ One possibly more hopeful alternative to dispensing with the necessity of acting with the

The natural inclination for freedom can no longer—because of historical changes to humanity—be fully satisfied in the original state of nature, and for this reason modern citizens are necessarily and mindlessly duped into submitting to a Hobbesian state that paradoxically extinguishes their natural freedom. As Affeldt points out, *any* association of individuals eventually becomes, according to Rousseau, tyrannical or ineffectual. *Ibid.*, 311.

⁵²³ Rousseau, *Political Economy*, 146. Strong notes that, unlike in Hobbes’ account, for Rousseau, “Death, insofar as it makes an appearance in the *Social Contract*, is to be welcomed as part of the life in common. The criminal condemned to die for his crimes is to look on his lot as chosen by himself in the act of citizenship.” Tracy Strong, “The General Will and the Scandal of Politics,” in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Critical Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers*, ed. John T. Scott (London: Routledge, 2006), 333.

⁵²⁴ Rousseau, *Political Economy*, 146.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*, 148. Affeldt notes that Rousseau envisions that citizens must “function as agents of constraint for others. Their own response to the call of the general will must be such that it will work to constrain others to heed that call as well.” Affeldt, “The Force of Freedom,” 314.

⁵²⁶ Emberley gives an account of Rousseau’s debts to Hobbes in his analysis of fear, and argues that “Fear counsels well, and Rousseau follows a tradition of modern thinkers who recognized that fear is a stable and certain passion on which to ground an effective morality.” Peter Emberley, “Rousseau and the Management of the Passions,” *Interpretation* 13 (1985): 167. This, for Rousseau, is ultimately an inevitable if regrettable phenomenon.

“appearance for tyranny” is for virtue, understood as selfless devotion to the laws, to effectively motivate both ruler and citizen. In order for the general will to be fulfilled in a legitimate government, then, virtue is a possible candidate for making the general will to come into being: “And since virtue is only [the] conformity of the private will to the general...make virtue reign.”⁵²⁷ Yet as we have seen, Rousseau has little confidence in the power of virtue understood in this way to effectively motivate and restrain both rulers and citizens. “All through the archives of history” men act according to what seems most advantageous to them at the moment and are not led by concerns about selfless virtue. While the general will is legitimately based on self-interest, the general will is only observed if it acquires a sacred authority to which men defer. Because men are not naturally bound by morality the general will and virtue as motives tend to be politically ineffectual, and any laws will be ineffectual without an ever more forceful government compelling its interpretation of the observation of the laws, in the absence of gods that reward or punish the observation of sacred laws. While good government based on virtue may last for awhile, as in Rome, virtue is at best a temporary brake toward eventual corruption and despotism.

We might hope that “the greatest wellspring of the public authority lies in the hearts of the citizens, and that for the maintenance of the government nothing can replace good morals.”⁵²⁸ The harder truth to swallow is that good morals are not very effective restraints, and that “Whatever precautions are taken [like trying to foster good morals as a public restraint], those who are only waiting for impunity to do evil will hardly lack

⁵²⁷ Rousseau, *Political Economy*, 149.

⁵²⁸ Ibid.

means of eluding the law or escaping a penalty.”⁵²⁹ *Whatever* precautions are taken, *whatever* might be done, men will elude the laws by following their immediate private interest, a very natural thing to do. Political virtue, then, however effectual it might be for a time, becomes ineffectual and political corruption inevitable: “The corruption of the people and leaders finally extends to the government, however wise it may be.”⁵³⁰ As virtue’s tenuous hold on men’s hearts weakens, “leaders are forced to substitute the cry of terror or the law of an apparent interest by which they deceive their creatures.”⁵³¹

Despotism then necessarily arises when an artificial constraint, the force of political virtue in men’s souls, loses its force as it inevitably does because of the natural power of self-interest. And in the absence of this artificial constraint, nothing can stop those who possess power from pursuing what appears to them to be their advantage. Like the atheist Wolmar’s discreet confession in Rousseau’s *Julie* that in the absence of a persuasive religious constraint his soul is weak in the face of carnal temptation,⁵³² Rousseau says here that “Once vice is no longer a dishonor, what leaders will be scrupulous enough to abstain from touching the public revenues left to their discretion” and pursue their own advantage even at the expense of harming the state?⁵³³ Once morality is corrupted and

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

⁵³⁰ Ibid.

⁵³¹ Ibid., 150.

⁵³² Rousseau, *Julie*, 404-5.

⁵³³ Rousseau, *Political Economy*, 159-60. As Masters puts it, “To be effective, morality must have a sanction binding the individual whose self-interest would lead him to ignore his obligations; without a necessary sanction, any rule of morality is merely a wish that the wicked can violate the prejudice of the good. Materialist philosophy, by openly attacking all religion, destroys the salutary belief in punishment after death without providing morality with an equivalent basis.” Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau*, 83.

loses its power self-interest causes rulers to seek their own profit at the expense of the common good, the legitimate general will.⁵³⁴

In the *Considerations on Poland*, Rousseau also considers the ineffectiveness of governments based on self-interest to maintain themselves, and their tendency to become despotic. He singles out both modern monarchies and modern republics, notably Montesquieu's favored forms of government, as examples of governments that appear to be "so wisely balanced," but which all ineluctably tend toward despotism. Institutions based on self-interest will not last, and he suggests that this will be the fate of all European monarchies and republics, and even of Poland if the Poles fail to heed Rousseau's advice to put a brake on the necessary tendency toward despotism with the means at their disposal. The corruption of all modern European states is a sobering example of the fact that even the most carefully crafted liberal institutions cannot prevent corruption and the abuse of power: "It is impossible to make any [laws] that men's passions do not abuse, as they have abused the first ones."⁵³⁵ All political institutions are

⁵³⁴ According to Masters, "The conversion of 'legitimate power into arbitrary power' destroying 'morals and virtues,' produces: the status...of master and slave, which is the last degree of inequality and the limit to which all the others finally lead, until new revolutions dissolve the government altogether or bring it closer to its legitimate institution." In addition, there is an admixture of hope in this dark account, since "all stages of human perfection lead ultimately to the final condition of slavery and tyranny, but this somber picture is qualified in one respect: the state of despotism is not necessarily permanent. New revolutions may conceivably destroy such governments or bring them back into harmony with the principles of a 'legitimate institution.'" Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau*, 197.

⁵³⁵ Rousseau, *Considerations*, 170. As Masters points out, "The weakness of [Rousseau's] constitutional solution is that it is subject to 'inevitable abuses' because 'experience' and 'knowledge of the human heart' both reveal that the delegation of power to magistrates and rulers will ultimately be used for private rather than public ends. But this abuse of power is a violation of the enlightened self-interest of the magistrate himself, since a ruler who disobeys the law thereby destroys his own legitimacy; the people have an absolute right of revolution. Merely by publishing the *Second Discourse*

susceptible to decay, because it is a natural inclination to acquire and abuse power. Persuading men to follow established laws and not abuse power is impossible: “To put law over men is a problem in politics which I compare to that of squaring the circle in geometry....Be sure that where you believe you are making the laws rule, it will be men who are ruling,” that natural self-interest causes all men to try to abuse power.⁵³⁶ Moral opinions and beliefs to which men defer can help at least to some degree the laws rule over men’s hearts, and provide a kind of preventive to corruption and the abuse of power. Rousseau suggests on the one hand that “good and solid” constitutions are ones where the law *does* rule over men’s hearts, although he undercuts this hope when he claims, on the other hand, that it is impossible to get laws to rule over men, that this is like trying to square the circle. But even more deeply, Rousseau suggests that even a legitimate government will tend toward despotism in trying to compel submission to the laws in the hearts of citizens: “As long as the legislative *force* does not reach that point, the laws will always be evaded.”⁵³⁷ Even a legitimate government, with representative institutions, is compelled to act with greater and greater force to prevent the self-interested evasion of the laws. And rather than act with a view to the common good, the rulers will use the force that they possess to their own advantage, corroding the institutions that were

Rousseau indicates to the citizens and magistrates of a legitimate regime—insofar as such regimes exist—that they have a mutual *interest* in preserving the sanctity of their laws against the ‘natural tendency’ of all governments to degenerate into tyranny.” Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau*, 191-192.

⁵³⁶ Rousseau, *Considerations*, 170-71. Masters describes how “the ‘extreme inequality of conditions,’ in combination with the vice inevitably produced by civil society, ultimately leads to despotism—the ‘fruit of an excess of corruption’ in which ‘the law of the strongest’ alone rules, as indeed had been the case (albeit with different effects) in the state of nature” Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau*, 196-197.

⁵³⁷ Rousseau, *Considerations*, 171; my emphasis.

instituted to protect the rights of all. Even a healthy morality, then, needs tyrannical guardians to enforce its (legitimate) demands, and the established institutions will be ineffectual since naturally power seeking rulers and ruled will evade the laws while seeking their own advantage. Polish legislators might try to emulate the ancients, because while the ancients were unable to prevent the inevitable tendency toward despotism, their politics knew, at least in some instances, how to animate virtue as a restraint on men's appetites. By contrast, modern politics is rooted in naked self-interest, which is a weaker preventative of despotism than virtue. Rousseau compares we modern men unfavorably with the ancients because of "Our prejudices, our base philosophy, the passions of petty self-interest, concentrated along with egoism in all hearts by the inept institutions that genius never laid down."⁵³⁸ Political virtue may in the long run be only a temporary brake on corruption and tyranny, but institutions based explicitly on self-interest are far less effective at preventing tyranny.

One of Machiavelli's most corrupting and powerful arguments is that even apparently morally good and decent men are compelled to be evil in order to defend themselves in the face of the depredations of evil men, or at least those who threaten their preservation.⁵³⁹ It is *necessary*, Machiavelli implores his readers, with some irony, to toughen up and know how to use evil means well; otherwise you will be destroyed by those who know better how to use power for evil ends. Rousseau makes a similar argument about the (unfortunate and lamentable) necessity of despotism to prevent anarchy. Echoing Hobbes' arguments in the *Leviathan*, basing a government exclusively

⁵³⁸ Ibid.

⁵³⁹ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 61.

on self-interest alone tends toward anarchy, and it is for that reason that a forceful despotism becomes necessary to prevent political disorder. As Rousseau says, modern nations “do not know any other bonds than those of self-interest; when they find it in fulfilling their engagements they will fulfill them; when they find it in breaking them, they will break them; it would be just as worthwhile not to make any.”⁵⁴⁰ Here Rousseau is speaking of interests between states, but it applies just as much to agreements before individuals within a state. If one finds one’s interest in an agreement, a forceful state becomes necessary to enforce that agreement, since men perceive their interests to be constantly in flux. And while one might hope or even expect that those who possess the power of the state might act virtuously for the common good, they too act with a view to their advantage and not to the true interests of the state. For Rousseau, it is ultimately the rapidly shifting and corrupt interests of those in power, acting with greater and greater force to prevent anarchy and pursue their own private interests, that most clearly show why any union between wisdom and politics is likely to be highly unstable at best. True “reason of state” might in principle guide a legitimate government, but almost always the state is led by “the momentary interest of a Minister, of a mistress, of a favorite; it is the motive that no human wisdom has been able to foresee that determines them sometimes for, sometimes against their true interests.”⁵⁴¹ According to Rousseau, it is the divergence of true interests and highly variable and unpredictable momentary and irrational interests that account for Socrates’ argument in Book V of the *Republic* about the perhaps permanent and insurmountable separation of wisdom and political power.

⁵⁴⁰ Rousseau, *Considerations*, 237.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid. 237

Perhaps more subtle and insidious is the prospect of what Tocqueville would call “soft despotism,” a tendency toward greater individual enervation and dependence on governments in modern state, a phenomenon Rousseau foresaw and diagnosed. In Rousseau’s view, cultivating the apparently unambiguously positive boons of cosmopolitan science, art, commerce, industry, and finance, boons promoted by Hobbes and Bacon through Montesquieu, paradoxically lead to a subtle spiritual slavery, in which the people are kept in dependence on the state and its way of life, in a “ferment [of] both material luxury and luxury of the mind,” which is inseparable from this paradoxical dependence. Rousseau warns that the way of life promoted by the early moderns and widely adopted “will form a people that is scheming, fervent, greedy, ambitious, servile, and knavish...always at one of the two extremes of misery or opulence, of license or of slavery, with no middle ground.”⁵⁴² In brief, Rousseau has an alternative interpretation of Montesquieu’s celebration without reservation of the liberating effects of the gradual and potentially global—if Montesquieu’s hopes and predictions are borne out—spread of commerce and institutions that promote political freedom. The effectual truth, in other words, of Montesquieuan commerce and freedom will be a subtle spiritual slavery of which virtually no one is aware.

9.3 THE DANGERS OF FEAR FOR EMILE

According to Rousseau, one of the greatest dangers for social men is to be obsessed with the fear of death. Men naturally fear what they do not know, Rousseau

⁵⁴² Ibid., 209.

suggests, yet they do not originally have any awareness of their future death, and for this reason they originally do not naturally fear death. They simply do not even think about it. Only with enlightenment does the awareness of death come, and once men become aware of their necessary future death they fear it since it seems to entail the complete extinction of their being. One of the major tendencies of social men is to respond to this situation by turning to modern medicine to try to prevent their deaths and prolong their ever more frail lives for as long as possible.⁵⁴³ Yet rather than improve the quality of their lives, Rousseau suggests that turning to medicine exacerbates men's fear of death. The goal of Emile's education is for Emile to live and enjoy life to the fullest, yet this goal will be impossible to obtain if, like modern men, Emile will be obsessed with the prospect of dying imminently.⁵⁴⁴ Rousseau thus implicitly responds to Hobbes' dominant type of man: that obsessed with his death. Fearing death prevents men from living well, Rousseau suggests, in that it robs us of the genuine pleasures of being alive. In focusing on a future necessity that may not arrive for a very long time, we live less fully and well in each individual moment. According to Rousseau, "vile fear" is among the most dangerous passions, and it is precisely fear that medicine produces. Rather than genuinely improve our lives, doctors multiply our fears and make us less able to enjoy life now. Doctors, Rousseau suggests, while being able to cure temporary illnesses, in fact give us more "fatal illnesses": "cowardice, pusillanimity, credulousness, terror of death."⁵⁴⁵ The less apparent byproduct of medicine, then, is to "impress us with terror" of our ailments and ultimately of death, even as we are impressed by doctors' ability to temporarily cure

⁵⁴³ For example, consider Rousseau, *Emile*, 181-83.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

us of each individual ailment that we might have. To prevent the emergence and exacerbation of the fear of death, then, Emile will not be taught that death is a great evil—rather it is a natural necessity—and because he will not be obsessed with death, he will not eagerly seek out doctors for all his ailments. The only time Rousseau will allow Emile to visit a doctor is if his life is ever in imminent danger.

The cause of men's fear is men's ignorance combined with—at least initial—weakness. A natural man “feels so weak that he fears everything he does not know.”⁵⁴⁶ Rousseau notes that he has “seen reasoners, strong-minded men, philosophers, soldiers, intrepid by daylight, tremble like women at the sound of a leaf at night,” the causes of which are at bottom the ignorance of things that surround us and of what is happening around us.⁵⁴⁷ However, Rousseau suggests that along with a natural ignorance and weakness, and thereby fear, naturally men also possess a curiosity that might be set against men's natural ignorance and fear, which might thus overcome, to some degree, men's natural fear of the unknown. An indispensable accompaniment of this curiosity should be an habituation with objects that one comes to know, which in turn causes men not to fear these formerly fearful objects. As Rousseau says, all new objects interest men, and “the habit of seeing new objects without being affected by them destroys [men's] fear.”⁵⁴⁸ As will be explored below, a goal for Emile is to arouse his natural curiosity and habituate him to objects that he might otherwise fear. By setting curiosity and habituation against fear, the natural tendency toward fear might be overcome.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., 191.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., 274.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., 191.

Our natural tendency to fear is especially acute at night when our normal faculties for judgment are impaired. Because we are unable to make sound judgments we are likely to imagine things that are not there, and to fear these things because we think we cannot fully know them. Without sight “we suppose there to be countless beings, countless things in motion which can harm [us] and from which it is impossible for [us] to protect [ourselves].”⁵⁴⁹ In order to prevent the emergence of this fear, or at least to manage it well, Emile will be habituated to the darkness, as we will see, in a peculiar way.

9.4 THE REMEDIES FOR FEAR FOR EMILE

Rousseau suggests a number of means for preventing the emergence of fear in Emile’s education, or at least preventing it from dominating his imagination. To begin with, Rousseau suggests that the best condition for preventing fear is for men to be kept simply in ignorance, especially about death. Naturally men know nothing about death, and thus have no reason to fear it. With bad educations their imaginations are dominated with the fear of it. Men without fear of death are to be found “Where there are no doctors, where they are ignorant of the consequences of their illnesses, where they hardly think of death. Naturally men knows how to suffer with constancy and dies in peace.”⁵⁵⁰ It is unclear what, if anything, Emile learns about death. It is improbable that he remains in permanent ignorance of it, like natural men. However, it is clear that Emile will at least

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid., 275.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid., 182.

resemble natural men in that his imagination will not be permanently obsessed with fear of death, and possible means to thwart it. Instead of teaching Emile about death, Emile's entire education is a kind of teaching about necessity and resigning oneself to things one cannot avoid, including death. Rather than look forward anxiously to death, Emile, like natural men, learns to resign himself to pain and illness, which he learns are natural necessities. Because they are necessities for all men, he will not fear them, and his imagination will be focused on the present, rather than on a possible future death.

One of the most noteworthy ways that Rousseau proposes to regulate Emile's imagination and thus his potential fear is by gradually accustoming his imagination to things that otherwise might cause him immense fear. For instance, Rousseau proposes to accustom Emile to new objects, even to "ugly" and "disgusting" objects, so that he will be habituated to being around objects he would otherwise be afraid of. Similarly, Rousseau gradually accustoms him—by starting out with innocuous and pleasing masks—to being accustomed to masks most children would initially fear. In this way habit can be used as a tool to conquer men's natural fear of new and strange things, including, as Rousseau suggests, children's natural fear of strange masks. As Rousseau says, "With a slow and carefully managed gradation man and child are made intrepid in everything."⁵⁵¹

Another means by which to habituate Emile to a condition he would otherwise fear is by having him play night games. According to Rousseau, the darkness of night naturally frightens men and night games combine the pleasures of competition with a light-heartedness that counter Emile's natural fear of darkness. By participating in night

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., 192.

games Emile will acquire the habit of being in the dark, and as Rousseau suggests, “habit kills the imagination.”⁵⁵² Yet rather than completely killing the imagination, night games direct Emile’s imagination in such a way that fear is removed from his imagination while the pleasures of playing at night occupy and stimulate his imagination.

Moreover, Rousseau indicates a way in which he himself overcame the fear of darkness and night, which was ultimately rooted in his pride not to be seen by others as frightened. According to Rousseau, when he was young he was staying with a minister and Rousseau’s cousin, who was characterized by fear. The minister put Rousseau’s courage to the test by giving Rousseau the key to a temple and asking him to retrieve a Bible from the pulpit. Perceiving nothing but darkness in the temple Rousseau was “seized by terror” and lost his bearings. He was not at this point habituated to the dark or his surroundings. Due to his overwhelming fear Rousseau quickly returned to the house but upon arriving at the house believed that the minister was laughing at Rousseau’s fear. This in turn caused Rousseau to be indignant and to desire to prove that he was not in fact dominated by fear. Spurred on by indignation and pride at not being afraid of the dark, Rousseau then instantly lost all his fear and ran back to temple and without hesitation grabbed the Bible from the pulpit. While Rousseau does not appeal to Emile’s pride to overcome his fear (because he has little to no *amour-propre* at all) Rousseau shows in this way that pride can be a means for at least social people to overcome their fear.⁵⁵³

⁵⁵² Ibid., 275.

⁵⁵³ Emberley is right when he suggests that “Hobbes had suggested that fear gives rise to the narrow calculation of self-interest.” Emberley, “Rousseau and the Management of the Passions,” 168-169. However, I think Emberley misses the mark when he subsequently argues that “Rousseau takes this one step further. Emile’s fearfulness will be channeled to provide for a social virtue that is a more reliable and socially binding force in men’s coexistence....Out of fearfulness for himself, and exposed to the common lot of men,

As I have tried to show, Rousseau attempts to make use of habit and the imagination itself in order to prevent Emile's imagination from being dominated by fear. If his fear is properly managed, Emile will not only not be dominated by fear but he will have an intrepidity that he otherwise would not have and that Montesquieu's fearful and timid natural men do not have. In Montesquieu's view men are naturally fearful and for this reason naturally prone to submit to despotism, the appropriate remedy for which is the enlightened political science of the commercial republic. The desire for enlightenment and the desire to secure their lives cause men to leave their fear-plagued state of isolation and to join a society that helps to assuage their fear. Yet as Rousseau suggests, both Hobbes' and Montesquieu's solutions fail to prevent men from being obsessed with avoiding their deaths. Even in the commonwealth or the commercial republic men are plagued by fear. Rather than propose an effective political science or recommending a move toward any society at all, Emile will preserve his natural ignorance about death and his natural independence as his fear, particularly of the darkness, is overcome through habit and the imagination. Paradoxically, however, managing Emile's fear in this way will give Emile a strength, confidence, and intrepidity that will cause him to be less susceptible to submit to despotism, which Montesquieu suggests is the most natural form of government to which men who are naturally fearful submit without enlightenment. In sum, while Montesquieu proposes a move to society and an enlightened political science that helps secure men from death (without preventing their imaginations from being

Emile will extend his care for himself to others, at the same time satisfying his relative regard for himself." Ibid. I think Rousseau wants to go to greater lengths than Emberley indicates here to prevent as much as possible the emergence of fear in Emile's soul. Instead of fear it is compassion that causes Emile to "extend his care for himself to others, at the same time satisfying his relative regard for himself."

obsessed with death), Rousseau proposes specific goals and means for an individual education, the result of which is the preservation of Emile's natural independence and ignorance of death, the removal of the natural fear of the darkness, and a greater likelihood that Emile will not submit to despotism.

However, while fear is a kind of natural passion that has to be managed well in order to prevent it from dominating the souls of Emile or other social men, there is another passion—compassion—that is also natural according to Rousseau and that can have positive social consequences, despite its being largely overlooked as a resource by Montesquieu, to say nothing of his predecessors Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke. In the next chapter I will try to show how Rousseau thinks he has discovered compassion in natural men, and the social and moral consequences of this discovery.

10.0 COMPASSION

Up until now I have examined passions and their political consequences that both Montesquieu and Rousseau have treated. I have tried to make Rousseau's treatment of these passions line up as closely as possible with Montesquieu's treatment, to see where they agree and where they disagree. However, there is one passion that Rousseau treats extensively and that Montesquieu does not: compassion, or as he often calls it, pity. As we will see, compassion is absent from the natural passions that Montesquieu discovers in the natural men of the state of nature. For this reason his portrayal of the way commercial societies satisfy men's most powerful passions omits compassion. In Montesquieu's view men are overwhelmingly concerned with their own self-interest. There are no strong passions that link human beings with others—except transient sexual ones—and any concern with the common good and the well-being of others is the result of enlightened self-interest. By contrast, Rousseau locates a passion in natural men that leads men to be concerned with the well-being of those less fortunate than them, because their imagination leads them outside of themselves and causes them to identify with beings similar to themselves who suffer. Yet rather than demanding self-sacrificing service to others, compassion, according to Rousseau, coheres with our own self-interest. Feeling compassion is a pleasant experience, because it causes us to feel our strength, as well as feeling the pleasure of not suffering as the unfortunate person does, precisely because we are also exposed to potential suffering in the future, as all human beings are. In this chapter then, I will consider what, according to Rousseau, compassion consists of, and how it coheres both with own self-interest and with the well-being of others. And in

doing so I will try to show Emile's compassion causes him to have a different character than the typical men of Montesquieu's commercial republics.

10.1 THE EMERGENCE OF COMPASSION IN EMILE: ITS NATURAL AND SELF-INTERESTED BASIS AND ITS MORAL SIGNIFICANCE

Rousseau's treatment of compassion is relatively compact within the scope of *Emile*, although it builds on and deepens the account of compassion in *The Second Discourse*.⁵⁵⁴ It consists of a number of short yet interrelated sections near the beginning of the fourth book of *Emile*, i.e., after the "moment of crisis" when Emile begins to feel new passions, and as he is introduced to the social and thereby the moral world.⁵⁵⁵ As we recall from *The Second Discourse*, compassion is in some sense a "natural" passion, yet it could also be argued that is a quasi-natural passion, insofar as it requires social interaction, and the development of unnatural faculties, like the imagination. A solitary man in the state of nature or Emile on an imaginary island would accordingly not feel compassion, because there is no one for whom he could feel compassion and he would live completely within himself. If compassion is in some sense a moral impulse (rooted in nature) and directed toward others, it is a passion that Emile does not feel during his earlier natural education, the result of which is that he has only the virtues that relate to himself, as Rousseau states at the end of Book 3. Yet, nonetheless, Rousseau insists that

⁵⁵⁴ Bloom offers a useful discussion of the cultivation of compassion in *Emile*. Bloom, in *CALPP*, pp. 102-6. Orwin offers a thought-provoking account of "Rousseau and the Discovery of Political Compassion." Orwin, in *Legacy of Rousseau*, pp. 296-320.

⁵⁵⁵ Cooper notes the connection between the emergence of sexual passion in *Emile* and the emergence of pity in him. Cooper, p. 96.

compassion is a natural passion, one that natural solitaries will feel instinctively when they encounter beings similar to themselves who suffer. The key for the instruction or unleashing of compassion in Emile's psyche is that he see others who he recognizes as like him who feel weak and who suffer. In Book 1 of *The Spirit of the Laws*, natural men approach others who are similar to themselves, but this is the result of overcoming powerful timidity and fear, and according to Montesquieu the true motive of this mutual approach is curiosity and ultimately the desire to gain knowledge and become more enlightened, in the company of others in society. By contrast, Rousseau suggests that "It is man's weakness which makes him sociable; it is our common miseries which turn our hearts to humanity; we would owe humanity nothing if we were not men" (E 372). In this statement, Rousseau suggests that it is our common susceptibility to pain and misery that leads men to be interested in one another. We have a natural inclination to pity those, like us, who suffer. And in this statement he also suggests a moral dimension to compassion: there is something that we as humans so to speak "owe" to humanity. Yet as we examine compassion more deeply we will see that compassion flows from our self-interested natural inclinations, and is thus not a moral duty externally imposed on us to which we must necessarily submit. We do not want to help those who suffer because our conscience demands it of us or because someone else orders us to do so, but rather out of free affection for others, rooted in our nature: "Our common miseries unite us by affection."

10.2 COMPASSION AND THE IMAGINATION

What makes compassion not strictly speaking natural is that it involves the emergence and development of the imagination, which takes men unnaturally outside of themselves and causes them to feel themselves in the suffering men, an experience which Rousseau portrays as intrinsically pleasant. As Rousseau suggests, the activity of the imagination and the desire to help those who suffer in principle costs men very little. It does not demand virtuous self-sacrifice or the preference of others' interest at the expense of our own self-interest. What is attractive about feeling compassion, Rousseau suggests, is not helping others per se (which indeed may be painful if it is excessive) or self-righteous satisfaction at our own supposedly morally admirable behavior, but rather the pleasure in realizing that we do not suffer as the suffering man does. This is a strictly self-interested impulse, which only effectually has benevolent results for others. In addition, Rousseau suggests that men then only become interested in one another out of positions of inequality. In particular, the healthy man has something that the unfortunate man lacks (health), yet the healthy man takes an interest in the unfortunate man because he recognizes that he too is potentially exposed to pain and suffering; his health at any moment could disappear. For this reason, Rousseau suggests that we do not put ourselves in the position of men happier than we are. We only imagine ourselves to be potentially in the position of those worse off than us. For instance, the pitiable do not imagine themselves in the place of those willing to aid them, but only pity themselves. There is, then, a striking difference between Montesquieu's and Rousseau's portrayals of the origins of the relations between men. Montesquieu's natural men approach each other from a position of equality: they recognize others like themselves who are equally fearful

and timid. By contrast, Rousseau's natural men approach each other from a position of both equality and inequality. A strong, independent, and healthy natural man will only be concerned for others who he perceives are less well off than himself. He will see some degree of equality in a being like himself who suffers, but he will be superior to this being because he retains his health. Otherwise, a strong, independent, and healthy natural man will only be concerned with his own well-being, and preserving his own independence. He will be indifferent to anyone else.

As I have suggested, according to Rousseau the isolated natural man does not feel a strong sense of compassion for others, because his capacity for compassion has not yet been developed: compassion is "a feeling that is obscure and lively in Savage man."⁵⁵⁶ Compassion develops only after the pure state of nature has been left behind and men enter society, yet compassion in general is weak in society: compassion is "developed but weak in Civilized man."⁵⁵⁷ The key for the emergence of compassion is the development of the imagination and men's capacity to identify with others like themselves. This is the result, according to Rousseau, of the development of the senses. In thus equating the senses with the imagination Rousseau seems to point to a direct relation between body and mind or soul that would suggest a single bodily substance in men, rather than a radical distinction between body and mind or soul. This is a complicated question, which at any rate Rousseau does not resolve here. What is important to note here, however, is that with the emergence of the imagination and the identification with others Emile's "heart" begins to feel a pleasant "tenderness" that he has previously not felt.⁵⁵⁸ Although

⁵⁵⁶ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, 37.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁸ Rousseau, *Emile*, 373.

it exists in the imagination, Rousseau depicts compassion as sub-rational, emerging as an initially uncontrollable natural instinct or inclination. Emile will feel “gut reactions” when he hears men cry out in pain and he viscerally averts his eyes at the sight of another man’s blood. The more that Emile reflects and gains enlightenment the less his reactions to suffering will remain simply visceral. And Rousseau suggests that the more men become socialized, unequal, and self-interested the more men’s natural capacity for compassion will be weakened. Emile is most strongly susceptible to feeling compassion after his natural and isolated education and before the corrupting influences of society may weaken his natural capacity for compassion.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of this formation of Emile’s imagination is that Rousseau deliberately implants fear in Emile, which, as we have seen, Rousseau otherwise wants to remove from Emile’s imagination, or prevent its birth. But this introduction of fear has an educative purpose and effect. The reason for introducing fear is to teach Emile the truth about the vulnerability of all men to the often-times extreme and painful vicissitudes of fortune. All men, according to Rousseau, are at some level ultimately susceptible to poverty, illness, and death, no matter how much they may appear to be immune from them at the heights of their glory. For this reason Rousseau wants Emile to feel that he too may be affected—and even may lose his life—to these misfortunes. No man, not even an extraordinarily educated man like Emile, is fully exempt from these misfortunes. As Rousseau says, “Teach him to count on neither birth, nor health, nor riches. Show him all the vicissitudes of fortune. Seek out for him examples, always too frequent, of people who from a station higher than his, have fallen

beneath these unhappy men.”⁵⁵⁹ By contrast the goal in a commercial republic is to accumulate as much power in its most peaceful form as possible (money), and then to build a seemingly comfortable and secure life. The temptation of the powerful and wealth is that they can secure themselves almost completely from misfortune. Rousseau suggests that the belief in genuine security from misfortune is an illusion and that all men, without exception, are susceptible to misfortune, and thus potential objects of pity.

Rousseau also suggests that the pity we feel is not measured by the quantity of another’s misfortune but rather by “the sentiment one attributes to those who suffer it.”⁵⁶⁰ This suggestion is linked to the earlier idea that we identify with others who are our equals and similar beings, who have similar passions and sentiments. If we imagine another being like us to feel immense pain, which we too may feel, we are more inclined to feel pity. One of the key features of Emile’s education in compassion is that he will be strong, healthy, and independent enough not to require compassion from others, which is at bottom a form of enervating dependence on others. Emile will then in a very real way be superior to other men or at least to corrupt and badly educated social men who cannot preserve their independence and who must be taken care of by others. Emile’s position will then be of a man aloof and independent from other men, yet who is concerned for the well-being of humanity as a whole. In Montesquieu’s account the social superior men only look upwards to the monarch in the hopes of attaining greater and greater honors and pleasures. They look with indifference if not contempt at those who have a lower social status than they do. Rousseau hints, however, that while compassion is natural,

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 375.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., 377.

compassion for all of humanity requires an artificial education that extends Emile's initially rather limited capacity for compassion (for individuals, for instance) to all of humanity: "Teach your pupil to love all men, even those who despise man. Do things in such a way that he puts himself in no class but finds his bearings in all. Speak before him of humankind with tenderness, even with pity, but never with contempt. Man, do not dishonor man."⁵⁶¹ By contrast, men in a commercial republic separate themselves into classes based on money and various forms of power. They strive to achieve higher social status without concern or pity for those in lower classes, unless they are concerned with exploiting them for greater money and power. Rousseau will take Emile's limited feeling of compassion and extend it to all of humanity. He will be concerned with the well-being of all without ever forgetting that his own well-being and self-interest come first, as they must according to nature. Yet while self-interest never ceases to exist and cannot be removed from Emile's heart, Rousseau wants to limit its influence when Emile feels compassion. While Emile's "first duty is toward himself"⁵⁶² without exception, Rousseau wants to "mix the least possible personal interest with these emotions—above all, no vanity, no emulation, no glory, none of those sentiments that force us to compare ourselves with others, for these comparisons are never made without some impression of hatred against those who dispute with us for preference, even if only preference in our own esteem."⁵⁶³ In this statement, Rousseau connects self-interest with the emergence and development of amour-propre. It is precisely the self-interested passion of amour-propre that Rousseau thinks leads directly to the unnatural and harmful effects of society,

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., 378.

⁵⁶² Ibid., 406.

⁵⁶³ Ibid., 378.

like vanity, emulation, and glory. While Emile will feel an intrinsic pleasure in being compassionate he will be in no competition to being more compassionate than another man, and he will not have compassion for a particular exclusive group, like any familial or political community to which he may belong. Emile's compassion, on the contrary, will be a kind of cosmopolitan compassion, which extends beyond any particular man or group of men to all of humanity. By contrast, to the extent that they feel compassion, Rousseau thinks that social men like in Montesquieu's commercial republic will feel amour-propre mixed in with their limited compassions (if it exists) and therefore be especially partial towards themselves and those who they perceive to be their own kind. Emile, because his compassion is not in competition with others, will feel compassion for all humanity rather than for any particular man or group at the expense of others. And Emile will not congratulate himself for being moral when he feels compassion, because the pleasure he feels from being compassionate is intrinsically pleasant and not in need of extrinsic support or justification.

10.3 THE WEAKNESS AND UTILITY OF COMPASSION IN COMMERCIAL REPUBLICS, AND MONTESQUIEU'S FEW REFERENCES TO COMPASSION

I have noted that the birth of compassion involves the development of Emile's imagination and his ability to live outside himself in identifying with other beings and mixing his being with theirs. At Emile's age—after puberty—he still has an abundance of strength and Rousseau makes use of this strength. Rousseau will then “offer the young man objects on which the expansive force of his heart can act—objects which swell the heart, which extend it to other beings, which make itself feel everywhere outside of

itself.” In this way Rousseau shapes Emile’s compassion in such a way that Emile becomes both good for himself and for others. Emile enjoys the feeling of his strength in helping others and he contributes to the common good by desiring to help and actually helping humanity. A member of a Montesquieuan commercial republic or Hobbesian commonwealth will lack the natural strength and independence of Emile as well as his genuine ties to the rest of humanity. Rousseau argues in the Preface to *Narcissus* that modern men, living in a Montesquieuan commercial republic, have a certain kind of superficial gentleness that is at bottom weakness. Modern societies have replaced virtue with self-interest, politeness, and proprieties, and the gentleness of modern societies that Montesquieu praises in fact enervates men: “This simulacrum [of virtue] is a certain gentleness of morals that sometimes replaces their purity, a certain appearance of order that prevents horrible confusion, a certain admiration of beautiful things that keeps the good ones from falling completely into obscurity. It is vice that takes the mask of virtue, not as hypocrisy in order to deceive and betray, but under this lovable and sacred effigy to escape from the horror that it has of itself when it sees itself uncovered.”⁵⁶⁴ Rousseau promotes a compassion that is not weakness, and that is not in tension with virtue. The passions of a citizen of a commercial republic are all directed inward, toward the self, whereas Emile’s compassion is directed outward toward others, without eviscerating his own self-interest and well-being. In short, Emile will feel “goodness, humanity, commiseration, beneficence, and all the attractive and sweet passions naturally pleasing

⁵⁶⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Preface to Narcissus,” in *Rousseau on Philosophy, Morality, and Religion*, trans. Christopher Kelly (Lebanon, NH : Dartmouth College Press, 2007), 29.

to men,” rather than the “envy, covetousness, hate, and all the repulsive and cruel passions” that are prevalent in the commercial republic or the commonwealth.⁵⁶⁵

Montesquieu rarely mentions “compassion” or “pity” in *The Spirit of the Laws*. In the few times he mentions it is in positive terms, as a useful social passion. But he clearly thinks it is a weak social passion, needing external support like religion,⁵⁶⁶ and that it is not as effective as other passions (like economic self-interest) in maintaining a peaceful and stable society. In one instance, Montesquieu notes that the people of Pegu are compassionate not because it is natural to feel compassion but because their religious opinions now include toleration, and they “believe that one will be saved in any religion whatever.”⁵⁶⁷ That is, compassion in this case is the result of an enlightened liberal reform of religion, a rational reformation of an unnatural and irrational prejudice. Compassion is not then a natural passion, according to Montesquieu, as Rousseau thinks it is. Similarly, Montesquieu notes that music—the result of human artifice—caused compassion in the Greeks, rather than natural instinct or inclination.⁵⁶⁸ At one point only does Montesquieu seem to have in mind something along the lines of what Rousseau does, at least to a degree: he says that extremely happy and extremely unhappy men are both disposed to harshness (the examples he gives are conquerors and monks). Only those in the middle, whose fortunes are a mixture of good and bad fortune, are likely to

⁵⁶⁵ Rousseau, *Emile*, 374. Bloom offers a thoroughgoing account of “Rousseau’s Critique of Liberal Constitutionalism.” Allan Bloom, “Rousseau’s Critique of Liberal Constitutionalism,” in *The Legacy of Rousseau*, ed. Clifford Orwin and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 143-67.

⁵⁶⁶ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 5.24.22.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.24.8.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.4.8.

feel gentleness and pity.⁵⁶⁹ In this statement Montesquieu points in the direction of Rousseau's project with regard to compassion, but he does not make compassion a major part of his own project, in large part because of his belief in the weak support for compassion in human nature.

Emile's introduction to society, and especially the new, corrupt commercial societies, begins in Book 4 of *Emile*. There Rousseau condenses his reflections on compassion in *Emile* into three maxims; yet rather than simply repeat what he has said before in *Emile* and elsewhere, such as in *The Second Discourse*, he introduces some important modifications to his teaching. To begin with, he focuses on the hypothesis that we only put ourselves in the position of those who are worse off than we are. The tendency of social men, according to Rousseau, is to envy those who are wealthier, more powerful, or otherwise better off (as we perceive them) than we are. This would be the typical tendency in a commercial republic, which tends toward ever-greater inequalities of wealth and power and thus greater degrees of envy. For this reason, Rousseau completely shifts Emile's natural perspective in such a way that he will pity *all* men, even those who appear to be well off, even the most powerful in society. He will see the weakness and misery of even the wealthy and powerful, and feel pity for them rather than envy. However, if the natural tendency of a primitive social man like Emile is to feel pity for others, pity is destroyed in more developed social men because men's natural identification with equals is destroyed.⁵⁷⁰ Social men, or at least the most powerful among them, tend, according to Rousseau, to regard themselves as secure against the

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., 1.6.9.

⁵⁷⁰ Starobinski underlines how all morality, being based on pity, is "prior to the emergence of reflective thought." Starobinski, *Transparency and Obstruction*, 210.

troubles that afflict the less well off. They believe themselves to be immune to suffering what those less well off than they suffer. For instance, kings and nobles do not fear falling to the level of a commoner and therefore do not feel pity for the misfortunes of the people. For this reason, Rousseau wants to direct Emile's imagination in such a way that Emile will see all other men as moral equals—no one is morally above or below him—yet he will feel pity for all men, even those who might appear to be in a better position. There is no corresponding check in a commercial republic against the tendency to destroy the roots of natural compassion. The tendency of the commercial republic is for the less well-off to envy the powerful and for the powerful to abuse and show no pity for the powerless, and to feel themselves exempt from suffering as the people suffer. And to the extent that the weak do suffer, compassion and the ties that link the well-being of men as moral equals are destroyed.

10.4 THE SELF-INTEREST OF COMPASSION AND ITS LINK TO A NEW MORALITY FOR CORRUPT TIMES

It may seem strange that Rousseau separates compassion as a naturally intrinsic passion and morality. Contemporary men may tend to think that if we help those who are not well off, we are adhering to a—or even the true—moral code and that we deserve praise or reward for helping the less well off. Furthermore, we may admire those who help others for sacrificing something of their own self-interest for the well-being of others (praise which in turn benefits their own self-interest). As I have mentioned, Rousseau praises compassion for its effects, but first of all because of how attractive it is to our self-interest, to the extent that we remain uncorrupt and can feel it. The reason

compassion is appealing is not because morality demands it of us, but because it is an intrinsically pleasurable experience for us to feel compassion. The reason that we feel pleasure, though, is that we feel relieved that we ourselves do not suffer in the way that the unfortunate man suffers, and we can feel our strength in coming to his aid. According to Rousseau, while our first feeling is sadness that another being is suffering, “the first return to [oneself] is a sentiment of pleasure. In seeing how many ills he is exempt from, [one] feels [oneself] to be happier than he had thought he was.”⁵⁷¹ Emile then enjoys both the feeling of pity for those who suffer and the pleasure of knowing that he does not suffer, at least currently. Emile then enjoys his position of strength and health and would never wish to trade places with a weaker and suffering man, even if he feels pleasure in exerting his strength to aid the weaker man. In helping others, however, we “extend ourselves” out of ourselves. As we have seen, this phenomenon, which arises only in society in the presence of other men, can have disastrous consequences. For instance, the emergence of amour-propre can lead to negative forms of emulation and vanity. This is the tendency in Montesquieu’s commercial republics. In a commercial republic men live outside of themselves in the light of fluctuating, irrational, and arbitrary public opinions. This is an unhealthy form of living outside oneself, according to Rousseau. Compassion, by contrast, is a more positive form of living outside of oneself because it has positive social consequences and does not lead to vanity. Rousseau portrays it in entirely positive terms, calling it “sweet” (“*doux*,” which can also mean “gentle,” precisely what Montesquieu hopes to promote through commerce). Yet only those men whose natural capacity for compassion remains in their souls can feel the sweetness of compassion.

⁵⁷¹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 382.

Rousseau suggests that men whose corruption has made their souls hardened will not feel the sweetness of compassion. As he says, “A hard man...is always unhappy, for the condition of his heart leaves him no superabundant sensibility he can accord to the suffering of others.”⁵⁷² Because Emile is so close to the natural state, he is capable of feeling—and enjoying—the most natural passions. To the extent that he moves away from nature, he will accordingly be less and less capable of feeling compassion. As men become more social and corrupt, as they must almost necessarily do in Montesquieu’s commercial republics, they will be more and more incapable of feeling the sweetness of compassion and being concerned with the well-being of others.

Compassion can ultimately be derived from *amour de soi*, or love of self. Rousseau had said earlier, in the beginning of Book 4, that all the passions, natural and unnatural, are merely modifications of *amour de soi*. The reason that this is the case for compassion is that in imagining ourselves in the place of a suffering man, we do not want him to suffer because we ourselves do not want to suffer. In extending our being outside of ourselves and imagining ourselves to occupy his being, we imagine suffering what he suffers, and we want that suffering to cease for the benefit of our sense of self-preservation and well-being. As Rousseau says, when I feel compassion for someone, “I feel that I am him, and his *amour de soi* because my *amour de soi*.”⁵⁷³ The reason for this is ultimately in nature itself, “which inspires in me the desire of my well-being in whatever place I feel my existence....Love of men derived from love of self is the principle of human justice.” By contrast, in Montesquieu there is no superabundant

⁵⁷² Ibid.

⁵⁷³ Ibid., 389.

extension of one's being outside of oneself and into the being of another, at least via the imagination. In Montesquieu, as in Hobbes, there is nothing but solitary individuals who universally fear death and who all pursue their petty self-interest without genuine concern for others.⁵⁷⁴ In a Montesquieuian commercial republic, men are concerned principally with their own security, and there is no social passion that inclines them to be concerned with the well-being of others. They merely wish to live a life of comfortable prosperity and they only care for others to the extent that others can be means for increasing their own comfortable prosperity. And as Rousseau suggests, the more wealth and comfort one acquires, the more men will believe—falsely—that one is exempt from life's ills, and the less will one feel pity for the unfortunate. The more one feels secure, the more one fails to see the ways in which one can never be totally secure. In any case, Montesquieu's natural and social men remain isolated and atomized individuals, whereas Emile, a newly socialized natural man, is capable of living outside of himself when he feels compassion, thereby benefitting both himself and others.

One of the most striking aspects of Rousseau's portrayal of compassion is the way in which he combats envy in the name of compassion. This entails a revolutionary transformation of perspective of the way most men see others in society. Most men, for instance those in a Montesquieuian commercial republic, tend to envy and resent those who they perceive to be wealthier and more powerful than they are. They perceive their

⁵⁷⁴ Hobbes includes pity in his long list of natural passions in chapter 6 of *Leviathan*. Although Hobbes does not place as much central importance of pity's naturalness and importance as Rousseau does, Rousseau's account of pity owes much to Hobbes' account insofar as Hobbes argues that pity arises from the development of the imagination: "*Griefe*, for the Calamity of another, is PITY; and ariseth from the imagination that the like calamity may befall himself; and therefore is called also COMPASSION, and in the phrase of this present time a FELLOW-FEELING." Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 43).

lives to be infinitely better, more pleasant, and easier than theirs, and they desire to have what the powerful and wealthy possess, which they lack, and which they believe is the key to their thwarted happiness. Instead of feeling envy and resentment, however, Emile will see the weakness, vulnerability, and in particular the enervating dependence of those in power, and he will pity even those who might otherwise appear to be in a more favorable social position than he is in. According to Rousseau, Emile pities kings, who are in fact slaves to their subjects since they are compelled to rule over and in fact serve other human beings, he pities the vanity of so-called wise men, he pities the rich, slaves to appearance, and he pities the petty pleasures and boredom of voluptuaries.⁵⁷⁵ Such a portrait is far from Montesquieu's portrayal and praise of monarchies and commercial republics. In both of those forms of government, such pursuits constituted, if not the peak of pleasure and happiness, then at least a very worthwhile kind of pleasure and happiness, which resulted in peace, prosperity, and pleasure, precarious though they may be.

10.5 THE POTENTIAL FOR COMPASSION IN COMMERCIAL SOCIETIES

A large part of Montesquieu's defense of commercial republics is that they will ultimately lead to peaceful relations between men. This will be true not only of citizens living in a particular political community but ultimately between all individuals in all societies. The coming worldwide triumph of commerce that he predicts will ineluctably cure men of their prejudices and make them gentler toward one another. And part of this defense hinges on the idea that commerce benefits everyone, even the least well off: a

⁵⁷⁵ Rousseau, *Emile*, 400.

day laborer in England is better off than a “king in America,” as Locke has it, and a rising tide will lift all boats. For this reason it seems that Montesquieu thinks he can discard with ways—like compassion—to foster concern for those who are less successful in a commercial society than those who are most successful—after all, the effects of commerce will improve everyone’s well-being in the long run.

By contrast, Rousseau is skeptical that any society can rely on self-interest in the way that Montesquieu does while excluding stronger communal ties. This is because the modern liberal state, in both its Hobbesian and Montesquieuian formulations, relies on what Rousseau sees as an overly narrow idea of justice rooted in the kind of self-interest that leads men to be indifferent to the suffering of others. While this kind of self-interest makes men gentle in a way—they are no longer barbarically irrational—it makes them harsh in another sense, in the sense that their self-interest causes them to try to profit at the expense of others and to be indifferent to their suffering. So while commerce leads to a kind of gentleness, it does not lead to compassion. And Rousseau thinks self-interest alone or self-interest understood simply as keeping one’s contracts will not lead to a peaceful society. According to Rousseau, if interest by itself cannot lead to a stable and peaceful society, then virtue, *amour-propre*, and compassion are alternative passions. Rousseau employs all of these passion in different ways in *Emile*, but as I have tried to show, virtue and *amour-propre* are dangerous passions, and susceptible to abuse or mismanagement. Compassion, according to Rousseau, is less susceptible to abuse in a commercial society, and it is overlooked by Montesquieu as a useful social passion, because he did not think it was either natural or necessary. Rousseau, on the contrary, sees potential for compassion in the new commercial societies, especially since in

commercial societies men's fortunes fluctuate so much. Compassion can be a kind of new social glue in the new societies to ameliorate the bad effects of commercial society. In the *Political Economy*, Rousseau argues that compassion or as he calls it there commiseration can be useful in fostering patriotism or stronger communal ties. But this feeling of commiseration must be restricted to a relatively small number of people near to us for it to be effective, since the feelings of humanity (like commiseration) weaken the more that they are extended. It is for this reason that we care less about the misfortunes of those on the other side of the world than we do about those close to us.⁵⁷⁶ Compassion can then be useful even in modern commercial societies, and it can be effective only insofar as people still feel strong attachments to those who live near them. In the *Considerations*, then, Rousseau suggests how virtue and *amour-propre* can be useful in fostering patriotism. In the *Political Economy* Rousseau suggests how compassion can help foster stronger communal ties and patriotism.

According to Rousseau, compassion could only be effective if those in the highest ranks of society saw themselves as being vulnerable to the vicissitudes of fortune and capable of trading places with those who are in the lowest ranks in society (as Emile is taught to do). It is for this reason that monarchies are bad at fostering compassion—as Rousseau points out, kings cannot imagine themselves suffering what their subjects suffer. The kings (and aristocrats) have lost recognition of the moral equality that men in the state nature had. By contrast, a society that does a good job of promoting compassion, according to Rousseau, is Turkey. In Turkey, as Rousseau points out, people's fortunes

⁵⁷⁶ Rousseau, *Political Economy*, 15.

constantly fluctuate.⁵⁷⁷ Paradoxically, Turkey, even though Rousseau thinks it is a despotism, can serve as a model for commercial societies in fostering compassion.

In addition, compassion is particularly useful for a commercial society because it is a natural instinct or inclination, and therefore (when its possibility has been preserved) it is more reliable and effective than selfless virtue. And because Montesquieu omits compassion from his account of men's natural passions, he overlooks it as a useful and natural social passion. At bottom, then, Montesquieu thinks that commercial republics will be able to dispense with fear through the effective arrangement of motives and institutions rooted in self-interest. Rousseau is skeptical that commercial societies can dispense with fear, and he thinks that compassion is the most useful remedy for a potentially (or even inevitably) bad situation. According to Montesquieu, then, despotism can be avoided without relying on compassion, while according to Rousseau compassion can be a natural passion that can be used as a palliative for an (in the long run) inevitable tendency toward despotism. Montesquieuian self-interest, Rousseau thinks, induces the manipulation and exploitation of others, to the extent that men can get away with it. The only effective restraint for social men's limitless quest for power is the fear of the law. Yet Rousseau thinks Montesquieu ultimately cannot avoid Hobbes' solution, which is to have the government be more harsh and repressive and to use ever more fear on people whose natural inclination is to try to evade the law. In the end, then, for Rousseau the Hobbesian and Montesquieuian quest for security leads ultimately to greater insecurity. By contrast, in a commercial society compassion for the less fortunate helps to alleviate insecurity without relying on (an inevitably harsh) government.

⁵⁷⁷ Rousseau, *Emile*, 376.

CONCLUSION

There is much in common in Montesquieu and Rousseau's analyses of the passions and their relation to politics. They both follow Hobbes' philosophic starting point and method, and they both agree that Hobbes got some important things right and wrong. Following Hobbes' lead, they both reject the moral orientation of classical philosophy and Biblical theology, and agree on the need to begin to understand human nature by returning to an imaginary state of nature. According to both Montesquieu and Rousseau, men are not naturally political or social, and they do not naturally love or tend toward virtue or the divine. They both agree with Machiavelli and Hobbes that men love themselves and prefer their own security first, and they agree with them that men naturally desire to acquire power. And they agree with Hobbes that there is no cosmic *summum bonum* at which men will find perfect rest and happiness; the only final rest is death.

However, there are a number of fundamental differences between Montesquieu and Rousseau that I hope to have shown as clearly as I can. For instance, while both Montesquieu and Rousseau think men are naturally individuals, and not political animals, in the state of nature, and love themselves more than any other beings, Rousseau thinks men are more radically apolitical than Montesquieu thinks they are. In particular, Montesquieu thinks that men consciously choose to leave the state of nature in order to join society. For this reason it has been said that there is a kind of hidden political teleology in Montesquieu. According to Montesquieu, in consciously leaving the state of nature and joining society men stand to gain enlightenment, eventually of the principles

of the best possible form of government if the apparently true laws of nature become known and disseminated. For Montesquieu there is no question that men are better off in society, at least one with enlightened political principles, than they were in the state of nature. This is in part because while Montesquieu and Rousseau both think that men are initially more peaceful than Hobbes thinks they are in the state of nature, and while they agree that Hobbes is right about how men eventually behave once they compete with each other, the transition from Montesquieu's original state to Hobbes' state is more rapid than Rousseau thinks it is, and what Montesquieu thinks needs preserving most—our bodies—can most effectively be preserved in a good government once a conscious desire is made to acquire knowledge about the laws of nature. The desire to preserve oneself and to flee death cannot be preserved in the state of nature, either in Montesquieu's original state, or in Hobbes' more social state, but it can be preserved in the new best form of government, the commercial republic. By contrast, Rousseau thinks that there is a much slower transition from his account of the original state of nature to Hobbes' state, and that forming nascent societies is a result of a series of historical accidents that cannot be reversed and that leave men almost entirely worse off than they were in the original state of nature, despite their lack of enlightenment.

In addition to this slower movement out of the state of nature, and its tendency toward a generally worse state—in contrast to Montesquieu's argument that history tends to lead to improvement—Rousseau simply explores more thoroughly than Montesquieu does the natural passions in the state of nature, in the *Second Discourse* and *Emile*. In particular, Rousseau focuses on two core passions in the state of nature, *amour de soi* and compassion. *Amour de soi* is an instinctive and pre-rational desire for self-preservation

and well-being, without regard to the well-being of others. And compassion is a passion that modifies men's concern for themselves and causes them to feel pain at the sight of others' suffering. While Rousseau thinks compassion is natural at least in some form, Montesquieu does not. In addition, Montesquieu seems to imply the existence of something like *amour de soi* in his account of natural men, but he does not focus as much as Rousseau does on the ways in which this passion—the source of all subsequent passions, according to Rousseau—is modified by society throughout human history. Montesquieu agrees with Rousseau that men are naturally self-interested and want to preserve their bodies from death. And he agrees with him that particular historical forms of government shape and mold men in important ways. And he acknowledges that because of history men cannot return to the state of nature—which, Montesquieu's view, would not even be desirable—and that certain forms of government, like ancient republics, are effectively obsolete because of historical changes. But he does not focus as much as Rousseau does on how fundamentally different men are now from previous societies and from the state of nature.

Rousseau simply makes a greater theme of his political philosophy than Montesquieu does the ways in which human nature has been radically modified by the societies in which men have lived, generally for the worse. As he suggests at the beginning of the *Second Discourse*, human nature as contemporary men know it is almost unrecognizable from our original nature, due to the effects of perfectibility and the multiplication of new, irrational desires and social passions. And whereas Montesquieu thinks that there can be a smooth transition from the state of nature and its primary needs to an enlightened government that can satisfy those needs and preserve the core of men's

original nature with the right political institutions, Rousseau fundamentally disagrees with this analysis. According to Rousseau, no society can preserve or satisfy men's natural passions since all societies corrupt men's natural passions and cause the birth of new unnatural passions that are impossible to satisfy. While Montesquieu thinks that men are naturally amoral and cannot be relied on to be virtuous in society, he thinks that the right institutions can be put in place to bring the laws of nature into effect, and to prevent men from killing each other and stealing their property. Rousseau, on the other hand, thinks that men's corrupt passions in society will naturally tend toward acquiring more power and manipulating and abusing others, so not that only can the original passions not be preserved or satisfied in society, due to historical changes of human nature, but that all societies necessarily tend toward corruption and the kind of government that Montesquieu thought was worst and sought to prevent through an institutional solution, despotism. For Rousseau any apparent institutional solution will be ineffective, given social men's tendency to abuse power and institutions to their own advantage.

One of the biggest differences between Montesquieu and Rousseau is on their judgment of the passion of virtue. At the beginning of *The Spirit of the Laws* Montesquieu seems to hold virtue in high regard—which he thinks boils down to a painful renunciation of private goods for the sake of devotion to the common good. But he slowly revises this view so that by the end of the book virtue is discarded as a political goal, and in Montesquieu's best form of government, the commercial republic, there is hardly any virtue at all. In the new way of life Montesquieu seeks to minimize or even get rid of this kind of political virtue as much as possible. Montesquieu ultimately judges that there was no political virtue in the state of nature, and the requirements of virtue contort

our original nature in unhealthy ways. Rousseau, on the other hand, has a different evaluation of virtue. Rousseau agrees with Montesquieu that there is no self-denying political virtue in the state of nature and that painful self-renunciation is a perversion of our original nature. However, in *Emile* Rousseau experiments with trying to construct a new kind of political virtue that is superior to and more humane than the historical examples of political virtue, like in Sparta. (As an example of the older kind of virtue, the kind that Montesquieu rejects, Rousseau describes in *Emile* a citizen mother who prefers victory in battle to the lives of her warrior sons. This sacrifice, Rousseau suggests, while admirable from a certain perspective, is an example of the kind of inhumaneness that the older kind of political virtue fostered.) Instead, Rousseau paradoxically tries to build a new kind of virtue on the basis of Emile's natural strength—his physical and mental virtue—and familial affection, as the natural basis for an attachment to a greater common good outside of oneself, in which the tensions between private and public good are minimized as much as possible, even if this tension can never, in Rousseau's view, be fully overcome, given our nature. Furthermore, while Montesquieu thinks that society at least in principle is capable of softening us, and making us less inclined to be cruel to each other, Rousseau judges that this is a generally negative development, since it attenuates our natural strength and makes us more dependent on others, thereby destroying our natural strength and independence. In order to remedy this dangerous tendency for almost all social human beings, Rousseau goes to great lengths in the first three books of *Emile* to strengthen Emile's body and mind, as much as possible, to prepare him for a life of relative independence and to make him less vulnerable to the corrosive and enfeebling snares of social dependence. Thus, at the end of the third book,

Rousseau claims that Emile has all the virtue that relates to himself, and has the strength and knowledge to pursue all the goods that are useful to him, and are good for his preservation and well-being. This self-regarding virtue paradoxically forms the basis of Emile's consequent attachment to social and political virtue, a virtue that is more humane than the Spartan kind that Montesquieu rejects, and preserves natural independence better than Montesquieu's commercial republic, with its multiplying webs of dependence, can. Emile's education in the first three books prepares him for his education in the final two books, when he becomes attached to virtue through a somewhat natural affection for another human being, his wife, and learns the principles of political right. In the final two books Emile enters the social and moral world, and Rousseau experiments with what a natural man raised for himself might be for others. Emile then becomes attached to others on the basis of *amour de soi* and through well-managed modifications of *amour-propre* and compassion, while the dangerous kinds of *amour-propre* are avoided. Emile will in principle be capable of being a humane, moral citizen because he loves himself, his wife, his children, and his mind knows and is attached to the principles of a new humane political science. Yet for all that, Rousseau ultimately does not think that the tension between the natural man who lives for himself and the moral man who lives for others can ever be fully overcome. I think with Emile Rousseau experiments with minimizing this tension as much as possible, but it always remains, and the moral world, legitimate as it may be, and conventional as it is, will always demand some degree of painful and unnatural self-renunciation (which Emile interprets as a kind of feeling of strength) that mars our original nature. And this is even for the best—and ultimately fictional—case of

Emile. For the vast majority of men will be weak and ensnared by innumerable social chains, good neither for themselves nor for others.

The next passion that Montesquieu and Rousseau evaluate is honor—as Montesquieu calls it—and *amour-propre*—as Rousseau calls it. According to Montesquieu, since men are solitary in the state of nature, there are no social comparisons or hierarchies according to various standards of social worth. But when Montesquieu turns to analyzing various possible forms of government, monarchies, based on some degree of honor all members of the monarchy, earn Montesquieu’s high praise. Montesquieu thinks that honor is capable of causing men to work toward something greater and socially useful outside of themselves, and that acquiring honor induces great psychological satisfaction. Honor can animate a monarchy, which can ensure security and political stability, and Montesquieu thinks that there are no real social drawbacks to honor. Honor modifies our original nature, but exclusively for the better. Rousseau, on the other hand, emphasizes more sharply that humans do not compare each others’ worth in the state of nature, and that the necessary social phenomenon of living outside of oneself and believing one’s worth to be validated by conventionally approved social standards has generally negative consequences, even if Rousseau suggests, in the *Second Discourse*, that this motivation has resulted in the greatest human accomplishments. It is a generally negative social passion, according to Rousseau, because it causes men to judge their worth by so many irrational illusions. And it is negative too in that it is impossible to satisfy, and thus necessarily results in unhappiness. With *amour-propre* there is a fundamental disproportion between our faculties and our desires, since while *amour-propre* causes us to desire to compel the world to love us, our faculties are far too

weak to do this. Everyone else, entrapped in their own illusions of *amour-propre*, is too busy futilely trying to compel the rest of the world to love them. So while Montesquieu emphasizes the keen psychological pleasures of honor and the positive political results when honor animates a government, Rousseau emphasizes the illusory nature of any transient psychological satisfaction, and the ultimate psychological pain that we feel in an impossible quest. It is in the nature of *amour-propre*, Rousseau suggests, to be motivated to acquire more and more admirers, who Rousseau insists will naturally never love us more than they love themselves, thus causing us to fail to satisfy this passion.

Yet for all that, Rousseau does have *some* good things to say about *amour-propre*. Besides being the driving force behind the greatest human accomplishments, it is a necessary component of romantic love, and causes Emile to have an exclusive attachment to Sophie, and to try to please a particular and a particularly esteemed woman to the exclusion of all other women. In this way he is *for* a particular other. Without this exclusive preference rooted in *amour-propre* he would not be for any other woman in particular. This form of the passion, Rousseau thinks, results in psychological and physical pleasure, and may result in the building of families, where men and women can find common interests and be good for each other, the experimental goal, after all, of Emile's entire psychological-social experiment. Yet Rousseau also thinks that *amour-propre* can play a positive role in fostering a healthy kind of patriotism. There is some overlap between Montesquieu's promotion of honor and praise of monarchy, which effectually leads to a stable political order, and Rousseau's political prescription to the Polish legislators. In the *Considerations*, Rousseau encourages Polish legislators to award honors to Polish citizens for patriotic deeds, and he advocates an institutional hierarchy

where all Poles will have the opportunity to rise. In working for themselves, that is, for transient psychological satisfaction, they will be indirectly working for the good of the state, and in this way a kind of self-interest and the common good might correspond. The Polish institutional hierarchy where all citizens have the chance to rise thus resembles Montesquieu's account of the institutional hierarchy of monarchy, although there is also a major difference. Montesquieu has no issue with luxury, vanity, and moral dissolution in a monarchy, whereas Rousseau explicitly urges Polish legislators to prevent as best they can the emergence of luxury, vanity, and moral dissolution. The Poles are encouraged to compete for prizes and honors, but Rousseau wants Polish legislators to try to foster a love of Poland as a whole and to prevent the emergence of corrupt individual interests, not because individual interests are morally bad necessarily but because the apparent interests that Montesquieu promotes or at least permits are not naturally healthy or socially useful. Luxury and vanity encourage softness, weakness, and social illusions, thus corrupting both natural independence and any healthy social and moral attachments that men might be capable of. However, despite this analysis of a relatively "healthy" political order, a full understanding of Rousseau's evaluation of *amour-propre* cannot be made without comparing the positive features of Poland and Emile and Sophie's romance to Rousseau's greater critique of the unnaturalness of *amour-propre*, and the impossibility of its satisfaction, as well as the necessarily corrupting tendencies of any society.

Both Montesquieu and Rousseau think fear is to some degree natural, even if they agree that it is good to overcome it by acquiring knowledge. Montesquieu's natural men live in fearful timidity in their trees until they overcome their fear by approaching others

who turn out to be like themselves, and they can together acquire greater knowledge about the world. Unfortunately, though, enlightenment does not always follow from the original state and with ignorance about good political principles men are particularly susceptible to living under fear-based despotisms, which according to Montesquieu are the most common form of government historically. With enlightenment, though, Montesquieu thinks despotisms can be prevented and better, more rational forms of government can be founded. Rousseau thinks that fear is somewhat natural, although it can be overcome as a natural man gains experience and knowledge about the world, since fear, according to Rousseau, is fear of the unknown. As a natural man becomes habituated to previously unknown and fearful things, his fear subsides. Yet Rousseau is skeptical that enlightenment can prevent the development of fear-based despotisms.

A major difference between Montesquieu and Rousseau concerns the status of the goodness of modern, liberal, commercial republics, which Montesquieu regards as the best and most rational form of government, and which Rousseau regards as a form of government that—far from being especially good—necessarily tends toward oppression and despotism. According to Montesquieu, the commercial republic is the most rational form of government since it aims to preserve natural freedom and allow all the passions to be as free from constraint as is consistent with stable political institutions. And in particular it aims at preserving men's bodies and their property, which Montesquieu, following Hobbes and Locke, thinks is our most pressing desire. If this goal can be achieved, Montesquieu otherwise envisions fairly lax moral standards for such a society, which he also thinks will be more in accord with human nature than more repressive forms of government, like ancient republics and despotisms. Rousseau, on the other hand,

is highly critical of commercial republics, not so much for their moral laxity—although this is a part of his critique—as much as for the way in which they destroy natural independence—without intending to do so—and failing to prevent the emergence of despotism. An apparently enlightened and rational society as much as any society compels men to live unnaturally outside themselves, according to illusory social standards, and it entraps men in webs of dependence in which their natural independence is destroyed. As Rousseau famously puts it near the beginning of *Emile*, modern men “float” aimlessly between their natural inclinations and their conventional social and moral obligations, and in this state, that of the modern “bourgeois,” men are good neither for themselves nor for others, and as Rousseau pessimistically judges, they are effectively good for nothing, neither naturally whole nor devoted to anything greater than themselves. In Rousseau’s view, ancient virtue can no longer be a force in men’s souls, due to the historical changes of perfectibility, and in particular the influence of Christianity in dividing men’s souls. And while Rousseau experiments with Emile’s moral development as an alternative way of life, the Emilian educational project is for all intents and purposes chimerical, and in any case Emile and Sophie’s happy life dissolves fairly quickly once the pair move to the city and the corrupt social forces of the modern world destroy their union. Rather than being a realm of limitless freedom, pleasure, personal security, social validation, and happiness, Rousseau thinks that the kind of modern society Montesquieu promotes is fundamentally corrupt and a breeding ground for dissolution, false opinions, unbridled grasping for power and power, oppression, attempted manipulation of others, psychological pain, and ultimately of weakness and misery, both acknowledged and unwitting. According to Rousseau, the institutions that

Montesquieu erects in order to prevent a Hobbesian despotism and a return to a Hobbesian state of nature are ineffective. The way in which men's natural passions are transformed in society incline them to acquire as much potentially abusive power as possible, and to manipulate and oppress others to their own advantage. There is no reliable natural or institutional check powerful enough to neutralize this dangerous tendency.

Yet if modern society will necessarily tend toward despotism, there is one potential resource that Rousseau thinks Montesquieu overlooked as a palliative. In Rousseau's view as modern men grasp for greater power they will be inclined to be more and more cruel to each other and indifferent to the suffering of others. Yet in the state of nature, and in the psychological core of every human being, according to Rousseau, is compassion, a passion that might mitigate, at least to some degree, men's cruelty to each other in society. According to Rousseau compassion is a passion that men in the state of nature feel strongly, and which causes them to feel pain at the sight of other sentient beings suffer, and to feel a pleasurable strength to the degree that they can relieve their suffering. Rousseau thinks compassion might provide the basis of a new humane morality, even if Rousseau also suggests that compassion becomes gradually weaker the more removed men become from the state of nature, and that whatever mechanisms are put in place to slow down the denaturing of men, universal corruption is in the long run virtually inevitable.

Finally, one of the biggest differences between Montesquieu and Rousseau's analyses of the passions is that Montesquieu generally focuses on societies as a whole whereas Rousseau focuses on the development of the passions of individuals, and

especially of one imaginary individual, Emile. This is important, ultimately, because it has to do with the degree to which they think individuals and societies might become enlightened, and the degree to which individuals might or might not be happy and whole in society. *The Spirit of the Laws* is driven by a quest to discover the rational principles of *the* best possible society and form of government, and to aid in bringing about the realization of those principles into political practice throughout the world as much as possible. Following Machiavelli in rejecting the “imaginary republics” of the ancients, which might only be founded in speech, Montesquieu thinks he has come upon the most rational form of government in modern England, which is the most rational because it brings into practice the correct laws of nature, and in particular it satisfies our most pressing desire, to be secure against death, and because it otherwise allows men to live free and unconstrained by unreasonable and authoritarian demands. If Montesquieu is right, that the modern commercial republic is the most rational form of government possible, then the quest for the best possible society, the animating quest of political philosophy, is over, since in such a society men can find full human satisfaction in it, and there will be no need to search for a better alternative way of life that might satisfy body and mind more.

Rousseau disagrees with Montesquieu on this point and argues not only that the commercial republic is not the best and most rational form of government capable of procuring our happiness, since it is full of irrational opinions and warped passions, but also that no actual society is capable of satisfying human beings who are naturally individuals who are whole and independent. In Rousseau’s view, the only time when humans were truly content and in need of nothing more was in the state of nature, where

they were genuinely whole and self-sufficient, even if in that state they also lacked all reason. The movement from the state of nature to any society necessarily introduces new artificial and conventional passions and needs, which as they multiply become harder and harder to satisfy and cause us to feel greater psychological anguish and unhappiness.

And even if we can rationally discover the principles of the best or at least the most legitimate form of government, as Rousseau seems to think we can, he is very far from thinking that such a society—if it can actually endure—might be peopled by fully rational human beings. Montesquieu thinks that life in the state of nature outside society is dominated by darkness and ignorance. However, the rational discovery of the best political principles might illuminate society, or to use Platonic language, the cave, that men must live in together. For Montesquieu the light of enlightenment can help to reform badly lit caves so that knowledge of the laws of nature might be disseminated and that all men might live according to the truth. For Rousseau, men originally dwell in ignorance, as Montesquieu thinks, but only an education as unique and heterodox for an individual as Emile's is capable of making an "ordinary" man, as Emile is, approach the light of the truth. And even then Emile is only quasi-rational, since Emile is not a philosopher but a future moral citizen of a decent regime, if he consents to join one and whole-heartedly fulfills his duties. So while Montesquieu thinks an entire society, or cave, might live rationally according to the truth, Rousseau thinks only a very strange education might make a particular individual approach something like the truth, and Rousseau has no hopes that Emile's education can effectively be recreated on a massive scale to reform society. Emile will not be ensnared by the false opinions of society, but neither will he be fully rational—at the end of *Emile* he begs his tutor not to leave him as his guide.

Rousseau, then, ultimately agrees with Plato and against Montesquieu—and Hobbes and Locke—that all actual societies are darkened caves, full of irrational prejudice and illusion. However, whereas Plato suggests that this apparently natural horizon of contradictory moral-political opinions might provide the first steps in a philosophic ascent outside one's particular cave, and that in principle anyone is capable of making progress in this ascent, Rousseau is far more pessimistic about the obstacles preventing us from leaving the cave and living according to nature. For Rousseau once we have left the state of nature and dwell in societies and caves it is virtually impossible to overcome our corrupt passions and return to nature.

My account of the dispute between Montesquieu and Rousseau matters because Montesquieu and Rousseau both offer what they claim are definitive accounts of what the core of human nature consists of, even though they draw different conclusions. In Montesquieu's account, if we follow his institutional prescriptions, human nature can find as much security and relative contentment as it is capable of procuring. If he is right, then the quest for the best regime can be discarded, because the best form of government has been discovered and put into effect. All that remains to be done is to replicate this kind of government in as many parts of the globe as is practically possible. And this dispute matters because Montesquieu's solution is our political solution to question of the best way of life. The way of life that he argues is best is the way of life that we modern liberal democrats think is best. His account of modern England as a blueprint for a praiseworthy form of government was absorbed by the American Founders and they tried to found a new form of government that would put into practice the lessons they learned from Montesquieu's account of modern England. It is no accident that the American

Founders cited Montesquieu in the *Federalist Papers* more frequently than any other political philosopher, more frequently even than Locke.

On the other hand, Rousseau's powerful critique of Montesquieu's account undercuts Montesquieu's argument for the goodness of our way of life. If Rousseau is right, or at least partially right, then the question of the best way of life has not been settled by Montesquieu and we must search for alternative, superior ways of life than that discovered by Montesquieu. And if Rousseau is right then no actual society, as Montesquieu suggests, can provide the satisfaction of the best way of life.

We can conclude from this that despite Montesquieu's powerful argument in defense of the liberal commercial republic as the best way of life, Rousseau exposes some grave weaknesses that Montesquieu failed to see or account for. For this reason Rousseau helps us to see seemingly familiar phenomena from new, deeper perspectives. For instance, Rousseau's accounts of *amour-propre*, compassion, and natural and moral corruption, among others, ultimately seem truer to the phenomena than Montesquieu's analysis. While Montesquieu's project is admirable in that it tries to find an enduring institutional solution to the threat of despotism, Rousseau's deeper analysis exposes the vulnerabilities that we, accustomed to evaluating our way of life through at least a kind of Montesquieuian lens, fail to see without Rousseau's new, paradoxical perspectives.

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