THE UNCERTAIN INEVITABILITY OF DECLINE IN MONTESQUIEU

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The decline of regimes—its causes and direction—has been a subject of interest to political scientists at least since the birth of the discipline in fifth- and fourth-century Athens. In recent years, the tools of contemporary political science have been engaged to explain the collapse of the former Soviet Union, the fracture of Yugoslavia, and the instability of postcolonial states in Africa, among other things. Diverse as they are in many respects, contemporary treatments of regime decline are alike in regarding the phenomenon as an exception rather than the rule of political life. They are the progeny of the revolution in modern political thought that introduced the possibility of permanent states based on universal rules of human nature, natural right, and reason. By contrast, the ancients denied the possibility of permanent states and considered regime decline and revolution to be intractable aspects of political life. The modern change of mind on this matter was accomplished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by Hobbes, Locke, and Kant and reached a kind of peak in the nineteenth century with Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Montesquieu occupies an unusual position in this history of ideas because he was a modern thinker (and a liberal one) who believed in the inevitable tendency of every regime to decline. Yet his agreement with the ancients on this point was not complete either. He differed from them in his understanding of the ultimate causes of political decline and its moral meaning. And while he

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did not think the tendency could be fully overcome, Montesquieu did believe that it could be mitigated, although success always was uncertain.

The Spirit of the Laws first appeared in 1748, the fruit (Montesquieu said) of twenty years' labor.[1] It is a remarkably comprehensive treatment of virtually everything relevant to the life of a political regime, understood in the broadest sense to include its political institutions, civil and criminal laws, defense and foreign relations, economy, religion, culture, patterns of social organization, and family structure. The book treats both ancient and modern forms of government, and its comparative analysis ranges across every continent. The most famous and most influential aspects of the work are Montesquieu's teaching on the separation of powers,[2] on which the *Federalist* drew so heavily, and his emphasis on the political effects of social and cultural factors, in view of which he sometimes is regarded as a forerunner (even the founder) of modern sociology.[3] His views on regime decline have drawn less attention. Indeed, while the separation of powers and Montesquieu's quasi-sociological method have been the subjects of extensive commentary, little sustained analysis exists on the corruption and decline of governments in *The Spirit of the Laws*.[4] This study explores that theme and shows why Montesquieu regarded the general tendency toward decline to be inevitable but its actual outcome in any particular case uncertain. Part I lays out the various forms of government and the particular types of decline associated with each one, as presented in Books II through VIII of *The Spirit of the Laws*. Part II identifies two general causes of decline that affect all polities. The first is the encroaching nature of political power itself, which makes the institutional structure of every government permanently vulnerable because those with power continually seek to augment it, overriding existing institutional boundaries and modifying what Montesquieu calls the "nature" of the regime. The second general cause of decline is the partiality of every regime as embodied in what Montesquieu refers to as its motivating "principle," which can only ever be an incomplete expression of human nature and individual moral psychology. The intrinsic partiality of politics and the encroaching nature of power can be attenuated, however. Part III takes up Montesquieu's liberal mechanisms for mitigating decline—especially the edifying effects of pluralism—and considers the significance of these findings for contemporary liberal democracy.

I. FORMS OF GOVERNMENT AND TYPES OF DECLINE

Montesquieu's discussion of the corruption and change of governments in Book VIII of *The Spirit of the Laws* follows the tripartite typology developed

in Books II and III. In these early books, Montesquieu distinguishes between three primary forms of government, each identified by a particular "nature," or the constitutional structure "that makes it what it is," and by a specific "principle," the motivating passion that "makes it act" (III.1). Republican government is rule by the people or a part of the people, and its motivating spring is political virtue, defined as love of equality and the common good.[5] Monarchy is the rule of one according to fixed laws, rule that is mediated by the presence of powerful intermediary bodies, especially the nobility (II.1, 4). Its principle is honor—the ambitious desire for distinction, spirited independence, and jealous regard for privilege and prerogative—which motivates individual and collective resistance to the encroaching power of the crown and thereby sustains a constitutional balance of power (II.4, III.5-8). Despotism is the rule of one alone without fixed laws or intermediary bodies, government in which everything is swept along by "the will" and "caprices" of a single man. It is sustained by the fear the despot's unlimited power inspires in his subjects (II.1, III.9). Montesquieu offers this typology of governments as a template for interpreting the structure of political institutions and the dynamics of political power in different settings. They are akin to "ideal types," as many commentators have noted, which actual governments will approach more or less but never perfectly embody.[6] While actual governments may combine elements of the different types Montesquieu enumerates, however, each has its own distinctive nature and principle.

Book VIII, "On the Corruption of the Principles of the Three Governments," opens with the general rule that "the corruption of each government commences almost always with that of its principles" (VIII.1). Yet Montesquieu initially treats the theme of corruption and decline with the same degree of differentiation that he accords to political constitutions and their animating principles. Different governments are corrupted by different particular causes, and they decline in different ways. Some general rules gradually become apparent, as we shall see, but Montesquieu's analysis begins by emphasizing the plurality of corruption and the particular forms of decline associated with each type of polity. For example, democracy declines when the "spirit of equality" that is so central to republican virtue gives way to an acceptance of inequality, or when it becomes "extreme" so that "each one wishes to be equal to those whom he has chosen to command him" (VIII.2). When the love of equality is replaced by a spirit of inequality, the government is led to aristocracy; when the spirit of extreme equality arises, the government is led to despotism (VIII.2). The latter transformation begins when the spirit of extreme equality makes limits on the action of individuals seem intolerable to them. Gradually, the populace rejects all authority asserted against itself (that of senators and magistrates, for instance, and

eventually that of the laws). In the process, it destroys the institutional constraints that limit the exercise of political power more generally. At the same time, and also in the name of equality, "the people will distribute among themselves all the public funds" (VIII.2), thus bankrupting the public treasury for the satisfaction of private interests and rendering impossible the provision of public needs, including the public defense. In this situation, Montesquieu says, "the more the people appear to take advantage of their liberty, the more they will approach the moment they must lose it" (VIII.2). Although Montesquieu is not explicit on this point, we can easily envision "the moment" he has in mind here: a crisis arises spawned by chance or intrigue, and the people, finding the treasury empty and unable to rekindle their former spirit of self-sacrifice, turn in desperation to the first person promising to return them to a state of stability and ease. In doing so, however, they effectively deliver themselves into the hands of a despot because in their earlier zeal to increase equality they destroyed the institutional limits on political power. Extreme equality thus eventually leads to the rule of an individual tyrant. A republic animated by the spring of political virtue therefore must avoid both inequality and the spirit of extreme equality if it is to preserve itself.

Similarly, monarchy must protect the integrity of the principle of honor. This principle has been corrupted "when honor has been placed in contradiction with honors and when one can be at the same time covered with infamy and with dignities" (VIII.7). In other words, corruption occurs when a monarch confers public honors, status, and office on those who bow obsequiously to his authority rather than asserting a spirit of self-command or defending a standard of right that is independent of his will.[7] Under these conditions, Montesquieu says, "the foremost dignities are the marks of the foremost servitude" and "the important men" (*les grands*) become "instruments of arbitrary power" (VIII.7). Dependency and the debasement of honor are two sides of the same coin, for honor in Montesquieu reflects an independence that is, at least occasionally, admirable.[8] This independence is guided by codes of honor that are embedded in publicly recognized social and political traditions. Thus, "honor has its supreme rules" (*ses règles suprêmes*), which transcend the private (subjective) wills of individual persons as well as that of the prince (IV.2). Yet honor is not to be identified with moral virtue, at least not directly. Even when the principle of monarchy is operating properly, it is what Montesquieu calls "false honor." "Philosophically speaking," he says, "it is a false honor that drives all the parts of the state, but this false honor is as useful to the public as the true one would be to the individuals who could have it" (III.7). Speaking "philosophically," true honor would be something resembling the ambition of Aristotle's magnanimous man, who does the right

thing, for the right reason, in the right manner, at the right time, and so on.[9] His ambition is guided not simply by a historically embedded code of honor but by what is by nature good, and he receives public recognition (or honors) for the goodness of his actions.[10] The external honors he wins and the internal honor he exhibits are "useful" to him as an individual, in Montesquieu's terms, because they make him a better man, a more perfect or complete embodiment of what it means to be a human being.

Even uncorrupted honor in Montesquieu does not entail this level of perfection, however. In part, Montesquieu's distinction between true and false honor, and his acceptance of the latter, reflects his modern, liberal orientation to politics. He accepts in significant measure the comparatively modest aspirations of politics introduced by earlier liberals such as Locke, for whom the purpose of politics was individual security—or comfortable self-preservation—rather than the perfection of souls. It also means that "false" honor is not to be equated with corrupt honor. False honor is no threat to monarchy, on Montesquieu's account, but rather supports it. By contrast, the corruption of honor entails a loss of personal and corporate independence on the part of the nobility, and it is accompanied by a decline in the proper balance of power that constitutes moderate monarchy. Yet if corrupt honor brings about a decline of monarchy relative to the regime's own nature and principle, it does not mark a movement from truth to falsehood, or a simple shift from moral virtue to moral vice, since even uncorrupted honor in this context is false and not to be equated with moral virtue. In a similar way, the moderate spirit of equality at the heart of republican virtue constitutes a middle point between the spirit of inequality and that of extreme equality, but Montesquieu does not connect this mean to an independent moral standard in the manner of Aristotle. Montesquieu never says that the moderate equality of virtuous republicans is what they by nature deserve, or that it reflects natural right. He does not assess the principle of republican government on the basis of a higher standard of justice. This is one implication of his emphatic distinction between what he calls the "political" virtue of ancient republics and moral or Christian virtue.[11] And the spirit of extreme equality is shown to be problematic not because extreme inequality is in itself unjust but because it produces despotism. The hierarchy of regimes in *The Republic* of Plato, in which each successive stage in the cycle of decline represents a loss according to an independent moral standard, is replaced by Montesquieu with a different scheme. Every change counts as a decline insofar as it marks a departure from the existing nature and principle of the government. But there is only one change that counts as a moral decline, and this is the change from any moderate government (republic or monarchy) to a despotic one.

Yet even in the case of despotism, the moral meaning of corruption is complicated by Montesquieu's ambivalent use of the term. This ambivalence is exemplified in his application of the word "corruption" to the destruction of despotic governments. Like honor and virtue, fear, the principle of despotism, is subject to corruption. When fear has been corrupted, despotic governments—like the others—are likely to collapse. But what could it mean for fear to be corrupted? To corrupt fear is merely to supplant it with other motives, not to debase it, for there is nothing admirable or elevated about fear. Despotism differs from republican government and monarchy on the grounds that

> the principle of despotism is corrupted without ceasing because it is corrupted by its nature. Other governments perish because particular accidents violate their principle; this one perishes by its internal vice when some accidental causes do not prevent its principle from being corrupted. (VIII.10)

What makes despotism intrinsically "corrupt" is partly that it cannot sustain itself as a form of government, and its "vice" here refers to its inadequacy in this regard. One principal meaning of the corruption of both moderate and despotic governments, then, is simply change or collapse, a pragmatic matter rather than a moral one.

Despotism is intrinsically corrupt in a way that goes beyond the merely pragmatic, however. Although Montesquieu never explicitly identifies a best regime, he makes it abundantly clear that despotism is the worst one. So if there is no clearly articulated *summum bonum* that informs his treatment of corruption and decline, there surely is a *summum malum*.[12] Despotism, he says, brings "insults" (VIII.21) and "appalling ills" (*maux effroyables*) (II.4) to human nature, causing it to "suffer" (VIII.8). Under this form of government, "the portion of men, like that of beasts, is instinct, obedience, chastisement" (III.10). No ambition survives, and the human capacity for deliberation is markedly reduced (IV.3, V.13, III.9). Because life under despotism is so insecure, few persons are willing to take the risks and make the investments required to prosper, and consequently commerce and other arts, such as industry and the cultivation of land, suffer neglect (V.14-15). The personal attachments and obligations that contribute to elevating human lives above mere life, such as "respect for a father, tenderness for one's children and women, [and] laws of honor" (III.10), whither. All action is mere reaction, a response to unreflective appetites and fears, rather than principled intention (V.17-18). Montesquieu does not elaborate on the quality he refers to as "greatness" (*grandeur*) of "soul" (*l'âme*), but he insists that it is possible only under moderate governments that protect individual liberty (V.12), whereas

with despotism, as under slavery, the "soul . . . is constrained to be debased without ceasing" (XV.13).[13]

The moral meaning of Montesquieu's discussion of political decline therefore is complex. He refuses simply to equate the corruption and decline of particular governments with the decline of virtue per se.[14] This represents a significant departure from Plato's account of corruption and the decline of regimes in *The Republic*. The movement from kingship to aristocracy to timocracy to plutocracy to democracy and finally tyranny, described in Book 8 of *The Republic*, constitutes successive stages in a process of falling away from a unitary moral standard.[15] At each stage, the decline of the regime results from a moral failure, or an intellectual one, which is the failure to see and act on the true nature of the good. Corruption is defined with reference to this standard and not only, or even primarily, in terms of the collapse of a particular regime. For Montesquieu, there is no significant moral gain or moral loss in the transition from a moderate republic to a moderate monarchy, or vice versa. Thus, the corruption of a republic (for instance) could very well be a morally meaningless event (VIII.8). Yet if its corruption should lead to despotism, the moral meaning would be clear.

The political meaning of such an outcome is somewhat more ambiguous. Although Montesquieu treats despotism as a type of government, it is in some ways nonpolitical, even antipolitical.[16] It leaves no room for collective self-determination or even reasoned deliberation since the despot "does not have to deliberate, to doubt, or to reason; he has only to want" (IV.3). Despotism is the rule of instinct and appetite (V.13) not the deliberate intentions of reflective human beings, and in this sense it resembles the necessitous realm of nature more closely than the shared choices characteristic of political life. Despotism also undermines the possibility of a public sphere, another central component of politics. Under despotic government everything is the private property of the despot. Consequently, Montesquieu says, "the preserving of the state is only the preserving of the prince, or rather of the palace in which he is enclosed" (V.14). No politics is possible under these conditions because politics presupposes the existence of public matters. As a result, "politics with its springs and laws here should be very limited" for "everything comes down to reconciling political and civil government with domestic government, the officers of the state with those of the seraglio" (V.14). The nonpolitical quality of despotism may be one reason why Montesquieu speaks of political "decline" rather than using the term "revolution," as Aristotle does in *Politics* V. The idea of revolution implies more than merely decline; it suggests the replacement of one political order by another. Yet Montesquieu's treatment of decline makes it clear that the destruction of one political order may not always be followed by the rise of another form of politics; the result

may instead be the loss of politics altogether and the rise of an antipolitical form of organization. So if political decline sometimes may be morally neutral, as when a moderate monarchy is transformed into a moderate republic, Montesquieu nevertheless presses the point that the decline of a government also may be devastating, not only for its particular way of life but for political life in general. By speaking of political decline rather than revolution, he reminds us of this constant danger.

What is Montesquieu's morally ambivalent use of the word "corruption" meant to convey? One effect is to draw attention to the pluralist approach to politics that he introduces in *The Spirit of the Laws*. This approach is based on a negative normative standard consisting of the regime most to be avoided rather than a positive standard delineating the best way of life. For Montesquieu, as against Plato (and ultimately Aristotle as well), there is no single best way of life but rather a variety of good lives and decent forms of government. No unitary standard makes possible a rank ordering of the lives of honor, political virtue, moral virtue, and commerce; monarchy and republicanism; or the ancient world and the modern world. Because he teaches the plurality of human goods, Montesquieu has been accused by some of being a relativist.[17] The accusation is not easy to dismiss because Montesquieu does treat every regime as a context for moral and political life, thus contextualizing standards of right. Yet his insistence on the moral degradation of despotic government implies at least one standard that transcends particular contexts and so cuts against the strongly relativist reading of his work. Montesquieu was not a relativist but he was a pluralist, and this is one of the marks of his liberalism. The morally ambivalent use of the words "corruption" and "decline" speak to this defining feature of his political philosophy.

II. THE INEVITABILITY OF DECLINE

Montesquieu's opening assertion in Book VIII, that the corruption of government almost always begins with the corruption of its principle, would seem to make the character of its inhabitants the primary cause of every government's decline. The motivating principles of governments (virtue, honor, fear) are functions of character, after all. Yet later he insists that "the smallest change in the constitution entails the ruin of the principles," which indicates that character follows rather than shapes political institutions (VIII.14). He offers the republic of Carthage as an example, saying that the senate's loss of authority there during the Second Punic War corrupted the leading citizens so that "the virtue of the magistrates fell with the authority of the senate." Elsewhere, as we have seen, Montesquieu attends to the ways in which changes in

the principle of a republic affect the structure of the regime, as when the spirit of extreme equality in ancient Rome led the plebs to attack the prerogatives of the senate (XI.16). In the case of monarchy, we find that nature and principle (or institutions and character) have a similarly reciprocal relationship and that political decline results from a combination of the two factors. For although Montesquieu says that the decline of monarchy results from the corruption of honor (VIII.7), he also tells us that honor is corrupted as the result of the sovereign's encroachment on the prerogatives of the nobility, which brings about a shift in the institutional balance of power, or the structure of the government:

> Just as democracies are lost when the people strip the senate, the magistrates, and the judges of their functions, monarchies are corrupted when one takes away little by little the prerogatives of the bodies (*corps*) or the privileges of the towns. In the first case, one goes to the despotism of all; in the other, to the despotism of one alone. (VIII.6)

Thus, "the cause of the corruption of almost all monarchies" is the prince's attack on the independence of the intermediary bodies, a reference to Louis XIV's policy of eroding the power of the French nobility and replacing with his own favorites those who had held high office on the basis of heredity. The debasement of honor, monarchy's principle, would seem to be the product of structural changes in the government.

To note the reciprocal effects of structure and character on political decline does not go far enough toward an explanation of the phenomenon, however. What brings about the changes in the structures and principles of governments that in turn cause their decline? We know already that despotic governments inevitably decline because they are intrinsically self-destructive (VIII.10).[18] By contrast, Montesquieu tells us in VIII.10, moderate governments are destroyed because particular "accidents" violate their principles. Yet elsewhere he suggests that the decline of republics and monarchies is more than merely accidental. Indeed, he frequently conveys a sense of necessity in describing the decline of these forms of government. A chapter titled "Distinctive Properties of Monarchy" concludes with a fatalistic tone: "Rivers run to mix themselves with the sea; monarchies go to lose themselves in despotism" (VIII.17). Monarchy, like despotism, suffers from internal difficulties that make it intrinsically unstable. First among them is the tension between king and nobility, in which the king is "the source of all civil and political power" and yet the nobility (and the intermediary bodies more generally) mediate and therefore limit his power (II.4). The dynamic balance of power between them is the genius of this regime and its defining feature, as the "fundamental maxim" of monarchy is "no monarchy, no nobility: no

nobility, no monarch; rather, one has a despot" (IV.2). The very dynamism that constitutes the balance also makes it precarious, however, because each side continually seeks to press its own advantage at the expense of the other. Reflecting on the successes of Louis XIV in this regard, Montesquieu attributes the greater advantage to the monarch, who controls the army, hence the tendency of monarchies to run to despotism as rivers run to the sea.[19] Things could go the other way, of course, and later did so when the aristocratic uprising of 1788-89 opened the door for a popular revolution, resulting in what Montesquieu would have called "a despotism of all" (VIII.6) during the years of the Terror, followed by a "despotism of one" under Napoleon. If the Revolution shows that Montesquieu misread the direction that the decline of the French monarchy eventually would take, it supports his broader thesis about the general tendency toward decline, even among nondespotic forms of government.

Problems internal to the principle of honor also contribute to this tendency. Honor requires a relatively entrenched social order. Montesquieu insists that the prerogatives of the nobility must be hereditary and exclusive, and they must not transfer to the people "unless one wishes to offend (*choque*) the principle of the government, unless one wants to diminish the force of the nobility and that of the people" (V.9). The nobility even should "regard[] it as the sovereign infamy to share power with the people" (VIII.9). Yet elsewhere he maintains that a hereditary nobility tends toward "ignorance," "inattention," and "scorn for civil government," all of which presumably undermine its effectiveness as a counterbalance to the crown (II.4). Similarly, royal appointments give political power to the king's flatterers (V.19). In his *Pensées*, he speaks of "the inner desire and restlessness that each one has for leaving the place where he has been put" as the sustaining force of the political world, and a positive one at that.[20] Consequently, "the laws that order each man to remain in his profession and to pass it down to his children are not and cannot be useful except in despotic states, where no one can or ought to have any rivalry" (XX.22). Montesquieu thus supported, in the context of monarchy, the practice of buying offices on the grounds that it put political influence into the hands the ambitious, assertive types most likely to engage in the rivalries that sustain a balance of political power (V.19). Paradoxically, the fixed, hereditary social order that is necessary to honor also prevents persons of "merit" from coming to the fore and thereby undercuts honor, which leaves the government of monarchy vulnerable to the encroaching power of the crown.[21] Its corruption appears to be inevitable.

The fall of republics seems similarly unavoidable, and for reasons that go well beyond the "particular accidents" mentioned in VIII.10. Here again, tensions internal to the regime make it intrinsically unstable. To maintain the

political virtue that animates it, Montesquieu says, "it is necessary that a republic dread something" (VIII.5). The reason is that republican virtue, which consists in a preference for the common good over one's individual interests, requires a "renunciation of oneself, which is always a very painful (*pénible*) thing" (IV.5). Fear of external enemies unites the population in a common purpose, and the heat of necessity makes the sacrifices required by virtue more palatable. Consequently, "the more security these states have, the more, as with overly tranquil waters, they are subject to being corrupted" (VIII.5). Republics are thus forced to seek out military conflict when it is not initiated by others, which leads them to expand their borders. Moreover, a small republic is sure to be destroyed by a foreign force (IX.1). But the expansion of republics also is their downfall, as the Roman republic illustrates.[22] As a republic increases in size, it loses its collective identity and common spirit, which introduces inequalities and fuels private interests, thus undermining its animating principle of political virtue (VIII.16). It is in the nature of republics to have only a small territory, but it is necessary for them to expand. This contradiction contributes to the intrinsic instability of republican governments. It is compounded by their characteristic immoderation. Republican citizens must be ferocious in order to defend their regime against foreign aggression, but this makes them difficult to govern since warriors who are "so proud, so audacious, so terrible outside could not be very moderate within. To ask, in a free state, for men daring in war and timid in peace is to wish for impossible things."[23]

Thus, the decline of republics and monarchies is not caused solely by accidents. Like despotism, these regimes suffer from inescapably debilitating contradictions that contribute to making particular instances of each type vulnerable to decline. And yet even this does not tell the whole story, for one can find in *The Spirit of the Laws* two additional causes of decline that are still more fundamental than the ones just identified. The first is the encroaching nature of political power itself. "It is an eternal experience," Montesquieu points out, "that every man who has any power tends to abuse it; he goes until he finds some limits" (XI.4). The encroaching nature of power may lead to changes in the structure of a government, whether it is a monarch's attack on the nobility or a popular usurpation of the senate. In the case of the Romans, Montesquieu says, it was "due to a malady eternal among men" that "the plebeians, who had obtained tribunes to defend themselves, used them to attack," and gradually removed the prerogatives of the patricians, thus setting in motion a radical transformation in the structure of the republic.[24] When the republic finally was "oppressed," he continues, the true cause was not "the ambition of certain individuals." Instead, "we must accuse man—always more avid for power in the measure that he has an advantage, and who desires

everything only because he already possesses a great deal."[25] The encroaching nature of power—or of human nature—exerts pressure on every form of government, insofar as any constitutional arrangement is vulnerable to those who would overstep the established bounds of their authority. It also spurs the territorial expansion of power, even beyond the limits any particular government can sustain. The tendency of territorial expansion to produce political decline is a theme Montesquieu takes up directly in VIII.15-20.[26] Part of the meaning of political corruption and decline in Montesquieu, as we have seen, is a simple falling away from the defining nature and principle of any government. To the extent that the universal tendency to abuse or extend one's power leads to shifts in the prevailing distribution of power in a particular government or the excessive expansion of its borders, this feature of human nature will have been an underlying cause of the corruption (i.e., change) of the government. It also has a tendency to lead regimes of all types in the direction of despotism and so to corrupt them in the sense of morally debasing them and not merely altering their structure, since attacks on the established constraints on power open the door to the rule of unlimited power, or despotism.

A second underlying cause of corruption and decline is the inescapably partial quality of the principle of every government and its way of life more generally. Virtue, honor, and fear are only partial expressions of human nature. As the animating spirit of a government, each one faces a continuous onslaught from the rest of human nature, many elements of which are bound to conflict with it. This fact is perhaps most striking in the case of republican virtue, which runs counter to self-concern, and which for this reason appears to be especially vulnerable to the pressures exerted by human nature. But honor also is limited in this respect, even if it is not equally self-sacrificing. As Montesquieu presents it, honor is at odds with the humility of religious faith, the narrow egoism of commercial interest, and the feeling of equality, among other things; and as the prejudice of each person and each condition, it is lacking in the sense of a common humanity. Similarly, fear must stave off the stirrings of ambition, love, greed, pride, independence, and the love of liberty. This comes through very clearly in *Persian Letters*, in which the regime represented by the harem collapses under the weight of the many aspects of human nature that undermine fear, which the structure of the regime cannot accommodate, such as the ambition, the love, the greed, and the pride of Usbek's wives and eunuchs.[27]

This problem of partiality goes beyond the three forms of government represented by Montesquieu's typology. One may infer that virtue, honor, and fear are not the only incomplete representations of human nature but that the principle of every government is bound to be so. Every regime embodies a particular way of life, one that brings certain features of human nature to the

fore but not others, and develops some aspects of what it means to be human but not all of them. No regime could embody every way of life or all of human nature. To live in political society means to live in *a* political society, to make collective decisions according to a particular set of standards, and to undertake common enterprises in the name of some notion of what is good or right. Some standards may be truer than others, and some regimes may be better than others, but none is fully comprehensive since no one way of life can be every way of life, or even every good way of life. Yet the possibilities foreclosed by a regime and the aspects of human nature it pushes to the side often press at the margins, or even the center, of its political life. The partial nature of politics makes every government vulnerable to corruption and decline because it makes every regime incomplete and either subject to challenge by the parts of human nature it has left out or in need of them. Is the inevitability of political decline exceptionless? Can its causes be attenuated? In particular, can solutions be found to the fundamental problems of encroaching power and the partiality of politics?

III. MECHANISMS FOR MITIGATING DECLINE

One method for avoiding political decline, which Montesquieu recommends in VIII.20, is to contain territorial expansion. Republics should refrain from growing so large that they can no longer sustain a shared identity among citizens (VIII.16). Monarchical domains should remain limited to the size a moderate prince can control (VIII.17). Excessive expansion of any regime leads to despotism because only the iron hand of a despot can dominate far-flung territories and the disparate peoples they necessarily contain. Beyond Montesquieu's specific advice about avoiding expansion, *The Spirit of the Laws* as a whole suggests two more fundamental mechanisms for mitigating political decline. One of these mechanisms is structural, relating to the nature of the government, and the other is character based, relating to its animating principle. The structural mechanism is the separation, or balance, of powers. To constrain the encroaching nature of power, he says, "it is necessary that, by the arrangement of things, power should check (*arrête*) power" (XI.4). One must establish distinctive sites of political power and authority within a given government, and the constitution "must combine [these] powers, regulate them, temper them, make them act;" it "must give, so to speak, a ballast to one in order to place it in a position to resist another" (V.14). A solution to the problem of encroaching power is not to be found in direct appeals to the wisdom of citizens or rulers. This is another place where Montesquieu's treatment of regime political departs from that of Plato. Individual reason is not

the solution to decline partly because decline does not result simply from a failure of reason and partly because reason on its own cannot be relied upon to check this natural tendency. The solution cannot be found without reason, to be sure, as a constitution of balanced powers is "a masterpiece of legislation that chance rarely brings about and that prudence rarely is permitted to bring about" (V.14). Montesquieu contrasts this type of constitution with despotic government, which "leaps to view" (*sauté aux yeux*) because "one needs only passions to establish it" (V.14). But the genius of moderate governments lies mainly in the indirect rule of largely self-enforcing, institutional limits on political power rather than the direct rule of the wise. The primary role of reason in politics is not so much to orient the ship of state to a particular end as to keep it afloat, to prevent the polity from self-destructing as the result of encroaching power. The direction the government takes—the end it pursues—is less important to Montesquieu than the form of its constitution. His emphasis in this regard reflects the pluralism inherent in his liberal approach to politics.[28]

The balance of power that a well-conceived constitution establishes through political institutions is echoed in other aspects of a moderate regime. A measure of social heterogeneity, as against the forced uniformity of despotism[29] and the cultural homogeneity of ancient republics,[30] is conducive to moderation and stability, and hence longevity.[31] A plurality even of moral standards can have a moderating effect. It is true that Montesquieu expresses some ambivalence about the moral fragmentation of the modern world. He contrasts education in ancient republics with education in modern monarchies on the grounds that

> their education had another advantage over ours; it was never contradicted (*démentie*). . . . Today we receive three different or contrary educations: that of our fathers, that of our schoolmasters, and that of the world. What we are told by the last overthrows all the ideas of the first two. This comes, in some part, from the contrast that there is among us between the obligations of religion and those of the world, a thing the ancients did not know. (IV.4)[32]

The modern plurality of moral standards undercuts the force of shared commitments to collective standards and joint projects, with the result that feats accomplished easily by ancient republics now can only "astonish our small souls" (IV.4). Modern souls are "small" partly because our allegiances are divided among different authorities. But this is not altogether a bad thing. The unity and force of shared commitments in ancient republics also produced extremism and immoderate government (V.2). This immoderation not only jeopardized individual liberty but also was an important cause of political decline, as we have seen. A measure of division among moral authorities can

be good insofar as it contributes to the balance of power. The independent authority of religion can check the power of a tyrant (III.10), for example, and the moral authority of codes of honor among the nobility can motivate principled opposition to the encroaching power of a monarch (IV.2).[33] Another extrapolitical source of authority that can contribute to the general balance of power is commerce. Commerce establishes countervailing sites of power (XXI.20) that can check and balance the power of political sovereigns, and so it has "reduced (*ôté*) great assertions of authority, or at least the success of great assertions of authority" (XXII.13). Montesquieu thus treats commerce as an "auxiliary of constitutional safeguards," which functions as a bulwark against decline in the direction of despotism.[34] Thus, the political balance of power established by a constitution of separate powers may be enhanced by social, moral, and economic divisions of power. All mitigate the tendency of power to encroach and governments to decline, and so contribute to the prevention of despotism, the most dangerous outcome of political decline.

Montesquieu presents his defense of separate powers through a discussion of the constitution of England in Book XI, chapter 6, of *The Spirit of the Laws*, the most celebrated portion of the work. England, as Montesquieu characterizes it, embodies the constitutional balance of the three powers found "in each state": legislative power, executive power, and the power of judging. The legislative body, "being composed of two parts, the one will enchain the other by its mutual faculty of vetoing. Both will be bound by the executive power, which will itself be bound by the legislative power." For its part, the power of judging is rendered "invisible and null" by being removed from the hands of the executive and vested in popular juries responsible for administering justice to their peers. Together these separate elements and the system of checks and balances between them compose "the fundamental constitution" of this government (XI.6).

Montesquieu nowhere defends the view that the English constitution should be replicated by other nations in precise detail. The balance of power can take a variety of forms (XI.7), and the specific form it takes in any given regime should be suited to the broader context of social, cultural, economic, religious, and historical factors that comprise what Montesquieu calls "the spirit" of its laws (I.3). A constitution of balanced powers is compatible with republican as well as monarchical forms of government, for instance. Indeed, it is difficult to ascertain which type England itself more closely approximates since its constitution places legislative power and the power of judging (traditional marks of political sovereignty) in popular hands but gives executive power to a king.[35] Regardless of the specific form it takes, however, a constitutional balance of power is Montesquieu's general model for moderate government. Insofar as it provides a mechanism for constrain-

ing the encroaching nature of power, it also provides a means for attenuating corruption and decline.

A second means for containing decline is suggested by Montesquieu's treatment of the animating spirit of the English government, which is found in Book XIX, chapter 27, of *The Spirit of the Laws*. Montesquieu does not specify a particular principle for the English government in the way he specifies the principles of other regimes. Instead, he tells us that "all the passions are free there" (XIX.27). England seems to avoid the partiality inherent in the principle of every government by incorporating every passion into the spring that sets it in motion. The effect is not always salutary, for "hatred, envy, jealousy, and the ardor for enriching and distinguishing oneself would appear to their full extent." This is to be expected, however, because "if it were otherwise, the state would be like a man, struck down by disease, who has no passions because he has no strength" (XIX.27). A comprehensive character cannot be altogether pleasing because in order to be comprehensive, it must reflect all aspects of human nature and not only the admirable ones.[36] But the English regime seems to be sturdier for the fact that its principle excludes less of human nature than do those of other regimes. And even passions that are less than admirable serve the constitution. For example, the self-interest and the caprice of the English lead them to "often change parties," forgetting both "the laws of friendship and those of hatred." This makes them easy fodder for manipulation by officials in both the legislative and executive arms of government, but it also provides these two powers with the strength they need to resist one another. If the party associated with one power should "rise too much to the top, the effect of liberty would be to abase it while the citizens, like hands that rescue the body, would come to raise the other." In effect, the citizens themselves function as the ballast that preserves the balance of powers in the constitution and keeps the ship of state afloat. Because it does not rely on lofty motives, or even on a particular motive, the English constitution appears to be unusually resilient, or impervious to corruption and decline.

England is not altogether invulnerable, however. In fact, Montesquieu insists that "as all things human have an end, the state of which we are speaking will lose its liberty; it will perish" (XI.6). Not even England is a permanent polity. The cause most likely to bring it down, he predicts, will be the venality of the legislature, which had already become known for its practice of selling votes to the crown.[37] England "will perish when legislative power is more corrupt than executive power" (XI.6). It seems that despite the inclusive quality of the principle of English government—the fact that it is open to all the passions—some features of human nature nevertheless rise to the fore and overpower others. In particular, Montesquieu says in his *Notes on England*, "money is here held in sovereign esteem; honor and virtue little."[38] When all

the passions are free, the passion of material interest takes over,[39] pushing aside passions (such as virtue or honor) that might balance it and mitigate the legislators' venality. Commerce inspires its own kind of virtue, of course, and Montesquieu seems to have seen more of this virtue in the English populace than in its magistrates.[40] This suggestion is conveyed in notes he made preparatory to a letter addressed to the Englishman William Domville. Domville had written to Montesquieu shortly after the publication of *The Spirit of the Laws*, saying,

> You feel that we are no longer what we ought to be, that our liberty has been turned into license, that the very idea of the public good is lost and that the fate of rich and corrupt nations is waiting for us and even that we are hurling ourselves toward it. Permit me to ask you, sir, you who have reflected so much on the causes of the decline of nations, in what manner the relaxation of our mores will end, this abandonment of first principles.[41]

Montesquieu refused to fully endorse Domville's characterization, however. Although he agreed in his notes that in England there were "so many means of making a fortune" in government service that it seemed the English had "wished to corrupt" their magistrates and representatives, nevertheless he argued that "it is not the same among the entire body of the people, and I believe I have remarked a certain spirit of liberty that is illuminated always and is not ready to be extinguished." The English people, he wrote, "have more virtue than their representatives."[42] The middle class especially "loves its laws and its liberty," and "as long as the middle class preserves its principles it is difficult for [the English constitution] to be overturned."[43] In the letter of reply that he eventually sent to Domville, in fact, he insisted that "in Europe the last sigh of liberty will be heaved by an Englishman."[44]

Yet for all the energy the English show in defense of their interests, they lack gallantry, sociability, and high heartedness (XIX.27). Montesquieu reports that "their poets would have more often an original rudeness of invention than a certain delicacy that gives taste; one would find there something that would approach the force of Michelangelo more than the grace of Raphael" (XIX.27). The English lack precisely the traits Montesquieu celebrates in the French: "a sociable humor, an openness of heart; a joy in life, a taste, a facility in communicating its thoughts." As against England, France is "pleasant, playful, sometimes imprudent, often indiscreet" and yet has "courage, generosity, frankness, and a certain point of honor" (XIX.5). This is not to say that Montesquieu simply prefers the French monarchy of his day to the English form of government or that he regarded England as being in imminent danger of collapse but rather to acknowledge the partiality of the English way of life and its character. The partiality of their character, centering on material self-interest, explains why Montesquieu predicts that it will be

venality rather than some other cause that one day will destroy their regime. Certain capacities and qualities are shut out of the English character and others are exaggerated, despite the fact that "all the passions are free there."

This suggests that even when character is officially unregulated and unshaped, it is likely to be (or to become) narrow, and hence vulnerable to the dangers deriving from the partiality of political life. The inclusive principle of the English form of government mitigates but cannot wholly alleviate the inevitable tendency toward decline. The same is true with respect to the structure of the English constitution. Although the institutional balance of power wards off decline more effectively than reliance on an excessively demanding form of moral virtue or the wisdom of philosopher-kings, it cannot guarantee a perpetual polity. Montesquieu's prediction about the corruption of the English legislature brings this point home forcefully. It demonstrates that the separation of powers is not an entirely self-executing solution but does depend on character, even if this institutional mechanism makes the loftiest forms of virtue unnecessary. In this respect, Montesquieu's discussion of England is in keeping with his more general portrait of political life as shaped by the reciprocal relationship between the structure of political institutions and their animating principles, or the moral psychology that brings them to life.

CONCLUSIONS

Montesquieu's analysis of political corruption and decline suggests that the tendency toward decline is indeed inevitable but that it can be attenuated, at least in the case of governments that are not already despotic. The tendency toward decline is always present because it is rooted in human nature and the partial nature of politics. But it can be resisted. In particular, a constitution of separate powers and an animating spirit that is inclusive of many aspects of human nature rather than narrowly restricted to a few can help to ward off the fall of a government. Yet the effects of such resistance also are uncertain because the pressure toward decline never can be wholly transcended. The paradox of the uncertain inevitability of decline in Montesquieu reflects the paradoxical nature of political life, in which it is necessary for us to live one way rather than to live every way simultaneously, even though we cannot fully suppress the features of human nature that any one way of life inevitably forecloses. The foreclosed features of human nature together with the encroaching nature of power are the seeds of the conflicts that generate political decline.

American liberal democracy offers no exception to these general rules. We, too, must contend with the inescapable pressures that Montesquieu illu-

minates. His analysis reminds us to be vigilant in defending the division of power—political and otherwise—at every level. It also challenges us to see that although our constitutional apparatus takes much of the pressure off individual character, our separation of powers could not survive if our animating spirit were reduced entirely to venal self-interest. Beyond that, Montesquieu gives us reason to renew our collective commitment to pluralism and heterogeneity in society. Although the motivating principle of every government is bound to be (or eventually to become) partial, pluralism and heterogeneity introduce principles of action into the polity that may counterbalance the national spirit, or "principle," and protect it from the narrowness that invites degeneration. Thus, while the motive of material interest that predominates in the United States today is a perfectly legitimate motive (and its predominance may be good for individual liberty on the whole), we are well served by the presence of competing principles, seated frequently in the voluntary associations of American civil society, which challenge our materialism and our individualism. Honor, faith, friendship, pride, civic virtue, the love of liberty as an end in itself, the creative impulse and the spirit of innovation, and the ineffable longing for what is noble all shore up the integrity and strength of our regime even as they challenge the principle of self-interest—*because* they challenge it. They bring more of human nature into our way of life and thereby reduce the pressure on our political order posed by the parts of human nature that it inevitably minimizes or pushes to the periphery.

All this suggests that today we can best attend to the dangers of corruption and political decline not by imposing a new (or an old) moral order on the citizenry but by protecting the pluralism, heterogeneity, and individual liberty that are the conditions for the rise of alternative animating spirits and the widest realization of human capacities. The pluralism and heterogeneity of a liberal society contest and thereby mitigate the partiality of politics. They cannot undo the inevitable tendency toward decline that Montesquieu makes us see, but along with the institutional mechanisms he enumerates, they may make possible a continuous process of regeneration at the margins. So if Montesquieu's analysis of political decline suggests that liberal democracy, like every form of government, contains the seeds of its own decline, there may nevertheless be reason to think that we may find in it the seeds of renewal as well.

NOTES

1. Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, preface, in *Œuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, vol. 2, ed. Roger Caillois (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1949-51). Translations are my own. Here-

after references to *The Spirit of the Laws* will be inserted parenthetically into the text, with roman numerals indicating book and arabic numerals indicating chapter.

2. Montesquieu himself speaks of "distributed powers" (*pouvoirs distribués*) (XI.7) not "separate powers." In fact, the balance of power established by a moderate constitution presupposes a certain interaction between powers, such as the executive right to veto legislative decisions, rather than a strict separation. For analysis of Montesquieu on the balance of powers, see, for example, Sergio Cotta, "L'idée de parti dans la philosophie politique de Montesquieu" in *Actes du congrès Montesquieu réuni à Bordeaux du 23 au 26 mai 1955* (Bordeaux, France: Delmas, 1956), 257-63; C. P. Courtney, "Montesquieu and English Liberty" in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on* The Spirit of Laws, ed. David Carrithers, Michael Mosher, and Paul Rahe (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 273-91; Joseph Dedieu, *Montesquieu et la tradition politique anglaise en France* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1909); F. T. H. Fletcher, *Montesquieu and English Politics* (London: Edward Arnold, 1939); Gabriel Loirette, "Montesquieu et le problème, en France, du bon gouvernement" in *Actes du congrès Montesquieu réuni à Bordeaux du 23 au 26 mai 1955 pour commémorer la deuxième centenaire de la mort de Montesquieu* (Bordeaux, France: Imprimeries Delmas, 1956), 219-39; Harvey C. Mansfield Jr., *Taming the Prince: The Ambivalence of Modern Executive Power* (New York: Free Press, 1989), chap. 9; Henry J. Merry, *Montesquieu's System of Natural Government* (Lafayette, IN: Purdue Research Foundation, 1970), especially 313-45; Thomas Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), especially 114-63; John Plamenatz, *Man and Society*, vol. 1 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 276-93; Paul Rahe, "Forms of Government: Structure, Principle, Object, and Aim" in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on* The Spirit of Laws, ed. David Carrithers, Michael Mosher, and Paul Rahe (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 80-97; Judith Shklar, *Montesquieu* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1987), 79-104; George C. Vlachos, *La politique de Montesquieu: Notion et méthode* (Paris: Éditions Montchrestien, 1974), especially 98-162.

3. For examples of this interpretation, see Emile Durkheim, *Montesquieu and Rousseau: Forerunners of Sociology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960); Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, vol. 1 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1998), 13-72. Robert Alun Jones offers an appraisal of this interpretation in "Ambivalent Cartesians: Durkheim, Montesquieu, and Method," *American Journal of Sociology* 100 (1994): 1-39. Pierre Manent also reads Montesquieu as the proponent of a fundamentally sociological approach to politics in *The City of Man*, trans. Marc A. LePain (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). In a challenge to this reading, Catherine Larrère points out that it is ironic to call Montesquieu a founder of sociology because "his domain is not that of necessity but of reason." Catherine Larrère, *Actualité de Montesquieu* (Paris: Presses des Sciences Po, 1999), 10.

4. One exception is Badreddine Kassem's *Décadence et absolutisme dans l'oeuvre de Montesquieu* (Paris: Librairie Minard, 1960), which treats the subject of regime decline extensively. Kassem carefully describes Montesquieu's account of the varieties of corruption, or the "denaturation" of political systems (p. 9), ranging from the Orient to Spain, Italy, France, England, and ancient Rome. He effectively charts the particular progress of each but is less persuasive in his account of the general underlying causes of decline. Specifically, in the third part of the book, he identifies four "great causes of decline": war, depopulation, religious intolerance, and absolutism (pp. 213-66). Ultimately, he says these causes resolve themselves into a single "essential cause of decline to which all others can be traced," namely, despotism (p. 274; see also p. 20). This explanation is inadequate, however, because it leaves untouched the causes of despotism. Moreover, while in these passages Kassem treats despotism as a fundamental cause of decline, elsewhere he treats it as the final effect of decline, saying that "despotism is the limit toward which the degeneration of the other regimes tends" (p. 247). The latter assertion strikes

me as accurate. Yet if it is accurate to say that despotism is the effect of decline, it cannot also be the case that despotism is the sole primary (or first and fundamental) cause. The present analysis departs from that of Kassem in looking to human nature and the partial nature of politics for the ultimate sources of political decline.

Aside from Kassem's analysis, commentary on corruption has been limited largely to analysis of Montesquieu's book on the Romans or has concentrated on the government of despotism, the endpoint of political decline, without exploring in detail the process of decline or its causes. For analysis of Montesquieu's *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*, see David Lowenthal's introduction in his translation of the book (New York: Free Press, 1965); Richard Myers, "Christianity and Politics in Montesquieu's Greatness and Decline of the Romans," *Interpretation* 17 (winter 1989-90): 223-38; Roger B. Oake, "Montesquieu's Analysis of Roman History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 16 (1955): 44-59. For treatment of Montesquieu's views on despotism, see Paul Vernière, "Montesquieu et le monde musulman, d'après L'esprit des lois," in *Actes du congrès*, 175-90; Robert Shackleton, "Les mots 'despote' et 'despotisme,' " in *Essays on Montesquieu and on the Enlightenment*, ed. David Gilson and Martin Smith (Oxford, UK: Voltaire Foundation, 1988); Françoise Weil, "Montesquieu et le despotisme," in *Actes du congrès*; Roger Boesche, "Fearing Monarchs and Merchants: Montesquieu's Two Theories of Despotism," *Western Political Science Quarterly* 43 (December 1990): 741-62; Robert Koebner, "Despot and Despotism: Vicissitudes of a Political Term," in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtland Institutes*, vol. 14, no. 1/2 (London: Warburg Institute, 1951); Sharon Krause, "Despotism in *The Spirit of Laws*" in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on* The Spirit of Laws, ed. David Carrithers, Michael Mosher, and Paul Rahe (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 231-72; Melvin Richter, "Montesquieu's Comparative Analysis of Europe and Asia: Intended and Unintended Consequences" in *L'Europe de Montesquieu* (Napoli, Italy: Liguori Editore, 1995); Elie Carcassone, "La Chine dans L'esprit des lois" in *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1924), 198-205; David Young, "Montesquieu's View of Despotism and His Use of Travel Literature," *Review of Politics* 40 (1978): 392-405; Rahe, "Forms of Government," 90-97.

5. Republican government may take the form of either democracy or aristocracy (II.2). In aristocratic governments, the zealous love of equality that characterizes democratic virtue is replaced by what Montesquieu refers to as "moderation" (*la modération*), which is a "lesser virtue" (*une vertu moindre*) that motivates the few, who hold power, to refrain from oppressing the many (III.4). Although Montesquieu distinguishes aristocratic from democratic types of republicanism, he gives pride of place to the latter, saying that "the more an aristocracy approaches democracy, the more perfect it will be" (II.3). Throughout the analysis, democratic republicanism is treated as the exemplary form, and self-renouncing democratic virtue, rather than aristocratic moderation, is treated as the defining principle of republicanism in general. For further discussion of Montesquieu's treatment of republican government, see David W. Carrithers, "Democratic and Aristocratic Republics: Ancient and Modern" in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on* The Spirit of Laws, ed. David Carrithers, Michael Mosher, and Paul Rahe (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 109-58.

6. See, for instance, Nanerl O. Keohane, "Virtuous Republics and Glorious Monarchies: Two Models in Montesquieu's Political Thought," *Political Studies* 20 (1972): 383. Particular despotic governments are never completely lacking in restraints on the sovereign's authority, for instance, since traditional customs and religious beliefs as well as natural conditions such as climate and terrain typically set some limits on actual despots. Montesquieu draws special attention to China in this regard (VIII.21). On this point, see Alain Grosrichard, *Structure du sérail: La fiction du despotisme asiatique dans l'occident classique* (Paris: Éditions du seuil, 1970), 47; Anne M. Cohler, *Montesquieu's Comparative Politics and the Spirit of American Constitution-*

alism (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1988), 71-73; Weil, "Montesquieu et le despotisme," 201; Krause, "Despotism in *The Spirit of Laws*," 250; Richter, *The Political Theory of Montesquieu* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 83; Kassem, *Décadence et absolutisme*, 247; and Young, "Montesquieu's View of Despotism," 401f.

7. For further discussion of the role of honor as a source of opposition to sovereign authority, see Michael Mosher, "Monarchy's Paradox: Honor in the Face of Sovereign Power" in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on* The Spirit of Laws, ed. David Carrithers, Michael Mosher, and Paul Rahe (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 159-230; Corrodo Rosso, *Montesquieu moraliste* (Bordeaux, France: Ducros, 1971), 100; David W. Carrithers, "Montesquieu's Philosophy of History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47, no. 1 (1986): 76; Sharon Krause, "The Politics of Distinction and Disobedience: Honor and the Defense of Liberty in Montesquieu," *Polity* 31, no. 3 (spring 1999): 469-99; Louis Althusser, *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1982), 80; Mark Hulliung, *Montesquieu and the Old Regime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 179; Lawrence Levin, *The Political Doctrine of Montesquieu's* Esprit des Lois*: Its Classical Background* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 104; Franklin Ford, *Robe and Sword: The Regrouping of the French Aristocracy after Louis XIV* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 20.

8. Montesquieu's admiration for the independence associated with honor is most evident in his brief remarks on two disobedient noblemen:

> Crillon refused to assassinate the Duke of Guise, but he offered Henry III to engage the duke in battle. After Saint Bartholomew's Day, Charles IX, having written to all the governors to carry out a massacre against the Huguenots, the Viscount of Orte, who was in command at Bayonne, wrote to the king, "Sire, I have found among the inhabitants and the warriors only good citizens, brave soldiers, and no executioner; and so they and I beg Your Majesty to use our arms and our lives for things that can be done (*choses faisables*)." This great and generous courage regarded an act of cowardice as an impossible thing. (Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, IV.2)

9. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle (Grinnell, IA: Peripatetic Press, 1984), 1106b22-24. Bertrand Binoche indicates that Montesquieu also may have had in mind Bossuet's condemnation of worldly ambition as "false honor," which Bossuet contrasted with "the honor of Christians" that "consists in the observation of the orders of God and the rules of Christianity." Bertrand Binoche, *Introduction à De l'esprit des lois de Montesquieu* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), 125.

10. Or at least he *should* win honors on the basis of the goodness of his actions because political recognition should reflect natural deserts. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1123b.

11. See his "Avertissement de l'auteur," which precedes the preface to *The Spirit of the Laws:*

> For an understanding of the first four books of this work, it is necessary to observe that what I call 'virtue' in the republic is love of the homeland, that is to say, love of equality. It is not at all a moral virtue, nor a Christian virtue, it is political virtue.

He reiterates the distinction at III.5 note, IV.5, V.2, and V.4.

12. Thus, Michael Zuckert insists that "Montesquieu is not in the least a moral or political relativist, as his fierce opposition to despotism and slavery should make clear." Michael Zuckert, "Natural Law, Natural Rights, and Classical Liberalism: Montesquieu's Critique of Hobbes," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 18, no. 1 (2001): 247.

13. Weil notes that despotism destroys talents in "Montesquieu et le despotisme," 201f. On the same point, see Kassem, *Décadence et absolutisme*, 20, 92. For a more extended elaboration

of the ways in which despotism undercuts human nature as articulated in the preceding paragraph, see Krause, "Despotism in *The Spirit of Laws*," 257-58.

14. This is another point on which the present analysis departs from that of Kassem, who maintains that "the politics of Montesquieu is above all a moral doctrine (*une morale*). The value of a government results in the first place from the human value of its principle. Virtue, honor, fear are of a moral order." Kassem, *Décadence et absolutisme*, 275. There is a moral teaching in Montesquieu's treatment of political decline, but it is more complex than Kassem indicates. For instance, Kassem's interpretation fails to acknowledge Montesquieu's emphatic distinction between the political virtue that is the principle of republican government and moral virtue (Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, his "Avertissement de l'auteur," III.5 note, IV.5, V.2, V.4). Kassem is equally silent about Montesquieu's embrace of "false" honor as the principle of monarchy (III.7).

15. Binoche also compares Montesquieu's treatment of political decline to Plato's, saying that Montesquieu's account is "more complex than that of Plato. The latter, in effect, was describing the degeneration of the polity as a unidirectional process proceeding to tyranny via timocracy, oligarchy, and democracy: because one went from better to worse there was a point of departure and a point of arrival," whereas in Montesquieu there are multiple points of both departure and arrival. Binoche, *Introduction*, 204.

16. Richter notes the absence of politics in despotism in "Montesquieu's Comparative Analysis," 338. See also Krause, "Despotism in *The Spirit of Laws*," 240-42.

17. This was the thrust of Condorcet's attack on *The Spirit of the Laws*. See his remarks on Montesquieu reprinted in DeStutt de Tracy, *A Commentary and Review of Montesquieu's* Spirit of the Laws, trans. Thomas Jefferson (New York: Burt Franklin, 1969), 263.

18. One reason despotism is self-destructive is that it lacks fixed laws, including laws of succession. The result is a state limited in its duration to a single generation, marked throughout its short life by instability as potential successors compete for predominance (Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, V.14). In addition, a despot depends on his army to sustain the fear among the populace that upholds his authority, but without a popular base to counter this dependence, the despot himself is as vulnerable to the military as his subjects are. Another intrinsic weakness of despotic government is that the despot's power is vulnerable to the devaluation in the currency of fear that naturally accompanies its use. Over time, penalties must become increasingly severe to achieve the same effects (VI.13), but penalties that are too severe are difficult to enforce because individuals become too afraid to make accusations (VI.13-14). The lack of enforcement leads to disdain on the part of the people for the political authorities, which means that the excessive use of fear ultimately undermines itself. The conclusion Montesquieu presses here is that unlimited power gives rise to unavoidable contradictions and so is intrinsically unstable and consequently incapable of fulfilling the objectives of those who pursue it. This conclusion is intended to serve as a recommendation to despots and potential despots to moderate their rule.

19. See Kassem, *Décadence et absolutisme*, 9.

20. Montesquieu, *Mes pensées*, no. 69(5), Pléiade, I, 993.

21. In a similar vein, Diana Schaub calls attention to Montesquieu's portrait of the moral bankruptcy of the nobility in *Persian Letters* (no. 74), where

> we make the acquaintance of a "grand seigneur" of the realm—"who took snuff with such haughtiness, who blew his nose so pitilessly and spat so phlegmatically, and who caressed his dogs in a manner so offensive to mankind." Montesquieu dwells on the physical repulsiveness of this "little man," the manner of whose expectorations shows a lack of even the merest civility towards his fellows. Whereas he holds himself superior (and indifferent) to the rest of mankind, he stoops low indeed in his unseemly attachment to

> his pets. We may speak figuratively of the "bestiality" of the nobility when their social standing is no longer accompanied by any real human excellence.

Diana J. Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism: Women and Revolution in Montesquieu's* Persian Letters (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 124. Kassem also insists that for Montesquieu, "all nobility is doomed, when it is hereditary, to extreme corruption." Kassem, *Décadence et absolutisme*, 176. On the paradox of honor as simultaneously dependent on and resistant to a fixed social order, see Sharon Krause, *Liberalism with Honor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 65-66. For a discussion of merit and membership in the nobility in eighteenth-century France, see, for example, Jean Egret, *Louis XV et l'opposition parlementaire 1715-1774* (Paris: A. Colin, 1970); William Doyle, *The Parlement of Bordeaux and the End of the Old Regime, 1771-1790* (New York: St. Martin's, 1974); Iris Cox, *Montesquieu and the History of French Laws* (Oxford:, UK Voltaire Foundation, 1983), especially 167; and Ford, *Robe and Sword*, especially 117-19.

22. Montesquieu, *Considérations*, Book IX, Pléiade, II, 118-19. And see also *The Spirit of the Laws*, IX.1:

> If a republic is small, it is destroyed by a foreign force; if it is large, it is destroyed by an internal vice. This double inconvenience infects equally democracies and aristocracies, whether they are good or whether they are bad. The ill is in the thing itself; there is no form that can remedy it.

23. Montesquieu, *Considérations*, IX, 119.

24. Ibid., VIII, 112.

25. Ibid., XI, 129.

26. Binoche treats territorial expansion and "the disordering of the constitution" as the two primary causes of corruption and political decline in Montesquieu (Binoche, *Introduction*, 207-8). This reading is incomplete, however, because it does not explain why Montesquieu thought these tendencies so inevitable. In fact, the causes Binoche identifies are not primary but intermediary, themselves resulting from deeper, underlying factors.

27. For an interesting treatment of the ways that motives other than fear enter into despotic government in Montesquieu's analysis, see Corey Robin, "Reflections on Fear: Montesquieu in Retrieval," *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 2 (2000): 347-60.

28. And his skepticism about the possibility of having certain knowledge of metaphysical objects (See *Mes pensées*, no. 2062[410], 1537 and no. 2063[1154], 1537). Montesquieu's metaphysical skepticism marks another point of convergence with earlier liberals. Like Locke, he thought that the nature of the highest goods was impossible for human beings to know with any certainty. And this skepticism leads Montesquieu, as it led Locke, to defend political orders that aim for individual liberty rather than the perfection of the soul since the latter would require reliable knowledge of the nature of the highest goods.

29. Rica laments the forced uniformity of despotism in *Persian Letters*, saying,

> Among us characters are uniform because they are forced; one sees not at all people as they are but as they are obliged to be. In this servitude of heart and spirit, one hears spoken only fear, which has only one language, and not nature which expresses itself so differently and which may appear under so many forms.

Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, no. LXIII, Pléiade, I, 223.

Montesquieu also notes in *The Spirit of the Laws* that "despotism is uniform throughout" (V.14). Elsewhere in that work, he remarks on uniformity at greater length:

> There are certain ideas of uniformity that sometimes seize great spirits . . . but that infallibly strike small ones. They find there a type of perfection . . . the same weights in the police, the same measures in commerce, the same laws in the state and the same religion in all its parts. But is this always appropriate without exception? . . . And the grandeur of genius, does it not consist rather in knowing in which cases uniformity is necessary and in which differences are necessary? (XXIX.18)

30. In republics, Montesquieu says, each citizen "ought to have the same happiness and the same advantages, each should taste the same pleasures and form the same hopes" (V.3). It is partly in view of the need for homogeneity that one "needs the whole power of education" in republican government (IV.5), which makes it possible "to raise (*élever*) a whole people like a family" (IV.7). This homogeneity, like uniformity under despotism, also may be forced. Consider Montesquieu's comparison of the ancient republic and the Christian monastery in V.2.

31. Michael Mosher emphasizes this point in "The Judgmental Gaze of European Women: Gender, Sexuality, and the Critique of Republican Rule," *Political Theory* 22, no. 1 (1994): 25-44.

32. Note also *Mes pensées*, no. 1905(51), 1458: "There are three tribunes that are almost never in accord: that of the laws, that of honor, and that of religion."

33. Montesquieu's references to the honorable disobedience of Crillon and Orte in *The Spirit of the Laws*, IV.2, illustrate this point.

34. Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 78.

35. Although it has a king, Montesquieu characterizes England somewhat ambivalently as a "popular state," saying that the English, "in order to favor liberty, . . . have removed all the intermediate powers that formed their monarchy" (II.4). Elsewhere he refers to it as a "republic hiding under the form of monarchy" (V.19). Interpreters of Montesquieu differ as to whether he regarded England as a republic or a monarchy. For instance, Pangle treats England as an example of a new type of commercial republic in Montesquieu's *Philosophy of Liberalism*, while Mosher thinks Montesquieu presents England as a monarchy, in "Sovereignty and Its Supplement."

36. Kassem finds a certain "violence of tone" in Montesquieu's discussion of the character of the English, both in *The Spirit of the Laws* and in unpublished notes. Kassem, *Décadence et absolutisme*, 180. Yet he sees Montesquieu as resigned to the view that it was "necessary to accept the English such as they are" (p. 181). Thanks to its political institutions, England was the freest country then in existence (p. 185). Consequently, admiration was due, if not to the English character, then to the English form of government (p. 188).

37. Referring to this practice, Montesquieu once remarked that "the English do not deserve their liberty. They sell it to the king; and if the king should return it to them, they would sell it to him again." Montesquieu, "Notes sur l'Angleterre," Pléiade, I, 880.

38. Ibid., 878.

39. On this point, see Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism*, 117.

40. On the virtues that commerce inspires, see *The Spirit of the Laws*, V.6: "the spirit of commerce" brings with it "frugality, economy, moderation, work, wisdom, tranquility, order, and rule." In XX.1, Montesquieu maintains that "commerce corrupts pure mores," but "it polishes and softens barbarous mores."

41. Cited in Charles Dedeyan, *Montesquieu et l'Angleterre* (Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1969), 35.

42. Montesquieu, "A Monsieur Domville," Pléiade, I, 1447-50. Although these notes were made preparatory to a letter to Domville, they were themselves never sent. Paul Rahe makes much of these notes, finding in them the key to the durability of the English constitution. Com-

merce, Rahe insists, promotes the independence that makes possible the political vigilance that animates the English polity. Rahe, "Forms of Government," 94-97.

43. Montesquieu, "A Monsieur Domville," 1449.

44. Montesquieu to William Domville, July 22, 1749, in *Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, ed. André Masson, 3 vols. (Paris: Nagel, 1950-55), III, 1244-45. Cited in Rahe, "Forms of Government," 107, note 75. Yet even Rahe concludes that although "the principle of the English polity," which Rahe defines as "uneasiness" (*inquiétude*) shaped by English political institutions into "political vigilance" (pp. 84-90), is "generally reliable," it is "not utterly impervious to corruption" (p. 97). In the wrong circumstances, this uneasiness could be transformed into the species of fear that motivates despotism. Indeed, Rahe says, "because the modern republic and despotism are in the passions that set them in motion akin, the former can easily degenerate into the latter" (p. 97).

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