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Cartesian Animals:

Reconciling man and nature in *The Spirit of The Laws*

All Americans are at least dimly aware that we owe some sort of burden to our founding philosophy. While America is not the only country to find the words “right,” “liberty,” and “equality” in our founding documents, we might be the only country who occasionally has the sneaking suspicion that we do not share much more.

Sometimes this is not a happy thought. There is a certain dryness to “sterile formulations of rights, sovereignty, and legitimacy.”[[1]](#footnote-1) There is more than a bit of 20th century history that suggests that a regime devoted to the pursuit of property might be somehow lacking. Diana Schaub explains that the liberal regime, and its insecurities and intellectual crises, might just stem from the liberal understanding of the relationship between man and nature:

“For the protomoderns, the embrace of nature was not enslaving. For subsequent thinkers, the news… meant bondage; some egress to a realm outside of nature had to be found, for the sake of the human spirit. Thus began the flight from nature, with the baton being passed from Spinoza to Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx (who carried the baton upside down), and Nietzsche. They ran fast and far, but the visible, political terminus of this course of theoretical flight has not been freedom, but totalitarianism and the abyss, communism and fascism. We must wonder if there is not some more adequate understanding of both the nature of humankind and the nature of the world.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Schaub finds this moderate understanding of the nature of humankind and the nature of the world in the works of Montesquieu. According to her, “Montesquieu may be the only thinker whose correction of the early moderns did not take the form of a dangerous radicalization.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Montesquieu should familiar to anyone who has studied the *Federalist*--after which, it is always conceded, while he is important, Montesquieu is no Locke. However, his intellectual legacy may be greater than one expects. A recent survey of the literature published during the founding era found that “if there was one man read and reacted to by American political writers of all factions during all the stages of the founding era, it was probably not Locke but Montesquieu.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Additionally, *The Spirit of the Laws* “is quite properly regarded as the fountainhead of the modern study of comparative government and sociology.”[[5]](#footnote-5) And, one cannot help but mention that Montesquieu’s work influenced the likes of Hume, Rousseau and Tocqueville.

But gaining even a basic understanding of Montesquieu is easier said than done. According to scholars, Montesquieu is either an overlooked philosopher-poet who expresses “a poetry proper to modernity,”[[6]](#footnote-6) or he is committed rationalist intent on transforming political life so that it becomes “without aspiration to transcendence of mortal limits and of mundane concerns and preoccupations.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In his works, one can either “pick up almost any expression of discontent from the critics of the Cartesian Enlightenment,”[[8]](#footnote-8) or they might be “the most ambitious expression of the Enlightenment political philosophizing that lays the principled basis for our liberal republican civilization.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Or it could be that any of these label are minimizing the true “distinctiveness of Montesquieu’s contribution within the tradition of political thought;”[[10]](#footnote-10)

some commentators find that, when read correctly, “*The Spirit of the Laws* is the most comprehensive modern book on politics, exceeding in range and complexity any that appears before or since, excepting Aristotle’s *Politics*.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

In this paper, I will investigate Montesquieu’s liberalism, but not through investigating the liberal regime. Instead, I will look his proposed relationship between man and nature, a relationship at the core of the liberal regime.

To address the question of nature in Montesquieu, I will first briefly outline the disagreement between the ancients and the liberals concerning nature. In the second part, I will engage with Thomas Pangle, who argues that Montesquieu adopts the liberal opposition between man and nature. In the third, I will try and elucidate Montesquieu’s understanding of human nature, and finally, in the fourth, I will show how this human nature plays out in politics.

A careful read of Montesquieu will reveal that what is “natural” in man is far more complicated than it seems. Man is both a natural and an unnatural creature; which is to say, by virtue of his natural composition, man seeks to raise himself above nature. While in some ways this points back to the classical understanding of man as a “political animal,” Montesquieu denies that man has natural ends and suggests his contradictory nature leaves him agonized and antisocial. However, man’s internal contradictions can be ironed out—at least for a time—by good laws, work, and more than anything, a connection between man and the whole of nature.

PART I: NATURE

It is always awkward to try to summarize great debates in Western thought in a few pages. Sadly, to frame the question of the natural in an adequate sense, I will have to try.

We will look at the debate between the ancients and moderns through the lenses of two themes (admittedly, overlapping ones): body and soul, and nature and freedom.

Body, Soul, and Society

Leo Strauss explains that “to determine what is by nature good for man or the natural human good, one must determine what the nature of man, or man’s natural constitution, is.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Whereas Hobbes will claim that labels like “good” and “evil” are simply purely subjective names attached to each individual’s objects of desire and aversion, the ancients claimed that man has a natural good discoverable through reason.

The proponents of classical natural right held that “the different kinds of wants are not a bundle of urges; there is a natural order of the wants,”[[13]](#footnote-13) a natural order derived from the composition of man. Strauss explains that “it is the hierarchic order of man’s natural constitution which supplies the basis for natural right as the classics understood it. In one way or another everyone distinguishes between body and the soul; and everyone can be forced to admit that he cannot, without contradicting himself, deny that the soul stands higher than the body.”[[14]](#footnote-14) According to the ancients, there was something particular about the human soul: reason. Since “that which distinguishes man from the brutes, is speech or reason or understanding. Therefore, the proper work of man consists in living thoughtfully, in understanding, and in thoughtful action.”[[15]](#footnote-15) In addition to being reasonable, speech is also social. Because man is “radically social” “the perfection of his nature includes the social virtue par excellence, justice: justice and right are natural.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Because his natural sociability meant man could only flourish in society, the classical tradition considered men to be “political animals, innately directed to a specific fulfillment attained through civic community and lawful hierarchy.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

The liberals—here, Hobbes will be treated as our representative liberal--looked at politics, and saw animals, but of a more vicious kind. For Hobbes, humans are basically the same as other animals, but meaner. Reason, instead of being separate from and able to rule the “low” parts of man, was only really instrumental in attaining the desires of that lower nature.

Hobbes revealed his new conception of man through a thought experiment: the state of nature. In the state of nature, men are radically free and radically equal (at least, in their capacity to kill each other). Everything is permitted to him, even the bodies of others, leaving each man in a state of constant fear. To relieve himself of his crushing fear, man approaches his fellows and agrees to lay down his right to anything and everything, if the other does. This agreement is the origin of society and justice, and nothing else. Politics originates in rational consent and exists to help us pursue our self-interest safely. His regime promised a “radically lowered, utilitarian, and self-centered moral outlook”[[18]](#footnote-18) that suited his a vision of a low, utilitarian, and self-center being.

The needs of man’s higher nature were either weak or distorted versions of the passion for bodily security. Religion, particularly was a bunch of “dangerous delusions” that were “fueled by, and flattering, human hopes and fears, and reinforced by the power of custom and example.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Through correct education, Hobbes and the other liberals aimed at dispelling these illusions and reminding people that what they really want is not dignity, but stuff.

Freedom and Nature

For the ancients, nature provided the standard for human flourishing. As Strauss explains it, for the ancients, “the good life is the perfection of man’s nature. It is the life according to nature.”[[20]](#footnote-20) This is because “natural right in its classic form is connected with a teleological view of the universe. All natural beings have a natural end, a natural destiny, which determines what kind of operation is good for them.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

But things are not quite this simple. Experience would suggest that man is a natural being, but he is not natural in the same way that a plant is—man, unlike a plant, has free will. While he has ends dictated to him by nature, he is unique in that he can choose to not pursue these ends. In society, the debate concerning the degree of man’s “naturalness” continues, indefinitely, through two parties who make claims to rule: oligarchs and democrats. Those who privilege human excellent adopt a “view of politics implies an oligarchical view of nature in which the human good is distinct from and superior to the rest of nature” and those who stress the similarities between all men and nature hold the democratic view that “implies that nature is also a democracy in which men are nothing special.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

To resolve the man’s position in nature, Aristotle proposed an “ambivalent teleology,”[[23]](#footnote-23) in which “man can be regarded as nature’s property and nature as man’s property: man is both within nature and distinctively above it. But the two possibilities are connected, because man can be above nature, hence acquisitive, only through the use of natural faculties that also show him to be nature’s property.”[[24]](#footnote-24) This reconciliation navigates between the two extremes because “to begin directly with nature leaves human freedom and choice out of account; but to fail to return to nature would leave freedom an arbitrary quirk without a guide.”[[25]](#footnote-25) But the guide is there, and it dictates what freedom—and humans—exist *for*. Man pursues ends that have been decided by nature; freedom is for the sake of virtue. As Mansfield characterizes it at one point, the classics held that “men are essentially reasonable or intelligent rather than free.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Where the ancients saw man as possessing his distinct human freedom for certain natural ends—whose attainment would make him *more* natural--the moderns saw freedom as not really for anything, but enabling man to escape nature entirely.

For the moderns, the “starting point of human efforts is misery: the state of nature is a state of wretchedness. The way toward happiness is a movement away from the state of nature, a movement away from nature: the negation of nature is the way toward happiness.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Strauss explains that Hobbes “conceived of man’s leaving the state of nature and establishing civil society as a kind of revolt of man against nature.”[[28]](#footnote-28) In fact, “one can even safely go much beyond it and say that man can expel nature with a hayfork.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

Man continues his anti-natural activity within the bounds of society. Strauss that for Hobbes, “’the good life,’ for the sake of which men enter civil society, is no longer the life of human excellence but ‘commodious living’ as the reward to hard work.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Although it is for the attainment of sensual, and therefore natural pleasures, “labor is, in the words of Hegel, a negative attitude toward nature.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Nature, having no inherent worth, simply provides the raw materials for human creativity. Though Descartes is not a liberal, he might have expressed the promise of the modern project the best when he said:

“It is possible to reach knowledge that will be of much utility in this life; and that instead of the speculative philosophy now taught in the schools we can find a practical one, by which, knowing the nature and behavior of fire, water, air, stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies which surround us, as well as we now understand the different skills of our works, we can employ these entities for all the purposes for which they are suited, and so make ourselves masters and possessors of nature.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

Eros

But at this point, it should be admitted that our presentation of the classics is not quite complete. It is one thing to say that men are naturally conduced to certain high ends, and another to explain that they love justice and nobility *passionately*. If man simply has a potential to be noble that is unaddressed in the liberal regime, it is a shame. If he has a *need* for nobility, then the liberal regime, which relies on the low and ignores the high, looks dangerous, unstable, and on the verge of exploding with pent-up moral energy.

According to Pangle, this is exactly the case, and the insufficiency of the liberal understanding of man has already made itself felt. The 20th century vividly displayed what he terms the “manifest spiritual deficit of Enlightenment rationalism.” By denying that any natural basis for nobility and justice, and affirming only bodily needs, the moderns left man’s natural moral energy with now where to go—that is, until it exploded into “’ideological’ and religious perversions of the frustrated human longing for an elevated public calling.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Mansfield remarks: “if he knew our experience of totalitarian tyranny, Machiavelli himself might have shivered.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

Unlike the moderns, the classical political philosophers knew the power of man’s moral urge. Because of this they responded “to a universal, natural human yearning—*eros*,” which, “together with its volatile ally *thumos*, finds expression as a yearning to achieve a moral dignity and beauty (the *kalon*) that elevates us above, and allows us to hope to surmount, the limits of mortal existence.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Pangle protests that in the liberal regime, “the human individual’s anguished question about his personal fate within the whole, and thereby the human mind’s distinctive avenue of openness to the whole, is to be deliberately dulled or distracted.”[[36]](#footnote-36) And this, Pangle, is neither possible nor desirable.

PART II: LIBERAL MONTESQUIEU

Thomas Pangle places Montesquieu firmly among the liberals. He says: “Montesquieu agrees, then, with his modern philosophic predecessors that all lawful political societies are best understood as artificially established, for the sake primarily of security collective preservation by counteracting the mutually murderous natural outcome of the human passions.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

Hobbes and Locke held that society and justice is based on the rational consent of individuals. Through the use of his reason, man propels himself out of the wretchedness of nature. But an examination of the initial book of the Spirit of the Laws will show that this isn’t the account Montesquieu gives us of man and nature.

Starting in book one, chapter one (from here on out referred to as 1.1), Montesquieu begins to differentiate himself from the earlier liberals. The book opens with the statement: “laws, taken in the broadest meaning, are the necessary relations deriving from the nature of things: the divinity has its laws, the material world has its laws, the intelligences superior to man have their laws, the beasts have their laws.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Mansfield observes that this beginning is “in striking contrast to modern philosophers who maintain that man begins in perfect freedom, Montesquieu subjects him from his origin to laws, with no mention of freedom.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Montesquieu appears to reject the first premise of the liberal commonwealth: man’s absolute natural freedom.

In 1.3, Montesquieu introduces the state of war. His depiction of the state of war, and the formation of society, is as follows:

“As soon as men are in society, they lose their feeling of weakness; the equality that was among them ceases, and the state of war begins. Each particular society comes to feel its strength, producing a state of war among nations. The individuals within each society begin to feel their strength; they seek to turn their favor their favor the principal advantages of this society, which brings about a state of war among them. These two states of war bring about the establishment of laws among men.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

Let us note one crucial detail: there is no social contract. Mansfield comments on its striking absence saying: “the whole question of legitimate right by consent, central for Hobbes and Locke, is passed over in silence by Montesquieu.”[[41]](#footnote-41) It seems that men were not absolutely free before society, there was no renunciation of freedom at the formation of society, and no ensuing description of the rational commonwealth.

Instead we are told that war begins *after* the formation of society. Because “war then arises from security, not security from war” Mansfield concludes that “the formation of society *was not an act of freedom*—not the establishment of a sovereign or the making of a constitution.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

Pangle, acknowledges that Montesquieu derives war from society, but points out that Montesquieu still insists that law arises from war. He argues that there could have been primitive assemblies of families, then the emergence of all encompassing war, and then the social contract.

Pangle interprets Montesquieu’s assertion that the states of war “bring about” laws as indicating that law is a response to the state of war—a response that aims at peace. It is on the authority of this vague turn of phrase, “bring about,” that Pangle classifies Montesquieu as tacitly endorsing something like the social contract.

But Montesquieu does not say anywhere that the establishment of laws ends the state of war or aims at peace. Law could be a *legitimization* of a continual state of war—or even, in itself, a continued *manifestation* of the state of war.

As one progresses further into *The Spirit of the Laws*, this possibility becomes more and more visible. One sees more and more examples of ideas of right being used as justifications for continued domination and war. To give just one, of many examples, Montesquieu says: “religion gives to those who profess it *a right* to reduce to servitude those who do not profess it… It was this was of thinking that encouraged the destroyers of America in their crimes.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

The crux of Pangle’s objection to Montesquieu is that Montesquieu does believe strongly enough in the power of justice has over the human heart. At one point, he calls Montesquieu’s depiction of man’s desire for morality simply “risible hypocrisy.” Given that it is possible for domination to continue in spite of, or through, laws and ideas of justice, and given Pangle’s understanding of Montesquiean man gives him little regard for justice, by Pangle’s own framework, it is highly unlikely that these laws and ideas of “right” constituted the end of the state of war.

PART III: MONTESQUIEU’S CARTESIAN MONISM

To approach the question of man’s relationship to nature, we should start by unpacking how Montesquieu sees the composition of human beings.

For Pangle, the debate surrounding the relationship between body and soul is not really a question, because Montesquieu presents no such dichotomy. Pangle argues that Montesquieu “picture of man which is as near one can imagine to a pure materialism without being simply so. Montesquieu refers at times to ‘the soul’ but he leaves almost no material things except reason itself to constitute this ‘soul’: the passions, the spirit, the character, imagination, taste, sensibility, sadness and happiness, all are said to be determined by the state of the body.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

As evidence, he cites Montesquieu’s enigmatic statement of the body-soul relationship found in his *Essay on the Causes the may Effect Men’s Minds*: “in our body the soul is like a spider in its web. It cannot move without shaking one of the threads which are extended at a distance, and similarly, none of these threads can be stirred without moving the spider. It cannot touch one of these threads without moving another, which responds to this action.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

But perhaps Pangle is overoptimistic—reason, too, seems to be deeply effected by the body. For Montesquieu, the faculty of reasoning is somehow *sensual*. He says, “the soul understands by its ideas, and by its sensations… for though we oppose idea to sensation, yet while it sees a thing, it feels it; and there are no objects so intellectual, that it does not see, or believes it sees, and consequently that are not felt.[[46]](#footnote-46) It seems as though there is no such thing as pure reason, untainted by the condition of the body. Montesquieu remarks that “it is difficult to believe how many things determine the state of our mind. It is not only the alignment of the brain which modifies them, but the whole body. Almost all parts of the body contribute to it, including often those which are not suspected.”[[47]](#footnote-47)

Montesquieu’s Meditations

But from the first page of *The Spirit of the Laws*, we are asked to pose the question of man’s natural composition.

Let us return to 1.1. 1.1 explores the relationship between man and the rest of the universe. In describing 1.1, Pangle says: “Montesquieu begins his magnum opus by quietly indicating the fundamental metaphysical conundrum—as to the ontological status of rational consciousness.”[[48]](#footnote-48) While it seems unlikely to me that Montesquieu opens with this question only to show it has no relevance to politics, Pangle’s summary seems fair. But there is something to be added—Montesquieu does not begin with just *a* version of the metaphysical conundrum, he begins with an already familiar version of it. For most of the chapter, Montesquieu evokes Descartes, specifically, Descartes’ *Meditations*.

These similarities emerge in the first paragraph and continue throughout 1.1. Before discussing the parallels with the *Meditations* mean, we will first spend some time establishing that the parallels exist.

Montesquieu begins by listing five orders of beings subject to laws, saying: “all beings have their laws: the divinity has its laws, the material world has its laws, the intelligences superior to man have their laws, the beasts have their laws, man has his laws.”[[49]](#footnote-49) As Cohler points out,[[50]](#footnote-50) Descartes makes a similar list of beings in meditation 3, listing: “God, corporeal and inanimate things, angels, animals, and finally other men like myself.”[[51]](#footnote-51)

Both claim that the laws of nature are so absolute that if God had created an alternate world, it would have necessarily looked exactly the same as this one. Montesquieu claims that “the motion of matter… must have invariable laws; and, if one could imagine another world than this, it would have consistent rules or it would be destroyed.”[[52]](#footnote-52) In part five of the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes also tries to show that creation could not have proceeded in an arbitrary manner—he describes, extensively, how God’s creation of the world from chaos *had* to look the way it did. He then concludes that the laws of nature were such that “even if God had created several worlds, there would have been none where these laws were not observed.”[[53]](#footnote-53) This cannot be a common thought experiment, and so, once again, must serve to direct the reader towards Descartes.

Some of the logic also appears to owe a debt to Descartes. Montesquieu says that “to say that there is nothing just or unjust but what positive laws ordain or prohibit is to say that before a circle was drawn, all its radii were not equal.”[[54]](#footnote-54) Can one say that all the radii of a circle are equal if there are no circles? According to Descartes, you absolutely can: “when I imagine a triangle, even though there may perhaps be no such figure anywhere in the world outside of my thought, nor ever have been, nevertheless the figure cannot help having a certain determinate nature.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

We could go on—Montesquieu speaks of intelligent beings committing errors, which Descartes does in Meditation 4. Montesquieu wonders whether or not beasts are simply governed by general laws of motion, like clockwork, which Descartes does in *Discourse on Method* chapter 5. Every paragraph in 1.1, with the possible exception of the last, engages with Descartes in some way—although *why* he does this is up for debate, he indisputably does.

All that is left is to uncover the meaning of this connection.

We should stop and remember that this is not some short chapter nestled away in the middle of Part 6--we are describing *the very first chapter* of Montesquieu’s greatest book, a “work of twenty years,”[[56]](#footnote-56) a work whose first chapter Montesquieu presumably put some consideration into. The fact that a reader opening the text will find not Montesquieu, but Descartes, is a very deliberate and very significant choice.

Secondly, we have said that Montesquieu that “evokes” Descartes, but that is not enough. He appears to be *speaking from the perspective of the meditator* (or at least, an altered version of the meditator). He will continue to do so throughout 1.1.

Third, Montesquieu has made some crucial changes to Descartes’ meditator. He replaces angels with “intelligences superior to man.” He minimizes the importance of God, calling him simply a “first cause.”

But the most important change Montesquieu makes becomes apparent in the second paragraph. It reads: “those who have said that *a blind fate has produced all the effects that we see in the world* have said a great absurdity; for what greater absurdity is there than a blind fate that could have produced intelligent beings?”[[57]](#footnote-57) Montesquieu’s conclusions stem from an investigation into his own being, as he seems to have arrived at the conclusion that God exists through contemplating his own existence. This spirit of inquiry aligns him further with Descartes’ meditator.

But this question also indicates what is missing from 1.1: doubt. The Descartes’ Meditator must find proof that he exists in the first place, then he wonders about whether there is a God, and then he wonders if God is a deceiver. Montesquieu’s meditator, on the other hand, does not wonder whether or not he exists, and does not wonder if God’s a deceiver. Obviously, Montesquieu’s meditator says, there is a God, because I obviously exist—anything else would be not just unlikely, but *absurd*. He is certainty itself.

Although Pangle does not draw the same parallels between 1.1 and Descartes, he would probably view Montesquieu as endorsing Descartes’ high opinion of human reason and its ability to uncover truths about the universe. Pangle argues that the remainder of this book serves to “justify its opening theological declaration, a pronouncement unprecedented by virtue of its in-your-face boldness, surpassing even what Spinoza had dared” that is, the identifying of God with a “first cause” and suggesting that nothing in creation “transcends what is apparent to unassisted human reason.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

According to Pangle, this intention is made particularly clear by replacement of “angels” with “intelligences superior to man” in the order of beings. When Montesquieu comes to the part where he speaks about these “intelligences superior to man,” he replaces his original formulation with “intelligent beings.” Pangle argues that Montesquieu “by first mentioning prominently, and then dropping ‘intelligences superior to man,’ [Montesquieu] intimates that there is no intelligence superior to man’s and that therefore nothing is inherently mysterious or incomprehensible to perfected human reason.”[[59]](#footnote-59)

But the section that discusses the controversial “intelligent beings” indicates that perhaps the opposite of what Pangle suggests is true. Montesquieu describes the rules of justice that would apply to these intelligent beings midway through the chapter. They are as follows: “if one intelligent being had created another intelligent being, the created one ought to remain in its original dependency; so that one intelligent being who has done harm to another intelligent being deserves the same harm in return, and so forth.”[[60]](#footnote-60)

The remaining 718 pages of *The Spirit of the Laws* will mount an argument against using this sort of abstract ethical reasoning in politics. In 29.1, he indicates that the entire purpose of *The Spirit of the Laws* is to keep legislators away from making laws simply by thinking of what is right and wrong. In this same book he says: “the laws should not be subtle; they are made for people of middling understanding; *they are not an art of logic* but the simple reasoning of a father of the family.”[[61]](#footnote-61)

Therefore, as Lowenthal says, “it is clear that angelic perfection, or the perfection of intelligences superior to man, does not become an exemplar for human justice.”[[62]](#footnote-62) These are not the laws of men but the laws that outline “how purely intelligent beings would treat each other.”[[63]](#footnote-63) They are laws of Descartes meditator, supremely rational and “disturbed by no passion.”[[64]](#footnote-64) Since the intelligent beings do not have the same justice as humans, we can conclude that they really are a distinct set of beings.

We can begin to piece together what Montesquieu’s adoption of the meditator voice means. 1.1’s a priori reasoning and bold assertions of absolute knowledge concerning the nature of things—this is not Montesquieu. Mansfield observes that 1.1 “is very abstract and contains no concrete examples, unlike his later books, which are full of them.” He concludes that its function is to be “an abstraction that shows the futility of abstraction.”[[65]](#footnote-65) Whether or not this is the primary role of 1.1, it seems like this entire chapter was written from the perspective of a purely intelligent being. Its activities sound a lot like Descartes’, but they are *not* identical—one speculates that Montesquieu omits the things he omits--doubt, God, angels--because real doubt comes from man’s composite nature.

By beginning from the perspective of an intelligence superior to man, Montesquieu demotes the significance and power of human rationality. Both the classical tradition of natural right and Montesquieu’s modern interlocutors saw rationality as what distinguished man from beast and made him fully human—Descartes included.[[66]](#footnote-66) But beginning by listing “intelligences superior to man” in the order of beings, Montesquieu makes it so that human beings are the no longer the only rational creatures. In fact, human rationality looks quite pathetic.

Instead, we are given a different account of human distinctiveness. He says that animals “do not have our expectations, but they do not have our fears; they suffer death as we do, but without recognizing it.”[[67]](#footnote-67) In other words, hope, and fear, and consciousness of death is what is uniquely human—all things that result from the joining of the intelligent, physical, and passionate. A purely intelligent being could pose the question of its existence, but only man could pose it passionately.

In the final paragraph of 1.1, Montesquieu treats man as the composite being that he is. He is not just intelligent, but intelligent, physical, and passionate. Here, laws appear again, but not to simply enact justice but to “remind [man] of himself,”[[68]](#footnote-68) a purpose reminiscent of the one Montesquieu gave himself in the preface;[[69]](#footnote-69) since justice looks like human justice again, we can be confident that he is talking about the same mankind we will see in the rest of the book.

The State of Nature

Unfortunately for Montesquieu, the term “state of nature” is inextricable from all sorts of various associations and names like Hobbes, Locke Rousseau—perhaps, just by suggesting it, Montesquieu might have overpowered the actual content of 1.2.

But as readers, we are not wrong to think of other liberals. Montesquieu deliberately evokes the liberal conception of man. Montesquieu explicitly opposes Hobbes here, stressing that there is no war because “the idea of empire and domination… is complex and depends on so many other ideas.”[[70]](#footnote-70) We should note that Montesquieu attributes war to certain *ideas*—not passions. War is the result of man’s intellectual capacities.

When viewed from a distance, parallels with 1.1 start to emerge. Montesquieu is engaging with a modern thinker and is in a way restating his account of man. However, in both cases he changes a key conceit—he removed doubt from Descartes, and he removes war from Hobbes. Perhaps he is suggesting that each account of man is incomplete in some way.

A second parallel emerges when we go through the order of the chapter.

In 1.1, we were told that beasts “have natural laws because they are united by feeling; they have no positive laws because they are not united by knowledge.”[[71]](#footnote-71) In 1.2 Montesquieu describes only natural laws, and for most of the chapter, man as exclusively feeling and physical—the laws here apply to man before he is distinct from a beast, prior to human distinctiveness.

First, there is the feeling of one’s own weakness, and so peace is the first natural law. The second law would be to seek nourishment. The third describes an animal sociability. Each man would feel “the pleasure one animal feels at the approach of an animal of its own kind.”[[72]](#footnote-72) In addition, “the charm that the two sexes inspire in each other by their difference would increase this pleasure, and the natural entreaty they always make to one another would be a third law.”[[73]](#footnote-73) Then, finally, humans become distinct from animals: “besides feelings, which belong to men from the outset, they also succeed in gaining knowledge; thus they have a second bond, which other animals do not have.”[[74]](#footnote-74)

Viewed generally, the movement of the chapter is such that Montesquieu first treats man as feeling and physical, but not intelligent. Only at the very end does Montesquieu treat man as a composite being.

When phrased like this, perhaps what Montesquieu is doing comes to light—the movement of 1.2 *mirrors* that of 1.1. 1.1 began from the perspective of an intelligent being, and ended with man treated as physical, feeling, and intelligent. 1.2 begins with man as physical and feeling, and ends with him treated as physical, feeling, and intelligent. They perform identical motions, but in different directions.

On their own, both are also partial accounts. It is only by combining 1.1 and 1.2 that we arrive at the complete picture of man. Montesquieu hints at this within the chapter. He begins by saying “prior to all these laws are the laws of nature, so named because they derive uniquely from the constitution of our being.”[[75]](#footnote-75) While initially he might seem to be undermining what he set out in 1.1, he could also be indicating that “these laws” (presumably, the all the “necessary relations deriving form the nature of things”) apply later, when man has developed his knowledge. In the next paragraph, he hints at the relevance of 1.1 further, saying:

“The law that impresses on us the idea of a creator and thereby leads us toward him is the first of the *natural laws* in importance, though not in the first in the order of these laws. A man in the state of nature would have the faculty of knowing rather than knowledge. It is clear that his first ideas would not be speculative ones; he would think of the preservation of his being before seeking the origin of his being.”[[76]](#footnote-76)

Pangle tells us that Montesquieu, by deliberately pointing out that such a law is missing “indicates his view that humans are by nature completely unmoved by any religious experience and are ignorant of, undirected toward, any god.”[[77]](#footnote-77)

That is one reading of things—but on other hand, let us examine the phrasing. Montesquieu does not describe any sort of natural inclination towards reverence or moral yearning, which, if he was doing what Pangle claims, one would expect. Instead, he says that this law “impresses on us the idea of a creator and thereby leads us toward him” and leads man to be engaged in “seeking the origin of his being.”[[78]](#footnote-78) He describes an active and rational quest for the origin of his being. It is, to use Pangle’s own phrase, “the fundamental metaphysical conundrum—as to the ontological status of rational consciousness.” [[79]](#footnote-79) It also sounds like a fair description of Descartes’ activities in the *Meditations*.

In other words, the natural law that Pangle says is missing is not missing at all. 1.1 was a demonstration of the law of knowledge. Montesquieu is presenting his version of Descartes’ *Meditations* in 1.1 as somehow an illustration of the activity of the intellect, and the final puzzle piece needed to complete man.

By giving these two accounts of man separately, and then causing the “state of war” to happen at their intersection, Montesquieu indicates that there is something about man as a composite being that is antisocial. Both partial accounts are innocuous enough on their own. The intelligent beings “err,” but they are hardly at war. Pre-rational man is timid, gentle. But the combination of physical, feeling, and intelligent is nuclear—and immediately explodes into the state of war in 1.3.

The Cartesian Soul

Clearly, 1.1 and 1.2 are two puzzle pieces meant to be fit together. But what does it mean? Why did Montesquieu make 1.1 so specifically Cartesian? Why did he alter Descartes and Hobbes in the way he did?

To answer these questions, we must gain a more complete understanding of man’s intellectual needs. Luckily, Montesquieu treats the mind—which he equates totally with the soul—more thoroughly elsewhere. In *his Essay Upon Taste*, Montesquieu investigates the pleasures of the soul:

“the soul, independently of those pleasures it derives from the senses, has some which it would have without them, and are proper to itself. Such are those it derives from curiosity, the ideas of its own grandeur and perfections, the idea of its existence, opposed to the thought of annihilation, the pleasure of embracing the whole of a general idea, that of viewing a multiplicity of objects at once, and that of comparing, joining, and separating ideas.”[[80]](#footnote-80)

If it seems initially like the primary job of the soul is to think about its own existence, the rest of the *Essay Upon Taste* will only deepen this impression. Even those pleasures unrelated to directly contemplating its own existence—curiosity, embracing the whole of a general idea, that of viewing objects—all end up being about the soul confirming its own being.

Curiosity for example, comes from a desire for increased being. Montesquieu says that “the soul is made to think, that is, to perceive; now such a being must have curiosity… the soul is always in pursuit of novelty, and is never at rest… As we love to see a great many objects, we wish to extend our view, to be in different places and to enlarge our prospects; *in short, the mind stretches beyond all bounds, and wishes, if I may use the expression,* *to extend the sphere of its presence*.”[[81]](#footnote-81) The soul is not simply satisfied with contemplating itself because it wants to expand over everything.

Other pleasures Montesquieu initially lays out—combining and separating ideas, etc—also aim at the soul confirming its own being. He says that “the soul loves variety; but it does not love it, as we have said, but because it is formed to know and to see: it must then be possible for it to see, and the variety must permit it to do so; that is to say, an object must be simple enough to be perceived.”[[82]](#footnote-82)

When it truly cannot comprehend anything, “the mind retains nothing, foresees nothing: it is mortified by the confusion of its ideas, by the ignorance in which it remains; it is in vain fatigued, and can enjoy no pleasure.”[[83]](#footnote-83)

Sometimes, it even projects order into a lack of order. Montesquieu says that “in a work where there is no order, the mind, every moment, finds that order, into which it wishes to put things.”[[84]](#footnote-84)

This is precisely what Montesquieu’s meditator did to the universe in 1.1. The essential activity of the meditator in was the insistence on absolute order in the universe. In 1.1, Montesquieu even declares that “creation, which appears to be an arbitrary act, presupposes rules.”[[85]](#footnote-85) It seems that one must always be skeptical when a philosopher explicitly insists something is not arbitrary. When speaking as Montesquieu, in the *Essay Upon Taste*, he tells us bluntly that “our manner of existing is entirely arbitrary; we might have been made as we are, or otherwise.”[[86]](#footnote-86)

But even back in 1.1, Montesquieu suggested to attentive readers that the “necessary relations deriving from the nature of things” might not be so necessary. Montesquieu attaches a footnote to the initial order of beings. In it, Montesquieu quotes Plutarch, saying: “the law,” Plutarch says…. ‘is the queen of all, mortal and immortal.”[[87]](#footnote-87) Through his appeal to Plutarch, Montesquieu indicates to attentive readers that these “necessary relations” are not the result of human reason’s ability to penetrate into the universe, but actually were the result of artistic creation.

And yet, the fact that he explicitly insisted these laws were truly “necessary” is telling. The universe, which is actually could be extremely arbitrary, has been revised by the mind into an orderly, law-abiding cosmos. It seems like 1.1 points to the fact that the mind must create laws relating itself to the whole.

The content of *The Spirit of the Laws* confirms this--law, the ordering of the arbitrary, is an invincible feature of the human mind. It is simply impossible for everything to be arbitrary. Even in a despotism, law survives. When a despot renders a verdict, even “if he were drunken or mad, the decree would have to be carried out just the same; if it were not, he would be inconsistent, and *the law cannot be inconsistent.*”[[88]](#footnote-88) Montesquieu also told readers from early on that religion has a special power in the despotism. This is because “if, in these states, the laws of religion were of the same nature as human laws, the laws of religion would also be nothing; however, *it is necessary in society for something to be fixed*, and religion is that fixed thing.”[[89]](#footnote-89) Where there are “sacred books that fix and establish” laws, Montesquieu says that “in vain did an emperor want to abolish them; they triumphed over tyranny.”[[90]](#footnote-90)

We should also note that constraint, both internal and political, is a central part of human flourishing. He says that “just as the peoples who live under a good police are happier than those who run about in the forest, without rule and without leaders, so monarchs who live under the fundamental laws of their state are happier than despotic princes, who have nothing to rule their people’s hearts or their own.”[[91]](#footnote-91)

Why is there a genuine need for law? It seems to me that law is necessary for the soul’s basic activity, which is the confirmation of its own existence and the creation of order/meaning.

The soul would like to be a meaningful being. This requires two things: first, agency, because otherwise everything one did would be the result of laws of mechanics, of matter in motion, and therefore, meaningless. Secondly, to make an exercise of freedom meaningful and not merely free, the action must make reference to something. If there are no laws, an outburst of will is just a meaningless outburst of will, and our free agency is left “an arbitrary quirk without a guide.”[[92]](#footnote-92)

Eros

We have already touched on the second feature of the soul, but it bears further investigation. The second essential feature of the human mind was revealed the moment Montesquieu’s meditator asked: “what greater absurdity is there than a blind fate that could have produced intelligent beings?”[[93]](#footnote-93) The soul, which confirms its own meaningful existence in everything it does, cannot tolerate the idea that it is just the outcome of laws of mechanics. While it is fine viewing the rest of nature mechanistically, it seems to want to reserve a special freedom from nature for itself.

In *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu confirms that inherent in the nature of understanding is the love of perceiving free agency. He says: “by the nature of human understanding*,* we love in religion everything that presumes an effort, just on the subject of morality, we love in theory all that has the character of severity.”[[94]](#footnote-94) Montesquieu does not attribute this love to the heart or the spirit, but to something inherent in the processes of the mind. Unfortunately, the love of the appearance of human freedom often has nothing to do with the actual freedom of human beings. Men consistently overestimate their moral and intellectual power over their bodies: “celibacy has been more pleasing to the peoples whom it seemed to suit the least and for whom it could have the most grievous results.”[[95]](#footnote-95)

In the end, the soul is not perfectly free because, as discussed, man is a composite being. This brings us back to one of the first things said in the *Essay Upon Taste*. Montesquieu said: “we must begin with considering the nature of our being, and know what its pleasures are… If the soul had not been united to the body, it would have had clear intelligence, and it is probable that it would have loved what it fully understood*: at present we scarcely love any thing that we are thoroughly acquainted with*.”[[96]](#footnote-96)

The desire to be a purely free agent—that is, to be a soul and not a body—plays out throughout *The Spirit of the Laws*. It seems that the more people neglect their physicality, the higher their opinion of themselves becomes. Montesquieu tells us that “those who do not work regard themselves as the sovereigns of those who work”[[97]](#footnote-97) and “in many places on earth people let their fingernails grow in order to indicate that they do not work.”[[98]](#footnote-98)

When confronted with its necessity--particularly that of its own death--the human soul revolts and we see explosions of aesthetic energy. What was previously an indifferent world becomes beautified. For example, Montesquieu says:

“I find, in the law of the Lombards, that, if one of the two champions carried magical herbs, the judge had him put them away and made him swear he had no others. This law can only have been founded on common opinion; *fear, which has been said to have invented so many things, causes such illusions to be imagined*… from this was born the marvelous system of chivalry. All spirits were open to these ideas. In the romances one saw knights-errant, necromancers, fairies winged or intelligent horses… *in our world one saw a new world, and the ordinary course of nature was left only for common men*”[[99]](#footnote-99)

For the Lombards, the fear of death completely rewrote the laws of the universe, to the point where it seems a second world was imposed over the natural one. One imagines that the list of “beings” a German would give you would vary wildly before, this encounter with mortality.

In this way, “gallantry was born when one imagined extraordinary men who, upon seeing virtue joined to beauty and weakness in the same person, were led to expose themselves to danger for her sake.”[[100]](#footnote-100) And yet, Montesquieu is not just exposing human vanity--by imagining these extraordinary men who would risk their lives for justice and beauty, the Lombards *became* such men. Gallantry and its accompanying mode of justice, dueling, became a permanent part of the European landscape. We can see that the opinion that they were superior to bodily necessity produced the strength needed to overcome their fear.

While the opinion that one is superior to necessity can be the beginning of all sorts of human striving, it can also be the end to all human motion. In the *Persian Letters*, a Frenchman tells us that when a Spanish man has any sort of exceptional quality (such as being “proprietor of a large sword”) the Spaniard “he does no more work. His honor is connected with the repose of his limbs.”[[101]](#footnote-101) In addition, the Frenchman says:

Spaniards are endlessly pleased with themselves because they “reflect that they possess the supreme merit of being, as they call it, ‘men of white flesh.’ No queen in the Ottoman emperor’s harem ever took such pride in her beauty as the oldest and ugliest ruffian does in the dingy olive whiteness of his complexion… a man of such importance, a creature so perfect, would not go to work for all the treasure in the world, and could never bring himself to compromise the honor and dignity of his skin by degrading menial toil.”[[102]](#footnote-102)

While Lombards attained nobility and spiritual beauty through overcoming necessity, the Spanish assume they are above necessity because they believe they have a certain spiritual beauty. This aesthetic self-preference causes them to be a monstrously cruel nation.

Let us call this explosive aesthetic energy what it is—eros. Montesquieu sees in man an erotic desire to be free of bodily limits, in favor of beauty, nobility, increased being. Montesquieu, in line with ancient political philosophy, views this eros as deeply ambiguous—it can either lead to tremendous strength and self-overcoming or a simple rejection of what is. When speaking about Aristotle, Mansfield’s observed that “nature is more ornery than the most ornery of men. As mere resistance, the human desire for freedom from nature leads back to the very tyranny of non-human nature which it resists.”[[103]](#footnote-103) This statement applies to Montesquieu, as well, who sees that men are capable of overcoming natural limits, but and also just of denying those limits.

Montesquieu’s False Dualism

At this point, we can return to book 1 of *The Spirit of the Laws* and how man’s composite nature leads him to war. The friction between, and unity of, body and mind is reflected in 1.1 and 1.2, and eventually explodes into war in 1.3.

We were prepared for the tension between body and soul by the tension between the philosophers Montesquieu engaged with. The obvious thing about the pairing of Hobbes and Descartes is how badly these two philosophers go together. In evoking the two philosophers he has chosen, Montesquieu is invoking two radically opposed philosophies of mind.

Descartes famously proposes an extreme mind-body dualism. He says: “I was a thing or substance whose whole essence or nature was only to think, and which, to exist, has no need of space nor of any material thing or body. Thus it follows that this ego, this mind, this soul, is entirely distinct from the body.”[[104]](#footnote-104)

Hobbes, on the other hand, claims that the soul and the body cannot be separated. He devotes no small amount of space in the *Leviathan* to showing that, when artfully interpreted, scripture does not claim that soul and body are separate substances. Part of the reason he writes is so “that men may no longer suffer themselves to be abused, by them, that by this doctrine of *Separated Essences,*”[[105]](#footnote-105) which he considers to have caused all sorts of political disorder.

Montesquieu gives us Hobbes’ state of nature without war (although it is only without war because it is also without reason) and Descartes’ mediations and without doubt. In doing so, he indicates that both these accounts are insufficient in themselves. You wouldn’t have the state of war without a self-conscious seeking of truth and existential pains, and you wouldn’t have a existentially pained soul without a body.

Montesquieu suggests that neither materialist monism nor pure mind-body dualism really explains the human condition. Instead, Montesquieu suggests that the relationship between body any soul is that of a *false dualism*. If the Cartesian intelligence of 1.1 is what man’s animal “faculty of knowing” looks like, he will think he’s a mind but really be an animal.

The explosive energy characterizing the state of war comes from an inherent discomfort in the composition of the human being. Our “intelligent” part simply jars against the animal and physical—an internal discomfort that no social contract, nor any amount of material well-being, can remedy.

He reiterates humanity’s poor composition not just through the content of book 1, but through what he leaves out. Montesquieu declines to talk about *speech*.

This neglect is clearly a very deliberate choice. Lowenthal agrees, saying that “in Aristotle, speech was regarded as a crucial natural function eminently fitting man for the associated life. Montesquieu knew this tradition well, and it can therefore hardly be accidental that his own account of natural man is entirely silent about speech.”[[106]](#footnote-106)

The classical tradition held that “it is reason or speech that distinguishes him from the other animals, and speech is communication, man is social in a more radical sense than any other social animal: humanity itself is sociality.”[[107]](#footnote-107) Here, Strauss is indicating the position of the ancients that Montesquieu will take issue with: reason and speech are considered synonymous, and bound together as part of man’s “higher” faculties. By removing speech, Montesquieu is severing the connection between reason and sociability.

Man is reasonable but in a deeply uncommunicative and antisocial way. Descartes’ *a priori* investigations are those a radically isolated consciousness. Descartes wonders if he might be entirely alone in the cosmos, and chides himself for having assuming otherwise, saying it was only by a “blind and rash impulse, that I have believed that there were things outside of myself and different from my own being.”[[108]](#footnote-108) It takes him until the fifth meditation to admit the existence of things other than himself and God—and even then he only concedes triangles. If this is the nature of reason, then man’s reasoning faulty has nothing whatsoever to do with sociability or politics. Montesquieu’s meditator is detached from worldly things and detached from his animal and physical natures--one imagines he would rather think about geometry than do anything for his fellows. After all, can he really be certain his fellow citizens exist?

On the other hand, man is sociable, but in a subrational sense. The third law of nature, which dictates that we feel delight at the sight of an animal of our own kind, is, after all part of our animal composition. As Schaub says, “according to Montesquieu, our sociability is in large part animal—gregarious and carnal—not political as the ancients would have it.”[[109]](#footnote-109)

Man’s “higher” faculties are contained in a radically isolated consciousness, that doubts whether other things, who aren’t dependent on its will, exist. Man’s “lower” nature conduces him to association, love, sympathy. By removing speech from his account of things, Montesquieu removes the possibility that there might be a compromise between the two, or some single natural end that could fulfill man completely. Instead, men are embroiled into a state of war and rendered violently asocial *because* of their higher capacities.

Man is a rational animal--or, shall we say, a Cartesian animal. But he is not a political animal, because that moniker suggests that what is not animal leads him to society.

PART IV: MAN AND NATURE

In nations where there are no ideas other than those pertaining to self-preservation, “men… will be little different from the animals.” There, “brains… unused lose their functions; they hardly profit from their soul, which gains little from its union with the body. *It is education which makes this union perfect; this takes place among civilized nations*.”[[110]](#footnote-110) In his typical understated manner, Montesquieu reveals a central aspect of his politics. What separates civilized nations from uncivilized nations is the proper unification of body and soul. Civilized nations find a balance between man understood as a free moral agent, and man as just another animal.

In addition to individual education, “there is also a general education, which is received from the society where one lives... this is produced in two ways: by physical causes, which derive from the climate” and, secondly, “by moral causes, which are a combination of laws, of religion, of moeures, manieres, and that certain emanation of a mode of thought.”[[111]](#footnote-111) These physical and moral causes come together to provide an answer to the question facing the oligarchs and democrats: is the human good distinct from the rest of nature?

While Montesquieu does not believe men to be determined by their physical education, climate does seem to have an immense power. To understand the different educations nature can provide, and how we can arrive at a desirable one, we will begin by treating the two extremities of the education nature can give us. Montesquieu tells us that “as hot climates produce a quantity of delicate fruits, the barbarians, who find what is necessary instantly, spend more time amusing themselves; the Indians of the cold countries do not have so much leisure; they must continually fish and hunt; therefore, they have fewer dances, less music, and fewer festivals.”[[112]](#footnote-112)

People in hot climates are vivacious and erotic, whereas those in cold climates people are dull and focused on this life. But these things will not play out as one might think, and to really make people social Montesquieu will have to find a middle ground between the two.

Erotic Despotism

In a chapter entitled: “The Idea of Despotism”, Montesquieu says: “When the savages of Louisiana want fruit, they cut down the tree and gather the fruit. There you have despotic government.”[[113]](#footnote-113) This is the entirety of the chapter. What results is that citizens of these nations “find what is necessary instantly” and therefore “spend more time amusing themselves.”[[114]](#footnote-114) In hot climates, nature teaches men that they are above natural necessity.

They are left with more time to appreciate particularly human goods. They love, first and foremost, love: “with that delicacy of organs found in hot counties, the soul is sovereignly moved by all that is related to the union of the two sexes.”[[115]](#footnote-115) These people are wildly sensitive to music—Montesquieu describes nations as “transported” by it. They also tend to have the most perfect moral ideas: “celibacy has been more pleasing to the peoples whom it seemed to suit the least and for whom it could have the most grievous results. In the countries of southern Europe, where by the nature of climate the law of celibacy is the most difficult to observe, it has been retained.”[[116]](#footnote-116)

And yet, these sensitive lovers of beauty will have “no curiosity, no noble enterprise, no generous sentiment; inclinations will all be passive there; laziness there will be happiness.”[[117]](#footnote-117) Souls, in a despotism, are closed.

The radical closure of souls is reflected everywhere in the despotic state. Montesquieu says that “in despotic states, each household is a separate empire.”[[118]](#footnote-118) Montesquieu tells us repeatedly that a despotism is characterized by enclosure. Everyone is enclosed. The princes “shut themselves in the palace”[[119]](#footnote-119) and “the young” are “shut in at home.”[[120]](#footnote-120) There is never even a suspicion of infidelity because “the separation of women, the enclosure, the eunuchs, the locks, render the thing so difficult that the law judges it impossible.”[[121]](#footnote-121) There are even enclosures within enclosures: “wives should not only be separated from men by their enclosure in the house, but they should also be separated within that same enclosure.”[[122]](#footnote-122) Even the state is best when enclosed: “such a state will be in the best situation when it is able to consider itself as alone in the world, when it is surrounded by deserts.”[[123]](#footnote-123)

People are entirely closed to the future, as well. In despotic government “man can no more express his fears about a future event than he can blame his lack of success on the caprice of fortune.”[[124]](#footnote-124) This disconnectedness from the future causes some of the despotic brutality because “a slave, chosen by his master to tyrannize over the other slaves, uncertain of enjoying each day’s fortune on the following day, has no other felicity than that of sating the arrogance, desires, and voluptuousness of each day.”[[125]](#footnote-125) This also holds for the ruling class, which does not pay much attention to anything other than their own security, because “nothing which does not directly menace the palace or the capital makes an impression on ignorant, arrogant, and biased minds; and, as for the sequence of events, they cannot follow it, foresee it, or even think about it.”[[126]](#footnote-126)

Since hot climates are characterized by increased eroticism, one might think it strange that people are so radically shut off from one another. But Montesquieu explains this: “man whose five senses constantly tell him that he is everything and that others are nothing is naturally lazy, ignorant, and voluptuous.”[[127]](#footnote-127) Here, he is speaking of the despot, but this statement seems to apply to all men in hot climates. The despot thinks that he *is* the whole. The despotic prince “is the laws, the state, and the prince.”[[128]](#footnote-128) The despot looks out upon his kingdom and considers the “laws themselves… as effects of his will.”[[129]](#footnote-129)

Private citizens do that same in their households—Montesquieu says that “most moral actions… are nothing but the wills of the father, the husband, or the master, are regulated by them an not by magistrates.”[[130]](#footnote-130) Profoundly closed to the whole, to nature, to society, despotic man reigns over his home like a wrathful god. In PL #21, Usbek says to one of the Eunuchs: “you but mere tools, which I can break at will; who exist only insofar as you can obey; who are in the world only to live under my laws, or to die as soon as I command it; who breathe only as long as my happiness, my love, or even my jealousy, require your degraded selves.”[[131]](#footnote-131)

Natural feelings have no place in a despotism. As a general maxim, in everything they do, “the princes in these states trifle with human nature.”[[132]](#footnote-132) Typically, despotic governments try to do everything by force, even that which human nature dictates can not be done by force. Spain, for example, was so cruel to those it ruled that the Spanish discovered that “the harshness of the government can go as far as destroying natural feelings by natural feelings themselves; did not the women in America make themselves miscarry in order for their children not to have such cruel masters?”[[133]](#footnote-133) Whereas “a wise legislator would have sought to lead men’s spirits back by a just tempering of penalties and rewards …. despotism does not know these springs; it does not lead in these ways. It may abuse itself, but that is all it can do.”[[134]](#footnote-134)

Priestly morality is also correlated with hot climate. Montesquieu says that “the number of dervishes, or monks, seems to increase with the heat of the climate;”[[135]](#footnote-135) and perhaps also shows the essential feature of hot climates. For instance, he tells us that “continence… is, that virtue which is more perfect, because, by its nature, it must be practiced by few people.”[[136]](#footnote-136) In his reading of things, priests and monks practice continence *because* it is inaccessible to most of humanity and *because* of its distance from nature. And yet, by trying to eject themselves from nature, they forget that they are natural beings and they destroy themselves. He says that “no one would suspect the ancient Desert Fathers of having been imbeciles… however, these fathers, by their fasts and by keeping themselves awake at night, a practice they pushed too far, pitifully ruined their minds.”[[137]](#footnote-137)

There are “infinite evils born of the arrogance of certain nations: laziness, poverty, the abandonment of everything, and the destruction of the nations that chance has let fall into their hands as well as their own nation.”[[138]](#footnote-138) Having no conception of the dignity of nature, the Spanish destroy everything they touch. In America: “the Spanish worked the mines, excavated the mountains, and invented machines to draw the waters, break ore and separate it; and, as they mocked the lives of the Indians, they worked them mercilessly.”[[139]](#footnote-139) The land was destroyed: “the German and Hungarian mines make cultivating the land worthwhile, and working those of Mexico and Peru destroys that cultivation.”[[140]](#footnote-140)

Accepting Necessity

In the other extreme, there are cold, severe climates that provide the opposite education. There, “the barrenness of the land makes men industrious, sober, inured to work, courageous, and fit for war; they must procure for themselves what the terrain refuses them.”[[141]](#footnote-141) Whereas the peoples who gained subsistence easily were led to believe nature had little inherent dignity, these peoples cannot afford to neglect natural necessity.

One sees the results of this in peoples who do not cultivate the land. For them, life is inseparable from necessity: “pastoral peoples cannot be separated from their herds, which provide their subsistence.”[[142]](#footnote-142) They “do not have even the idea of luxury.”[[143]](#footnote-143) However, these peoples do not return to being the gentle animals described in 1.2, but instead develop a kind of fierce animal pride. By overcoming their weakness, people who do not cultivate the land found their freedom in nature. Montesquieu says that “the admirable simplicity of the Germanic peoples must be seen in Tacitus; art did not fashion their ornaments, they found them in nature. If the family of their leader was to be marked by some sign, it was again in nature that they had to seek it; the kings of the Franks, Burgundians, and Visigoths wore their long hair as a diadem.”[[144]](#footnote-144)

However, their fierce independence comes at a price—none of them are truly part of society. They are more like separate nations than citizens: “barbarian peoples who do not cultivate the land have no territory properly so-called and are, as we have said, governed by the right of nations rather than by civil right. Therefore, they are almost always armed…. ‘eagles,’ said the king of the Ostrogoths, ‘stop giving food to their little ones as soon as their feathers and claws are formed.”[[145]](#footnote-145) Trust, friendship, the ability to not be armed at all times—none of this is found here. Additionally, the invocation of eagles makes it clear that the human good is not considered to be remotely distinct from that of other animals.

And perhaps most importantly, these peoples also do not have any longing for eternity. “The Salic Law did not have as its purpose a preference for one sex over another, it had still less that of perpetuating a family, a name, or a transfer of land; none of this entered the heads of the Germans. It was a purely economic law.”[[146]](#footnote-146)

The Cultivation of the Land

In both the very hot and very cold climate, the gentle sociability of animal man was crowded out by the erotic desire for freedom. Neither the extreme privileging of the soul (despotism) nor the body (barbarians) leads towards sociability. It seems that there must be a compromise made between the two.

The uniquely human way of living is connected with the cultivation of the land. The cultivation of the land is the mean between the rejection of nature that characterizes despotism, and the embrace of nature that leaves pastoral peoples savage. In 14.1, Montesquieu even goes so far as to say that “the cultivation of the land is the greatest labor of men.”[[147]](#footnote-147)

Becoming sedentary is the thing that “principally swells the civil code.”[[148]](#footnote-148) It also requires conventional values, the most basic of which is money: “the cultivation of the land requires the use of money… all this leads to the establishment of a sign for value.”[[149]](#footnote-149) Sedentary peoples, who now have property, begin to have moral longings that barbarians do not have. For example, “almost all the peoples with a police live in houses. From this has naturally come the idea of building a house for god where they can worship him and go to seek him in their fears or their hopes... this very natural idea comes only to peoples who cultivate land, and one will not see temples built by those who have no houses themselves.”[[150]](#footnote-150)

Whereas Montesquieu stresses that barbarian peoples have no attachment to their land, their wives, or their religion, sedentary peoples start having an idea of property, ownership, and most importantly, permanence. Whereas both the despotic and the barbarian man channel all their existential longing into the here and now, and are left able to think about the future, sedentary peoples always look to the future.

Positive law can create a link to future generations. While “feedings one’s children is an obligation of natural right; giving them one’s inheritance is an obligation of civil or political right.”[[151]](#footnote-151) When such a civil law is established, it is very beneficial. Montesquieu says that a “law which fixes the family in a succession of persons of the same sex contributes much to the propagation of the human species. The family is a sort of property; a man who has children of the sex that does not perpetuate it is never content until he has those of the sex that does. Names, which give men the idea of a thing that seemingly should not perish, are very appropriate for inspiring in each family the desire to extend its duration.”[[152]](#footnote-152) Additionally, “nature gives fathers a desire to procure heirs for their children, which they scarcely feel for themselves; in the various degrees of primogeniture, they see themselves gradually advancing toward the future.”[[153]](#footnote-153) One could say that in general, as soon as man sees living socially behavior as the way to expanding his being, the contradiction within man quiets down and he is left social.

The land, too, is given increased respect, as it is also part of the individual’s connection to the future. Montesquieu says: “noble lands, like noble persons, will have privileges. One cannot separate the dignity of the monarch from that of the kingdom; one can scarcely separate the dignity of the noble from that of his fief.”[[154]](#footnote-154) Montesquieu describes how the fief system caused men to really strive to help his fellows, saying that “as a lord lived in his village or in his town, as he was not great, rich, powerful (what shall I say?), as he was kept secure only by the number of his inhabitants, each one strove with a singular attentiveness to make his little country flourish.”[[155]](#footnote-155)

Ironically, it becomes clear that the only way to get man invested in the here and now is through connecting it to something more permanent. This is shown clearly through the political failures of despotism, nations “where, as we have said, one decides to act only in the anticipation of the comforts of life, the prince who gives rewards has only silver to give.”[[156]](#footnote-156) When one feels severed from any connection to the future, even the efforts directed toward material well-being stop:

“Of all despotic governments, none is more oppressive to itself than the one whose prince declares himself owner of all the land and heir to all his subjects. This always results in abandoning the cultivation of the land and, if the prince is a merchant, in ruining every kind of industry. In these states, nothing is repaired, nothing improved. *Houses are built only for a lifetime*; *one digs no ditches, plants no trees; one draws all from the land, and returns nothing to it; all is fallow, all is deserted*.”[[157]](#footnote-157)

The human heart is hopelessly directed towards the future and towards expanding its being. While he is capable of ruining the earth when he feels detached from it, he is also capable of extraordinary feats when he feels invested in it. All he needs is to see the correlation between his striving and his reward.

While true freedom in Montesquieu is not unproblematic, he still affirms unequivocally the power of human will. He says:

“Before Christianity had abolished civil servitude in Europe, work in the mines was regarded as so arduous that one believed it could be done only by slaves or criminals. But today one knows that men employed there live *happily*. One has encouraged this profession by small privileges; to an increase in work one has joined an increase in gain, and one has come to make them love their condition more than any other they could have assumed… *There is no work so arduous that one cannot adjust it to the strength of the one who does it*… I do not know if my spirit or my heart dictates this point. Perhaps there is no climate on earth where one could not engage freemen to work. Because the laws were badly made, lazy men appeared; because these men were lazy, they were enslaved.”[[158]](#footnote-158)

This is not to say that Montesquieu wanted to relegate everyone to lives of backbreaking labor, nor that he was under any illusions about the extent to which the liberal regime could truly satisfy human passions.

But he does propose a vision of modernity in which man is not quite so alienated from the whole. Let us remember that the liberal regime promises a more natural nuclear family and the acquisition of property. Family, property, work—these are in their own way connections to the whole. No, these things will not satisfy human ambition, and yes, a lot has been lost. But they are not nothing.

CONCLUSION

Montesquieu is no ancient—to see this, one only has to remember that he worries about the slavery of the body by the soul, and not the other way around. It seems like high always corrupts low: “the prejudices of the magistrates began as the prejudices of the nation.”[[159]](#footnote-159)

But in some ways, his project is reminiscent of Aristotle’s. Recall that Mansfield described Aristotle as having an “ambivalent teleology,”[[160]](#footnote-160) in which “man can be regarded as nature’s property and nature as man’s property: man is both within nature and distinctively above it. But the two possibilities are connected, because man can be above nature, hence acquisitive, only through the use of natural faculties that also show him to be nature’s property.”[[161]](#footnote-161)

The word “teleology” does not quite apply; the rest of Mansfield’s description seems to fit almost perfectly. Man has to strive to separate himself from other animals, but he has to do so within certain bounds. If he gets too drunk on the prospect of freedom, he becomes the worst of all the animals. Montesquieu incessantly reminds people that necessity applies to them, too, and makes every effort to show to despotic nations like the Spanish that force cannot govern everything in politics. In fact, perhaps the point of much of his work is pointing out that any sort of mastery is bad for the master. The moment man begins to think like a master, he loses his connection to himself--and to eternity.

In this way, Montesquieu opposes himself to Descartes, who declares his intent to make humans “masters and possessors of nature,” and then explains that this mastery will allow us to control “health, the principal good and the basis of all other goods in this life.”[[162]](#footnote-162)

Montesquieu warns, however, that the tremendous power and well-being promised by the modern project will not deliver man to happiness, but to misery. Even if we were able to deliver unlimited pleasures to ourselves, it would be pointless because “at length everything fatigues us, especially great pleasures; we quit them always with as much pleasure as we began them.” [[163]](#footnote-163) Any sort of artificial joy could not last because “great joy is a state as far removed from health as great pain. Only the healthy man can take pleasure from being alive.”[[164]](#footnote-164)

Health requires something that mastery over nature cannot deliver: striving, activity, and investment in the natural world. People need to experience highs and lows because “our Soul grows tired with enjoyment; not to perceive any pleasure at all is to fall into a state of lifeless insensibility, which quite oppresses it. We find a remedy for all this by varying its modifications: it feels, and it does not grow tired.”[[165]](#footnote-165) In short, where Descartes would have prescribed medicine, Montesquieu prescribes life.

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