

Faith and Reason in Montesquieu

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The relationship between faith and reason in a short work by Montesquieu entitled, "Discourse on the Motives That Ought to Encourage Us to the Sciences,"¹ an address he delivered at the Academy of Sciences of Bordeaux on Nov. 15, 1725, is my subject.² This short but weighty work is a condensed microcosm of his contributions to the Enlightenment. It contains, to the best of my knowledge, his most extended treatment of the relationship between faith and reason and the role of the sciences in improving civilization. That he presented it to a university audience in the midst of the Enlightenment in Europe suggests that Montesquieu sought to weigh in on the momentous project of the Enlightenment and perhaps even to attempt to direct its path.

The "Discourse's" chief aim is to reshape the medieval model of the university, and its reliance on Aristotle and the Bible, into an intellectual center devoted to the arts and sciences, and to make scientific philosophy, rather than scholasticism, the source of human intellectual

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¹ All quotations from Montesquieu's "Discourse" are from Diana Schaub's translation.

² I wish to thank Pavlos Leonidas Papadopoulos for the invitation to deliver the keynote address at the 2015 Braniff Graduate Conference at the University of Dallas that occasioned my initial lecture on the subject.

pursuits and goals. To put this in political terms, Montesquieu's "Discourse" reflects a shift away from what God can do for humankind, to what we can do for ourselves through the strength of our own minds and powers. This realignment of the internal branches of knowledge within the university finds its expression in the supremacy of the sciences over the humanities and theology. It also entails a new understanding of the relationship between rationalist, scientific philosophy and the good, enlightened society devoted to their development.

On the surface of things, this looks quite similar to the outline of Francis Bacon's project in the "Great Instauration," with which Montesquieu was no doubt familiar with and even supports, but in a qualified and slightly different way, as I hope to show later. A close reading of this work also reveals how a certain hiding or obscuring of death lies at the heart of Montesquieu's Enlightenment project, and therefore constitutes a break with the Socratic formula, as expressed by Cicero, "that to study philosophy is nothing but to prepare one's self to die."³

For our purposes, I shall divide the body of Montesquieu's "Discourse" into three unequal parts. The first focuses on a distinction that he makes between "great nations" and "savage peoples" (33). As we shall see, the opening paragraphs have religious superstition at their center. The second part contains Montesquieu's enumeration of the various motives that ought to encourage us to expand the sciences (which amount either to five or six, depending on whether one counts what he has to say about the *belles lettres* as a separate section). The third and final part of the "Discourse" deals exclusively with the role of the humanities. The books of "pure-spirit," as he calls "poetry and eloquence," have "at least general utility" (36), which is to say the humanities are instrumental and ought to play a subordinate but important role in popularizing the sciences for the masses while assisting those who study the humanities in cultivating the arts of writing and "critical thinking."

PART ONE

Montesquieu begins the "Discourse" with the following bold pronouncement: "The difference between great nations and savage people is that the former [great nations] have applied themselves to the arts and

³ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, translated by M. A. Screech, 89.

sciences, while the latter [savages] have totally neglected them" (33). If savage peoples neglect the arts and sciences, to what, then, are they devoted? According to Montesquieu, conquest.

Several things jump out right away. The first is that for Montesquieu, great nation status belongs to those nations who apply themselves to the arts and sciences, rather than to, say, war and conquest. For Montesquieu there does not appear to be a conflict either between nations and citizens or between the cultivation of the arts and the sciences, a point that Jean-Jacques Rousseau hotly contests later in his "Discourse on the Arts and Sciences," a work I take to be a direct response to Montesquieu's own "Discourse." I shall have more to say on Rousseau's response to Montesquieu later. For now, however, it is important to note that Montesquieu does not believe that a conflict exists between cultivating the arts and the sciences and on reliance on God.

How might a reader familiar with the biblical story of the Tower of Babel respond to Montesquieu's bold claim that great nations apply themselves to the arts and the sciences, while savage nations do not cultivate the sciences? How did Babel's devotion to the arts and sciences work out for its denizens? Thinking about Babel—or reading Montesquieu's "Discourse" with its story of Babel in mind—is helpful in this context for two reasons. The first is that I believe in doing so we gain a glimpse into what Montesquieu is up to here, which is not as straightforward as it may first appear. The second is that reading Montesquieu's "Discourse" with the Bible in mind helps to bring out his intentions in relationship to it, especially if we wish to understand the spirit of his reshaping the university. As we shall see, I believe Montesquieu has the Bible in mind throughout much of this work, albeit in a very subtle and puzzling manner.

Let us recall first that Nimrod, one of Noah's descendants, becomes a "mighty hunter before God" (Gen. 10:9), a conqueror of beasts and of men who relies on himself and seeks glory through conquest:

Nimrod founds a kingdom that includes [...] Babel. It becomes the peak and emblem of the continuing attempt to rebel against reliance on God, or of proud autonomy. For its people seek to build a great city and a tower to the very heavens—the abode of God—lest they be scattered over the whole earth. They seek, that is, to remain together and to build a name

for themselves.⁴

We are all familiar with how this story ends: “God moves to thwart, through dividing men into nations, human accomplishment or human self-reliance and art.”⁵ While Montesquieu may share the Bible’s critique of Nimrod’s quest for glory through conquest, he does not seem to share the admonishment of the arts and sciences. I suspect that if Montesquieu had been alive during this period in Biblical history, he would have been one of the chief architects of the tower, beckoning his fellow men in his philosophical salon to apply themselves to the arts and sciences, while discouraging them from conquest and war.

Montesquieu goes further when he claims, “Perhaps most nations owe their existence to the knowledge that the arts and sciences provide. If we had the mores of the American savages, two or three European nations would soon devour all the others; and then perhaps some people conquering our world would boast, like the Iroquois, of having devoured seventy nations” (33). At first this seems simple enough.

Yet upon closer inspection, an interesting difference between Montesquieu and Niccolò Machiavelli begins to emerge. For Machiavelli, it may be remembered, nations owe their existence to violence and necessity, and not to the bloodless abstractions of the arts and sciences. Montesquieu places great stock in the arts and the science as constituting the roots of a truly enlightened great nation, as he sees the arts and sciences as the means through which human beings gain membership in a community of knowers, stretching the boundaries of human knowledge, and conferring great benefits to mankind through the advancement of scientific philosophizing. By contrast, Machiavelli devotes the bulk of chapter six of *The Prince* to the greatest examples of virtue and founding. There he argues that great individuals found “peoples” through the force of a founder’s own will and intelligence. That is, all civilizations and what we call “culture” begin as “matter” and are then “formed” by the new “modes and orders” of the greatest founders into a “people,” whom Machiavelli likens to clay, like “matter enabling [founders] to introduce any form they pleased.”⁶ At the root of all order and peoples is terror or force, and not the arts and sciences: “It is however necessary, if one wants

⁴ Thomas Pangle and Timothy Burns, “The Bible,” 123.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, translated by Harvey Mansfield, 23.

to discuss this aspect well, to examine whether these innovators [founders] stand by themselves or depend on others; that is, whether to carry out their deed they must beg or indeed can use force." If they "beg" and therewith lack force, "they always come to ill and never accomplish anything; but when they depend on their own and are able to use force, then it is that they are rarely in peril." And, finally: "things must be ordered in such a mode that when people no longer believe, one can make them believe by force,"⁷ according to Machiavelli.

The contrast between Machiavelli and Montesquieu, at least on this important issue of to what a nation owes its existence, helps us to grasp these writers' different tastes and intentions. To be sure, Machiavelli is addressing himself to a "prince" and those with political ambition, unlike Montesquieu, who is addressing an academy devoted to the sciences. While I do believe that the aims of Machiavelli and Montesquieu are similar—to bring about law and order so that citizens may prosper—Montesquieu seems to believe that philosophy and liberty would be better served in a well-constructed, constitutional order of checks and balances, and one informed by a scientific understanding of human nature, rather than violence. Montesquieu's treatment of political concepts avoids putting the savagery of war directly in the face of the reader.

Second, Montesquieu seems to equate great nations and their citizens with the development of the arts and sciences and he does not seem to be concerned with any possible conflict between the arts and sciences and healthy citizenship. Rousseau, by contrast, objects to the notion that a healthy nation and its citizens can co-exist coherently with the advancement of the arts and sciences. It is precisely here that Rousseau enters the debate, ushering in what Leo Strauss calls the First Great Wave (or crisis) of Modernity.⁸

In response to the question posed by the Academy of Dijon in 1750—"Has the Restoration of the Sciences and the Arts Tended to Purify Morals?"—a question that suggests that at least some in that academy have some doubts over the Enlightenment, Rousseau answers in the negative. He accuses that the arts and sciences degrade society. While true philosophic genius can take care of itself, Rousseau asserts, the

⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁸ See Leo Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity."

advancement of the arts and sciences are terrible for morals, nations, and citizens. Indeed, Rousseau goes on to argue, the arts and sciences destroy belief in God, family, and country. And, as he adds toward the end of what became known as his *First Discourse*, the Enlightenment, with its total endorsement of rationality, will even corrupt poets and philosophers.

Rather than fostering a friendly intellectual climate in which philosophy can flourish, Rousseau argues that the arts and sciences will bring about a hostile age to both the life of the mind and any meaningful relations between citizens. He warns that it is not intellectual freedom that will prevail, but rather vain conformism to questionable, illusory abstractions. Enlightenment thought will produce not citizens moved by a sense of duty toward their fellows; rather, a vain, hypocritical, self-absorbed, and inauthentic bourgeoisie will replace the far nobler citizens of classical civic republicanism. Rousseau would favorably compare the classical citizen or even the noble savage of the *Second Discourse* to Montesquieu's enlightened man of the world. If status as a great nation means the development of the arts and sciences, regardless of the advantages Montesquieu enumerates, Rousseau would rather be a noble savage—a savage whom he presents not as conquering or ambitious but as a happy, content, and simple being, who lives entirely within himself and enjoys the sweet sentiment of his existence. Such a simple, happy man, according to Rousseau, belongs to a pre-scientific nature; his inner unity raises him above the dividedness that Rousseau sees as characteristic of the enlightened man of the world, who belongs neither to himself nor to others. Such a man, and the nation to which he belongs, is a nothing in Rousseau's view.

It is easy to paint Rousseau as a reactionary or as an early romantic, but he is just as opposed to conventional Christianity and monarchy as the most ardent Enlightenment philosopher. His objections to the Enlightenment project go far deeper. In fact, Rousseau's *First and Second Discourses* are intended to be read as responses to Montesquieu's own "Discourse." We shall now take a closer look at what Montesquieu says next and then imagine a dialogue between him and Rousseau. This dialogue between them becomes increasingly contentious as we develop further their conflicting visions of a healthy nation versus a savage people.

One might think, on the basis of the first paragraph of the "Discourse," that the advantages great nations have over a band of savages seeking to conquer them are merely technological—that is, that

great nations are better able to defend themselves against aggression than savage peoples. But this is not what Montesquieu argues:

[...]leaving aside savage peoples, if a Descartes had come to Mexico or Peru one hundred years before Cortez and Pizarro, and he had taught these people that men, composed as they are, are not able to be immortal; that the springs of their machine, as those of all machines, wear out; that the effects of nature are only a consequence of the laws and communications of movement, then Cortez, with a handful of men, would never have destroyed the empire of Mexico, nor Pizarro that of Peru. (33)

This astonishing claim takes the perspective of self-preservation, which is to say that Montesquieu shifts the focus from glory and conquest to defensive measures against destruction and annihilation.⁹ This is no coincidence, as he is not interested in advancing the arts and science for purposes of subjugation or domination. But what makes this passage so interesting is how it identifies superstition, rather than technological advancement, as the root cause of the successful conquest of Mexico and Peru. Had someone like a Descartes enlightened these native peoples just a century prior to the arrival of Cortez and Pizarro, argues Montesquieu, they would not have confused their conquerors with gods. The belief that they were up against gods and not men is the reason for their destruction, he insists: The battle was over ideas, not arms. Its roots are theological, not technological. Who can withstand what one perceives as a god? Defeat goes to faith; victory to reason.

Recognizing just how bold this claim is, Montesquieu next raises and answers the following question: "Can it be said that this destruction, the greatest history has ever known, was only a simple effect of the ignorance of a principle of philosophy?" (33). Montesquieu answers in the affirmative. To begin with, the Europeans were outnumbered. Furthermore, while the Mexicans did not possess firearms, they had bows and arrows, "which is to say they had the arms of the Greeks and Romans." They may not have had iron, "but they had flint, which cut like iron, which they placed at the tip of their weapons." The Mexicans also possessed excellent military tactics: "[T]hey made their ranks very

⁹ I owe this point to Mark Kremer.

compact, and as soon as a soldier died, he was immediately replaced by another." Moreover, Montesquieu adds, the Mexicans "had a generous and intrepid nobility who, more than Europe's nobility, envied the destiny of those who die for glory." The Peruvians had parallel advantages. So why did they lose when so many advantages seemed to have been on their side, when all the odds were stacked against the Europeans? In fact, Montesquieu points out that the "Spaniards even expected to be exterminated by those small tribes who had the resolve to defend themselves" (33–34).

How were the Mexicans and Peruvians so easily destroyed? As has been shown, the odds seemed to have been in their favor. Montesquieu explains: "All that appeared to them—a bearded man, a horse, a firearm—had upon them the effect of a power invisible, which they believed they were incapable of resisting" (34). It wasn't courage the Americans lacked, but rather the hope of success. "Thus," he concludes, "a bad principle of philosophy—the ignorance of a physical cause—paralyzed in a moment all the forces of two great empires" (34). In other words, the Aztecs and Incas defeated themselves. A theological placebo, rather than a technological disadvantage, crippled their imaginations and destroyed any hope of success. It was not human beings that they saw, but an "invisible power." Technological and military tactics are necessary but not sufficient for defense. An enlightened teaching about human nature is necessary to see things as they really are. If the best form of defense is to know one's enemy, the first thing to know about them is that they are human, all too human—not divine—and, therefore, mortal and just as vulnerable as their opponents.

Lest we miss another important lesson in Montesquieu's presentation of this slaughter, however, we can consider what would have happened had a Descartes arrived one hundred years prior to the arrival of the Europeans to enlighten these two empires. The Aztecs and the Incas would not have taken the Europeans for an invincible power. The question arises of whether such a loss of faith would have caused the implosion of their society before the Europeans had arrived to massacre them wholesale.¹⁰ From the perspective of the Aztec and Incan religions, Montesquieu's cure is just as destructive as what he views as their weakness. They believed that they were ruled, and then attacked, not by

¹⁰ See Diana Schaub, "Montesquieu's Popular Science," 39.

men, but by divine mediators. Yet, from the perspective of the Enlightenment, liberating individuals from superstition still leaves humans as humans. Humans remain, but the crippling religious notion that some men are immortal disappears. What is lost is superstition and, for Montesquieu, this is a small price to pay for a better chance at self-preservation and commodious living.

It is important to note that at no point does Montesquieu praise the Spaniards for their military success. Rather, he takes the side of the conquered and wonders how matters could have been different had they been enlightened about their own true nature. Furthermore, the Spaniards also spread Christianity. Rather than praising the Spaniards for forcing Christianity upon the Americas, Montesquieu argues that the Incas and Aztecs would have been better off had they been inoculated against the view of immortality and afterlife, that is, that humans could be or were gods. But if that were the case, would the Aztecs and Incas have converted to Christianity, which has as its theological center the idea that God became flesh/Man? One cannot help but wonder whether the same enlightened teaching that could have changed the outcome of the conquest would have also prevented Christianity from spreading to there in the first place. It would seem that both sides would lose their sense of religion—or at least the idea that humans could be immortal. As we have just seen, even though the odds were in their favor, the Aztec and Inca perished because of their religious superstitions: “they believed they were incapable of resisting” the men they saw as gods (33).

PART TWO

From the fostering of Enlightenment principles of rationality, so vital in overcoming the weakening influence of superstition in societies, Montesquieu next turns to the motives that ought to encourage the university to develop the arts and sciences. It is important to keep an eye on Montesquieu’s psychology of hope and the intellectual empowerment that the sciences confer upon humans throughout the rest of the “Discourse.” Whereas religious superstition robbed the Aztecs and Incas of any hope of success, the arts and sciences inspire hope and progress:

Among us, the invention of the cannon gave such a slight advantage to the nation that first made use of it that it still hasn’t been determined who

actually was first to use it. The invention of small telescopes helped the Dutch only once. We have learned to see in all these effects only pure mechanism; and so, there is no technological improvement that we cannot counter by another improvement.

The sciences are therefore very useful, insofar as they cure peoples of destructive prejudices. Since we can hope that a nation which has once cultivated the sciences will continue to do so, enough so as not to fall into the degree of coarseness and ignorance that brings ruin, we are going to speak of other motives that ought to engage us to apply ourselves to them. (34)

Read in the context of the Aztecs and Incas, it is clear that the prejudices Montesquieu has in mind here are religious superstitions. Montesquieu's overall point here was not lost on Adam Smith who, in *Wealth of Nations*, insists that "because modern firearms help to give 'civilized' nations a military advantage over 'barbarous' ones, the invention of fire-arms, an invention which at first sight appears to be so pernicious, is certainly favourable both to the permanency and to the extension of civilization."¹¹ Smith further adds that he sees science as "the great antidote to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition," and for this reason he suggests that the state should encourage the study of it "by instituting some sort of probation, even in the higher and more difficult sciences, to be undergone by every person before he [is] permitted to exercise any liberal profession or before he [can] be received as a candidate for any honorable office of trust or profit."¹²

Montesquieu goes on to enumerate five additional motives to encourage us towards the arts and sciences. "The first is the inner satisfaction of seeing the excellence of one's being develop, and of making an intelligent being more intelligent" (34). The cultivation of the arts and sciences nurtures humans to maturity by assisting their rational faculties to flourish. Related to the first motive is the second, which Montesquieu subtly expresses in quasi-religious terms: the arts and sciences speak to

a certain curiosity that all men have, and that has never been so reasonable as in this century. We hear it said every day that the bounds of human knowledge have become infinitely extended, that the learned are astonished to find themselves so learned, and that the magnitude of

¹¹ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, V.i.a.14, 796.

¹² *Ibid.*, V.i.g.14, 796.

success has made them sometimes doubt its reality. Should we take no part in this good news? (34)

Montesquieu's use of the biblical phrase "good news" would not have been lost on his Christian audience, who would no doubt have drawn a comparison to the Gospel's announcement of the "good news" by Jesus about the coming of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14–15), the saving acts of God and the resurrection from the dead, bringing atonement between people and God. In contrast to the biblical good news of salvation, the "good news" of science cures us of destructive prejudices and "causes us to forget that we are getting older" (35)—it obscures our mortal nature while inspiring us to advance its growth. It is not the Holy Spirit, but the human spirit that we witness in human progress. Montesquieu asks, "will we not see where it has been, the path it has made, the path that remains to it, the attainments on which it congratulates itself, those that it aspires to, and those that it despairs of acquiring?" (35).

PART THREE

Montesquieu's attempt to assuage any doubt about the mind's ability to progress, and his encouragement of universities to push the boundaries of human knowledge, are captured later by Kant's own optimism. Jonathan Israel explains that

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) [...] had no doubt that mankind was experiencing 'progress' and that this evident amelioration was driven by the advance of 'reason.' Hence, while man's improvement, as [Kant] saw it, was manifest in all spheres — legal, political, moral, commercial, and technological — it was in the first place a progression of the human mind and the impact on mankind of nature ... that was driving the process. In a famous essay of 1795 [Kant] asserted that European states were gradually becoming more 'republican,' and more 'representative' of the general will of their people, through their assembles, laws, and institutions. Politically, the ultimate end of human progress would be an international federation of powers to resolve disputes, leading ultimately, [Kant] envisioned, to 'perpetual peace.' The final goal, or 'telos,' of human progress, in his view, was the full flowering of human rationality and moral capacity, conceivable only on the basis of

Kant's optimism captures nicely the relationship between Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* and the "Discourse." In order to bring the political and scientific dimensions of the Enlightenment together coherently, however, Montesquieu next turns to what he refers to as the *belles lettres*. In order to promote the Enlightenment and to popularize its teachings, Montesquieu closes his "Discourse" by turning our attention to the role of the humanities.

Unlike Francis Bacon, who all but calls for the end of the humanities in the "New Organon" and the "Great Instauration," Montesquieu encourages the humanities to play an important, if subordinate, role in bringing the good news of the sciences to the masses in a comprehensible and elegant language: "Having spoken of the sciences, let us say a word about the *belles-lettres*. The books of pure spirit, like those of poetry and eloquence, have at least general utility; and these sorts of benefits are often greater than particular ones" (36). Among the benefits of the humanities, according to Montesquieu, is the promotion of critical reading and writing skills, which have as their aim the popularization of scientific works to the masses. The humanities ought to teach "the art of writing, the art of formulating our ideas, of expressing them nobly, in a lively manner, with force, grace, order, and a variety that refreshes the spirit" (36). In other words, the modern university ought to be composed of the sciences, which truly benefit society, and by the humanities, which teach people to engage in critical thinking and writing, thus making the spread of Enlightenment teachings to a literate audience possible.

If this is not the spirit of the modern university today, I do not know what is. How far the university has moved from the model promoted by Lessing—a model that encouraged artists to take their cue from the poetic geniuses such as Homer and Virgil, to seek the wisdom contained in these lost worlds of poetry—to today's university model in which the humanities must constantly justify their existence by reducing everything they have to offer to a set of "assessable skills." Whereas Lessing encourages students of the humanities to seek inspiration from the great philosophical poets, Montesquieu encourages them to take

¹³ Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind*, 6–7.

inspiration from scientific philosophizing. Here's how Montesquieu puts it in his closing remarks:

The sciences touch one another; the most abstract inform those which are less so, and the body of the sciences in its entirety is related to *belles lettres*. The sciences gain much from being treated in an ingenious and refined manner; it makes them less dry and wearisome and puts them within reach of all minds. If Father Malebranche had been a less enchanting writer, his philosophy would have remained in the confines of a college, as in a sort of netherworld. There are Cartesians who have read only the *Mondes* of Fontenelle; this work is more useful than a stronger work because it is the most serious that most are able to read.

(36)

Montesquieu confidently states that a society devoted to popular enlightenment ought to produce "books that refresh the spirit of honest men. [...] Such reading is the most innocent amusement of men of the world, since it almost always displaces entertainments, debauchery, slanderous conversations, and the projects and maneuverings of ambition."

It is precisely this very sense of moral and political progress that Rousseau calls into question. According to Rousseau, an "enlightened" society is not made better but worse through the arts and sciences. Science, he believes, undermines morality and civic virtue and ultimately results in vain, atomized individualism: "But these vain and futile declaimers go off in all directions, armed with their deadly paradoxes, undermining the foundations of faith, and annihilating virtue. They smile disdainfully at such old-fashioned words of Fatherland and Religion, and dedicate their talents and their philosophy to destroying and degrading all that is sacred among men."¹⁴

Moreover, the advancement of the sciences fosters materialism and commerce, warns Rousseau, which in turn promotes luxury, at the expense of civic duties: "Luxury is seldom found without the sciences and the arts, and they are never found without it."¹⁵ And, "while the conveniences of life increase, the arts improve, and luxury spreads; true

¹⁴ Rousseau, *First Discourse*, 17–18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

courage is enervated, the military virtues vanish, and this too is the work of the sciences and of all the arts that are practiced in the closeness of the study.”¹⁶ In addition, a society devoted to the arts and sciences must, as Montesquieu himself points out, popularize science in order to have their desired effect. It is not a matter of indifference, Montesquieu tells us in the beginning of the *Spirit of the Laws*, that the people be enlightened.¹⁷

I bring together Montesquieu and Rousseau in order to remind us of the deep tensions within the Enlightenment itself. While Montesquieu is hopeful of human improvement, Rousseau is clearly not. This is not to say that the choice is between these two thinkers. They are perhaps both significant: science is important to our material progress, but the humanities do and must play a far more important role in education than the mere popularization of science. It is through probing the assumptions of the Enlightenment that we can begin to gain a perspective on the alternatives and begin to test the merits of its ultimate claims and promises. Science, however, cannot do this. It is not scientific philosophizing that is equipped to take this challenge up, but philosophy, theology, and the great minds of literature.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁷ Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, xliv.

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