

*Liberalism
with Honor*

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Honor and the Defense of Liberty in the Old Regime

Honor's association with the old regime has seemed to many to disqualify it from the democratic politics of the New World. Yet if the French Revolution largely vanquished the old order, it did not change human nature or reverse the encroaching nature of political power. Montesquieu's concept of honor, which found its home in the constitutional monarchy of eighteenth-century France, remains illuminating today because the fundamental nature of agency, like that of power, has not changed. It is true that real differences exist between the old regime and the new despite the continuities between them, and honor has not remained unaffected by its new surroundings. But the continuities are significant, and they are less familiar to us than the differences. The modern democratic regime—and with it the modern democratic soul—has come to be defined almost entirely in opposition to its prerevolutionary forebears, a practice that has overlooked, and eventually concealed, what one writer calls “its vestigial aristocratic features.”¹ These aristocratic features are important resources for modern democracy, so important in fact that democracy cannot hope to sustain itself without recourse to them. Like individual rights, the intermediary bodies of civil society, and the separation of powers, honor is a part of liberal democracy's aristocratic inheritance that it cannot do without.

This chapter explains Montesquieu's idea of honor, showing how the ambitious desire for distinction motivates principled disobedience to encroaching political power. His understanding of honor is consistent with the tripartite scheme elaborated in Chapter 1, which includes public honors, codes of honor, and honor as a quality of character. Although

Montesquieu was not in favor of revolution or even sudden reform,² he thought that spirited resistance to the abuse of power was crucial for individual liberty, and he saw honor as the spring of such resistance. For this reason, honor in Montesquieu has been called “openly rebellious toward authority,”³ a form of “regulated disobedience,”⁴ “interference,”⁵ and even “anarchy.”⁶ Montesquieu's man of honor distinguishes himself though his disobedience, and the politics of distinction and disobedience that characterizes moderate monarchies divides political power and therefore limits it. To limit power is, for Montesquieu, the essence of liberty and the best protection for individual security. What one interpreter has called Montesquieu's “vacillating attitude toward honor” reflects its morally ambiguous character, for even the most shining examples of honor display mixed motives.⁷ If honor in Montesquieu sometimes seems similar to the magnanimity of the Aristotelian gentleman,⁸ at other times it appears to be nothing more than “having someone to look down on.”⁹ This complexity makes honor difficult to categorize. It cannot be reduced to self-interest, even self-interest well understood, partly because honor may motivate the sacrifice of one's most fundamental interest, life itself, and partly because of the principled and categorical quality of honor. At the same time, honor in Montesquieu should not be confused with contemporary civic virtue, because if honor sometimes involves personal sacrifice, it does not aim directly for the common good, as civic virtue does. In contrast to civic virtue—and like interest—honor is primarily self-serving. Moreover, on Montesquieu's account honor's function is not so much to motivate political participation as an end in itself as to arouse resistance to the abuse of power.

Little sustained, systematic attention has been given to the concept of honor in Montesquieu.¹⁰ In part, this neglect reflects the difficulty of categorizing honor on the basis of present typologies. In part, too, it is a sign of democratic discomfort with what appears to be an aristocratic concept. Thus honor has been overshadowed by Montesquieu's remarks on republican virtue, because they seem to contain the precursor to Rousseau's idea of the general will, and so to speak more directly to today's democratic citizens. Yet on Montesquieu's account, it is honor, not republican virtue, that checks encroaching political power and thereby serves individual liberty. Because of the way in which honor divides political power, even supports a nascent form of separate powers, the concept of honor is more significant for Montesquieu's liberalism as a whole

than prior scholarship has acknowledged. Honor reflects both his conviction that the institutions of limited government need lively defense and his reluctance to assign this task to virtue.

Following a brief account of how honor fits into Montesquieu's typology of regimes, four features of honor as a quality of character are elaborated: high ambition, the balance of reverence and reflexivity, partiality, and the mix of recognition and resistance. The substantive content of codes of honor may vary from one political society to another, as do systems for distributing public honors or recognition. The formal features of honor as a quality of character elaborated here are more enduring. These aspects of honor remain relatively constant in different contexts. They also illuminate the nature and conditions of political agency more generally, especially the strong exertions of agency that support individual liberty in the face of obvious risks and indeterminate benefits.¹¹

The Place of Honor in the Old Regime

Montesquieu's typology of regimes identifies three species of government, each with its own "nature" and "principle."¹² The nature of a government is "that which makes it what it is, and its principle that which makes it act. The one is its particular structure and the other the human passions that make it move" (III.1). The nature of a republic is popular sovereignty and its principle is what Montesquieu calls "political virtue"; despotism is the rule of one on the basis of arbitrary will and its principle is fear; monarchy is the rule of one according to fixed established laws and its principle is honor. Each of the three regimes exists only as a "totality," as the unity between its nature and its principle.¹³ Despotism, for example, cannot be sustained unless the people are made to fear the ruler, because fearless individuals capable of "esteeming" themselves very highly "would be in a condition to make revolutions." Therefore, fear must beat down everyone's courage, and extinguish self-respect and even the slightest feeling of ambition (III.9). Without the support of fear, the "passion that makes it move," the institutional apparatus of despotism would give way. Similarly, a republic cannot survive without what Montesquieu calls political virtue. In the absence of a monarch or a despot, a people must do for themselves what a strong central authority otherwise would force them to do. In particular, they must restrain themselves from harming others by loving equality and the laws, and they must defend the interests of the state (through military service,

for example) by subordinating their individual interests to the common good (V.3). The constant preference for the public interest over one's own, and even the "renunciation of oneself," is the essence of republican virtue for Montesquieu (IV.5). Without this, the institutions of republican government collapse; its nature dissolves without its principle.

It is worth pausing to consider Montesquieu's treatment of republican virtue because it prepares the way for his concept of honor and helps to clarify it. Montesquieu distinguishes what he calls the political virtue of ancient republics from moral virtue in a foreword to the book: "For an understanding of the first four books of this work, one must observe that what I call virtue in a republic is love of the homeland. . . . It is not at all a moral virtue or a Christian virtue" (Author's foreword). He reiterates the distinction periodically throughout the early sections of *The Spirit of the Laws* (III.5n, IV.5, V.2,4). The point needed emphasis because most of his readers would indeed have identified the unspecified term "virtue" with both moral and Christian virtue.¹⁴ In part, Montesquieu's distinction is meant to emphasize the instrumental rather than the comprehensive quality of political virtue as he uses the term. In part, too, it is intended to defuse hostility toward his general critique of virtue.¹⁵ As it happened, his critique of what he calls political virtue was interpreted by many readers, including the *nouvelles ecclésiastiques*, as a thinly veiled attack on moral and Christian virtue. The clerics were not altogether wrong in their interpretation of the critique. In other places, Montesquieu clearly identifies political virtue with Christian virtue, as when he illustrates "what virtue is in the political state" by describing the self-sacrifice of Christian monks (V.2). Passages such as this one suggest that his ecclesiastical critics were on to something, and more recent commentary has supported their suspicions.¹⁶ For Montesquieu, the effectual truth of all virtue, whether of the political, moral, intellectual, or religious variety, is self-renunciation, the forgetfulness of the worldly goods and the particular desires of the individual as an embodied being.¹⁷ He criticized virtue to illuminate the dangers of any regime based on self-renunciation, thus continuing a line of attack on classical and Christian political philosophy initiated by his "realist" forebears, Machiavelli and Hobbes. His political teaching is a good deal more moderate than that of either one, but for him the path to political moderation must begin from and never forsake a realistic assessment of human nature.

Montesquieu's portrait of virtue as self-renunciation departs markedly

from ancient accounts, of course.¹⁸ According to Aristotle, political, moral, and intellectual virtue were forms of self-fulfillment, not self-renunciation. Virtue brought about happiness, and the good man had a desire for virtue. Citizens had good reason to make the personal sacrifices that political virtue required of them because these sacrifices opened the door to their own higher well-being. One gave up lower goods for the sake of higher ones. In a similar way, good Christians turn their backs on all that belongs to this world for the sake of the more perfect pleasures of the next world (XXIV.11).¹⁹ In both cases, the required detachment from the particular concerns of the individual as an embodied being is justified by rewards that are above the body. When Montesquieu identifies political virtue (and implicitly all virtue) with self-renunciation simply, he suggests that no such rewards await, or justify, the sacrifices of republican citizens or persons of virtue more generally. His position in this regard is based on two considerations. The first is his genuine skepticism about the adequacy of ancient teleology. On the Greek account, it was the realization of the human telos through virtue that transformed the self-renunciation virtue required into the self-fulfillment it promised. If this teleology were inadequate or even questionable, as Montesquieu suspected, the promised self-fulfillment would prove baseless, and self-renunciation would be all that remained to virtue.

The second reason for identifying virtue with self-renunciation involves a historical rather than a metaphysical consideration. The modern world is distinguished from the ancient world by the fact of plurality in moral and political standards of conduct, according to Montesquieu. He draws attention to the modern condition of plurality in a passage on political virtue, saying that "today we receive three different or contrary educations: that of our fathers, that of our schoolmasters, and that of the world," and he contrasts this modern plurality with the unity that characterized ancient life (IV.4). Elsewhere he remarks that "there are three tribunals that are almost never in accord: that of the laws, that of honor, and that of religion."²⁰ Montesquieu accepts this plurality as an irremediable fact of modern life, due largely to the spread of Christianity together with the rise of modern commerce. There is reason to believe that he approves of it, as well, on the grounds that a plurality of normative standards, like the division of political powers, tends to encourage moderation.²¹ The historical fact of pluralism is a second reason why virtue

in general appears to the modern subject as simple self-renunciation, however, as pluralism undercuts the teleological assumptions that transform virtue's self-renunciation into self-fulfillment.²²

Instead of aspiring to the higher ends posited by Greek teleology, the republican virtue that Montesquieu describes aims at general ends.²³ Self-renunciation is understood as the sacrifice of one's particular self to the common "self" of the political community, rather than as the sacrifice of what is lower to what is higher in one's soul.²⁴ Yet from the standpoint of early liberalism, a standpoint that Montesquieu here adopts, the sacrifices of the republican citizen, the Christian monk, and the ancient philosopher appear to be equally empty. From this perspective, it is the particular, embodied self that matters, at least in politics.²⁵ And from this point of view, the common denominator of the virtues of the philosopher, the Christian, and the republican citizen is obedience to rule (even if it is self-rule) that mortifies the particular interests of the embodied self. Because it renounces particular interests, this obedience is rendered devoid of the ends that justify it: all their virtue is in vain.²⁶ In fact, their virtues are worse than vain; they are positively dangerous because they give rise to extremism. In the chapter entitled "What virtue is in the political state," the passage that most dramatically brings political virtue together with Christian virtue, Montesquieu remarks on the extremism of both:

The less we can satisfy our particular passions, the more we give ourselves up to passions for general ones. Why do monks love their order so much? It is exactly due to the same thing that makes their order intolerable to them. Their rule deprives them of all the things upon which ordinary passions rest; there remains, therefore, this passion for the very rule that afflicts them. The more austere it is, that is, the more it cuts out their inclinations, the more strength it gives to those that remain. (V.2)²⁷

If Montesquieu's identification of virtue with simple self-renunciation departs from ancient and Christian conceptions of virtue, it is meant to articulate a deeper truth about the effect of these forms of virtue, which is the same despite their different aspirations. All result in the suppression of human particularity and private desires. For the modern subject, they are felt as a painful denial of self, because of the skepticism of modern scientific reason and the plurality of modern standards of right,

which make questionable the goods that once eased the pain of virtue. And the political effect of the self-denial that virtue requires is extremism, which leads to immoderate government and the insecurity of persons.

The concept of honor, which resembles virtue in being a quality of character, a form of motivation, and a source of individual agency, is intended to meet the new conditions of modern politics. Montesquieu's argument for honor largely accepts Hobbes's denial of a single *summum bonum*, at least as a political matter. It also rejects the moral and physical harshness of ancient life, which Montesquieu thinks had to give way to a "more agreeable way of living" in the modern period. Under the new conditions of skepticism and plurality, and in light of the new expectation of comfort, "one felt that there had to be other mores" (VII.4). Honor is based not on self-renunciation but on self-love (*l'amour propre*), ambition, and the desire to distinguish oneself. It reflects the self-centered quality of modern mores, and it is meant to serve a liberal, or limited, regime rather than a salvific one, and yet it engages fundamental features of human nature. Honor does presuppose a certain teleology, it is true, but the teleology it presupposes is a partial one. Honor as a quality of character is compatible with a range of conceptions of the good and a variety of moral and political standards of right. The teleology of honor places self-command above subservience but it does not in itself define the ends toward which the self-commanding agent aims. Moreover, because honor is experienced as being less harsh than virtue, and because it is tied to a modern constitutional order, Montesquieu regards it as more moderate in its effects than what he calls virtue. The concept of honor allows Montesquieu to discuss character—the sources of individual agency and forms of motivation that serve liberal political institutions—in a more nuanced way than earlier liberals had done, while largely steering clear of the comprehensive teleology of the Greeks and the Christians. Because he aims above all for moderation in politics (XXIX.1), he wants to avoid the oppression of the particular interests and private desires that virtue (at least to the modern mind) had come to imply, and the zealous fervor that tends to accompany it.

Honor finds its home in the government of constitutional monarchy, on Montesquieu's account, where it serves the division of power that is central to this regime. The structure of monarchy includes the "intermediary bodies" that stand between the king and his subjects. They medi-

ate the flow of political power and check the exercise of authority, for "in order to form a moderate government, one must combine powers, regulate them, temper them, make them act; give, that is to say, a ballast to one to put it in a position to resist another" (V.14). By mediating the will of the sovereign, the intermediary bodies support the rule of law, because without limits on sovereign authority, nothing can be fixed and there is no fundamental law. The intermediary bodies include the lords, clergy, nobility, and towns. Each is a power recognized as "independent" that "checks (*arrête*) arbitrary power" (II.4). The intermediary bodies provide alternative sites of authority from which the king's use of power can be contested.²⁸ Of these bodies, Montesquieu emphasizes the role of the nobility, saying that "the nobility enters in some fashion into the essence of monarchy, of which the fundamental maxim is: no monarch, no nobility; no nobility, no monarch. Rather one has a despot" (II.4).²⁹

Lawyers, administrators, and military men, the nobility were charged with carrying out the will of the sovereign. As members of the *parlements* they adjudicated and administered his laws, as mayors of local villages they minded his subjects and collected his taxes, and as soldiers they commanded his armies and oversaw his conquests.³⁰ Although the nobility was charged with taking care of the king's business, this charge gave them the power to interfere in the king's business, and the legislative and judicial prerogatives of the nobility had the status of constitutional rights.³¹ In theory the courts had only to receive, record, transmit, and enforce the sovereign's directives, but in practice the *parlements* prided themselves on the right to delay registration of a questionable law while they presented their objections to the king and awaited his response.³² This right of remonstrance was supplemented with other forms of "interference" by the nobility at the level of local adjudication, administration, and enforcement. All were further enhanced by the ability to arouse public support for such interference.³³ Every delegation of authority resulted in a potential pocket of resistance so that "just as the sea, which seems to want to cover the whole earth, is checked by the grasses and the smallest bits of gravel on the shore, so monarchs, whose power seems boundless, are checked by the slightest obstacles" (II.4). As Montesquieu presents it in *The Spirit of the Laws*, honor is the "spring" (*ressort*) that animates the perpetual tumults between the nobility and the crown, tumults that serve liberty by dividing power.

It is worth noting that Montesquieu's discussion of the nobility elides

an important division within this category.³⁴ There had long been tensions, even hostilities, between the nobility of the sword consisting of soldiers (*noblesse d'épée*), and the nobility of the robe comprising magistrates and the members of the administrative *parlements* (*noblesse de robe*).³⁵ The former traced its lineage to the medieval warriors whose role it had been to defend the realm against external aggression.³⁶ The members of the latter group were relative newcomers to high society, beneficiaries of an expanding and increasingly complex state apparatus. Although the *noblesse d'épée* traditionally had claimed greater prestige, by Montesquieu's day the status of the robe was comparable, and on some accounts even superior.³⁷ Nor was the robe the mere instrument of the king, despite the fact that its ranks were populated by political appointees. On the contrary, its ideology aimed at limiting the power of the crown.³⁸ The debates in French constitutional theory of the first half of the eighteenth century, to which Montesquieu contributes at the end of *The Spirit of the Laws*, often played the two classes of nobility against each other, however. From Montesquieu's point of view, such skirmishes could only increase the power of the crown by dividing its most potent opposition. This is one reason why he runs the two groups together in his discussion of honor, and why he has been called the reconciler of the feudal and magistral traditions within the nobility.³⁹

Montesquieu's elision of the two classes of nobility also reflects a more general historical trend. The boundaries between the two branches of the French nobility had already begun to be transgressed by the sixteenth century.⁴⁰ At that time, the *noblesse d'épée* was deprived of a good part of its military efficacy as the result of technological innovations in warfare and greater political stability, and many nobles began to turn to activities other than fighting.⁴¹ The establishment of universities, the expansion of the state, and ultimately the advent of court life and salon society opened up new fields of endeavor for them. These changes had consequences for the meaning of honor. Feudal honor had been rooted in the acts of conquest and the martial practices of the Frankish warriors who invaded Roman Gaul. To be "noble" was "to count among one's ancestors no one who had been subjected to slavery."⁴² Where war was an everyday matter and slavery often the result of conquest, the physical strength that enabled one to remain free from servitude was highly prized. For this reason, the medieval knight was associated above all with the display of physical strength, what one commentator calls "the

strength of a splendid animal."⁴³ His honor was identified almost exclusively with his strength and his external goods, especially his fief.⁴⁴ In the following centuries, however, honor was increasingly internalized. The emphasis on physical qualities and external goods gradually gave way to a new understanding of honor as an internal quality of character, although it remained closely associated with the battlefield.⁴⁵ Honor came to mean valor rather than simple strength.

Still later, as the *noblesse d'épée* was invaded by and integrated with the *noblesse de robe*, the internal qualities associated with honor underwent further change. In particular, the assimilation of the martial and administrative classes within the nobility tended to demilitarize noble mores. As the power and prestige of the robe increased, the ideals of violent mastery and physical prowess associated with the sword were eclipsed by new notions of honorable conduct. Courage continued to be central to honor, but it was combined with qualities suited to the new nobility represented by the peaceful administrator, the moderate judge, the country gentleman, and the *honnête homme*.⁴⁶ This shift was part of a larger movement that one commentator has called a "revolution" in the "political values and practices" of the nobility in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴⁷

The rise of the robe class suggested a novel separation between political power and military might, since the new administrators held effective political control but did not fight.⁴⁸ These civil servants were men of letters, law, and politics, not war, and the nonmilitary ideal that they embodied was more in keeping with the standards being championed by Enlightenment humanists.⁴⁹ The humanist emphasis on letters challenged the military basis of noble rank.⁵⁰ And although *les lettres* had originally been scorned by the high nobility for its "feminizing" effects, the new orientation eventually displaced the warrior ethos as the primary outlook of the nobility in the eighteenth century.⁵¹ This displacement was never perfectly complete or fully conscious, to be sure.⁵² The old warrior honor was not so much abandoned by the nobility as extended and transformed. Although courage remained a constant feature of honor, it assumed new forms that went beyond martial valor.

Montesquieu's concept of honor reflects these historical shifts. It exemplifies the modern domestication of honor in which the martial valor of medieval soldiers was infused with qualities specific to the new administrative class of the *noblesse de robe*. He notes the connection be-

tween honor and soldiering, but his idea of honor also includes the moderation of the judicious administrator, the restraint of the equitable judge, and even the gentle manners and fine speech of the *courtiers*. His *honnêtes hommes* are more men of society and politics than warriors. They have courage, as we shall see, but it is civilized and directed by the rule of law, and moderated by the security of an established constitutional regime. Their courage also is political rather than merely physical, as manifested in the parliamentary acts of remonstrance and the individual acts of civil disobedience that check encroaching political power and protect individual liberty.

Moreover, honor in Montesquieu serves the defense of principle, not simply self-defense or the defense of territory, as the honor of medieval soldiers had done. This innovation to feudal honor was begun before Montesquieu by the Christian church. When the church appropriated the feudal virtues of the medieval nobility, it effected an important shift in the meaning of honor. Instead of using his strength and courage in the service of personal protection or gain, the Christian knight was expected to "defend Holy Church, particularly against the infidel. He will protect the widow, the orphan, and the poor."⁵³ Instead of defending himself or his lord, the man of honor henceforth would defend *the right*. Yet while Montesquieu's man of honor glories in defending a cause, rather than simply his person and property, the code of the *honnête homme* is secular, not religious; it is grounded in social practices and customs, and in a political tradition with constitutional standing. In fact, Montesquieu points out that codes of honor in modern monarchies sometimes oppose the "tribune" of religion.⁵⁴ Moreover, the codes of honor that Montesquieu has in mind do not constitute universal standards of right, as does the Christian creed. Eighteenth-century codes of honor provided concrete rules of conduct regulating specific spheres of activity and particular categories of persons. The connection between honor and principles of right that are both secular and universal came later. The American founders, who pledged their "sacred Honour" to defend the universal principles of liberty and equality, exemplify this modern development, as we shall see. Montesquieu's concept of honor, in which honor as a quality of character is tied to established rules of conduct rather than simply physical prowess, points in this direction but remains more limited in its scope.

So although honor in Montesquieu has roots in the martial valor of

feudal warriors and the piety of Christian knights, it also departs from these roots in important ways. The class of honorable men now includes not just soldiers but administrators and judges. And those with honor pursue glory not simply through conquest but through the defense of principles, and not by defending religious principles but by defending traditional codes of right action, political principles (such as the division of power and the rule of law), and constitutional rights (such as the parliamentary right of remonstrance). Because honor sets in motion the division of political power that moderates government and protects individual liberty, it is indispensable to monarchy, just as virtue is indispensable to republican government and fear to despotism. Without honor, the differentiated structure of monarchy would dissolve into the perfect unity of the unopposed will of the sovereign.

Honor's High Ambitions

The heart of honor in Montesquieu is principled desire, or ambition (*l'ambition*), defined as "the desire to do great things."⁵⁵ Insofar as ambition subverts equality, and therefore unity, it "is pernicious in a republic" (III.7), Montesquieu says; and because it is fearless, the spread of ambition would be catastrophic for a despot. Yet ambition "has good effects in monarchy" (III.7) because of its enlivening influence on the intermediary bodies. Those with honor are more contentious than bipartisan, but this contentiousness serves to divide and so to limit political power. In moderate monarchies, the ambitions of the nobles counteract the ambitions of the king, which is good for individual liberty. Yet as everyone knows, ambition can be low-minded and petty, and countless commentators have faulted Montesquieu for his defense of it.⁵⁶ Indeed, honor frequently is interpreted as nothing more than "ambition in idleness, baseness in pride, the desire to enrich oneself without work, aversion to truth, flattery, treachery, [and] perfidy" (III.5). Readers who take this account of "the wretched character of courtiers" (III.5) as the sum total of honor have missed a great deal, however.⁵⁷ Montesquieu is nothing if not realistic, and he makes no attempt to sweeten honor. The petty vanities of the courtiers are indeed its not-so-distant relations. Yet honor is a complex quality of character, not least because it includes ambition without being limited to the lowest forms of ambition, such as that of the courtiers.

The story of the Viscount of Orte displays the higher ambitions of honor and its complexity:

After Saint Bartholomew's Day, Charles IX having written to all the governors to massacre the Huguenots, the Viscount of Orte, who was in command at Bayonne, wrote to the king, "Sire, I have found among the inhabitants and the warriors only good citizens, brave soldiers, and no executioner; thus, they and I beg Your Majesty to use our arms and our lives for things that can be done (*choses faisables*)." This great and generous courage regarded an act of cowardice as an impossible thing. (IV.2)⁵⁸

Orte's disobedience parallels the "interference" of the *parlements*, although it is more spectacular. Why did he do it? Not from self-interest or civic virtue or solidarity, and not because he applied the principle of "universalizability," as we say today. Instead the story of Orte's courage must be understood together with Montesquieu's definition of honor as a form of personal ambition and even the prejudice (*prejugé*) of each person and each condition for himself and his own (III.6). Orte refused the king's command because he thought too much of himself to undertake such brutality. He expects more of himself than to kill innocents just because someone told him to do so, even his king. He is, so to speak, better than that; he would not stoop so low. He owes it to himself to uphold his code of honor because this is what distinguishes him from those who are simply the instruments of someone else's will, and he is proud that he is more than just that.

Honor is a mixed motive, and the courage of Orte is not altogether different from the vanities of the courtly air. What distinguishes Orte from the courtiers is not that his motives are purer than theirs, in the sense of being more altruistic or more universal, for he thinks of himself no less than they do. If anything, Orte thinks more of himself. It is his high opinion of himself that turns his desire for distinction to this brave act of resistance rather than obsequious social climbing, which is the vocation of the courtiers. The courtiers are obsequious because although they think only of themselves, they think too little of themselves, and so they freely debase themselves. They are ambitious and yet they will put up with anything.

And so Orte's "great and generous courage" reflects his ambition to be someone special. After all, it is no small thing to refuse a king. This am-

bition is an unusual (for us) mix of partiality and higher purpose. The mixed quality of honor explains why Montesquieu says that with honor, "one does not judge the actions of men as good but as fine, not as just but as great; not as reasonable but as extraordinary" (IV.2). What Orte did was "fine" (*belle*) in the sense of being beautiful or admirable. It exceeded average expectations. Honor is something to live up to because it is above average. It is wonderful to see, like a beautiful painting, because it reminds us that there is more to being human than getting by.⁵⁹ So honor is an excellence that "elevate[s] the heart" (IV.3), but honor, Montesquieu says, is not the same as virtue. Thus honor yields "fine" actions but not necessarily "good" ones. For "in order to be a good man (*homme de bien*), it is necessary to have the intention of being one and to love the state less for oneself than for itself" (III.6). The good man or woman has a pure and selfless heart, and does the right thing for the right reason. But that is not Orte, who acted for himself. If he did the Huguenots a good turn, their welfare was not his sole intention. Orte treated the Huguenots not only as ends in themselves but also as the means to his own self-respect and even his distinction. Their plight was his opportunity and he made the most of it.⁶⁰ Thus one must judge Orte's courage not as good but as fine.

If honor is not necessarily "good" neither is it intrinsically "just."⁶¹ Contemporary accounts of honor very often treat it as a subset of justice, but Montesquieu emphatically distinguishes them.⁶² With honor, one judges actions "not as just but as great," for "the virtues we are shown here are always less what one owes others than what one owes oneself; they are not so much what calls us to our fellow citizens as what distinguishes us from them" (IV.2). What one owes others is the province of justice; what one owes oneself is the province of honor. By emphasizing this distinction, Montesquieu reminds us that they do not always coincide. Justice and honor may conflict. What I owe to myself may very well come at the expense of what I owe to you. Nor does Montesquieu provide a clear rank ordering of the two. Moreover, except under despotism, where there are no fixed laws, one usually can act in a just fashion simply by following the law. So except where the laws are nonexistent or very bad, it is possible to be just without making much effort. By contrast, honor calls forth a certain "greatness of soul" (V.12) because it cannot be had so easily. Indeed, "the things that honor prohibits are more rigorously prohibited when the laws do not concur in proscribing them,

and those things that honor demands are more strongly demanded when the laws do not ask for them" (IV.2). Honorable people such as Orte ask more of themselves than what is minimally required by the laws.⁶³ Risk is involved in honor, self-assertion, and the willingness to undertake something difficult. So honor is an effort even if it is not exactly self-sacrifice.

Finally, one judges honorable actions "not as reasonable but as extraordinary" because they interrupt the ordinary processes and resist the constraints that condition our expectations. In this regard, honor resembles Hannah Arendt's concept of "action," although there are important differences as well. Action, on Arendt's account, means asserting one's capacity for what she calls "natality," or new beginnings, against the "automatic" processes of nature and civilization.⁶⁴ Arendt's actions are "interruptions of some natural series of events, of some automatic process, in whose context they constitute the wholly unexpected."⁶⁵ They manifest humankind's "sheer capacity to begin," a strong exertion of agency, because they imply a departure from the given. Honor in Montesquieu is not as creative or "authentic" as Arendt's concept of action, because it is tied to hereditary social codes and fixed laws. But like "action," honor cannot be made routine. It is true that Orte's disobedience is in line with, even demanded by, the laws of honor contained in his code. Yet if the laws of honor can be known in advance, individual acts of honor are more difficult to predict. Honor cannot be "reckoned on" with the same assurance that Hobbes attributed to the need for self-preservation, for example, because individual acts of honor are so "extraordinary" in this sense. Honorable actions are risky, and so call for a greater measure of intention, and therefore agency, than does the automatic response to bodily needs on which Hobbes reckoned. Honor is not radically spontaneous in the sense that it does not produce arbitrary actions. Individual acts of honor are not arbitrary because the codes that guide them are well established, but they are unpredictable because they are so extraordinary.

So honor is ambitious and assertive, and it aims high. It cannot be denied that honor in Montesquieu begins in rank or that it depends partly on public recognition and the distribution of public honors. But the story of Orte demonstrates that for Montesquieu honor does not end with either rank or public recognition. The fact that Montesquieu associates honor with ambition emphasizes the active quality of honor.⁶⁶

Honor as a quality of character requires an act of individual self-assertion that goes beyond rank and recognition, and sometimes even against the authorities that establish rank and distribute recognition. Indeed, the fact that honor cannot be provided by the authorities gives it the independence needed to resist them when necessary. The self-assertion that honor in Montesquieu requires is not the open-ended striving that one finds in a competitive society, but rather the striving to prove worthy of one's appointed station. Honor holds that "when we have once been placed in a rank, we should do or suffer nothing that might show that we hold ourselves inferior to the rank itself" (IV.2). Yet this is not a passive affair, for it may demand actions that are, as Montesquieu says, *belles*, *grandes*, and *extraordinaires*. Moreover, those with honor have high opinions of themselves, which means that they have much to live up to, which makes them willing to undertake risky actions. This explains why the quest for distinction is central to honor. Would Orte have stood up to the king if he could have esteemed himself either way? If doing something exceptional had not been necessary to his sense of self-respect, would he have gone to the trouble? Would he have bothered to risk his life? If we can respect ourselves regardless of what we do, why make the effort that the defense of liberty occasionally requires? In a "well-ordered society," it is true, great acts of resistance to political authority in defense of individual liberties are not often called for. But the rare instances in which they are called for can make all the difference.⁶⁷ The loss of high ambition risks a politics in which, as Tocqueville warned, "each day the appearance of the body social may become more tranquil and less aspiring (*haute*)"—even toward liberty.⁶⁸ The high ambitions of honor stand in the way of such acquiescence.

Reverence and Reflexivity

In a moderate monarchy, those with honor distinguish themselves by defending their constitutional liberties and the principles of right contained in their codes of honor.⁶⁹ Honor is not mere "self-expression" but rather "has its supreme rules" (*ses règles suprêmes*) (IV.2). The codes that give honor its rules, and thus its constraints, cannot be derived from divine will, or natural law, or reason itself. But they are not merely willful creations, either. Instead, codes of honor are grounded in social and political roles, in institutions that have histories, and in collective tradi-

tions with constitutional standing. They are not freely chosen on an individual basis but neither are they handed down by God or nature. Their authority comes from the weight of tradition, and so they rest on the conventional reverence that the members of a society hold for their institutions, traditions, and principles. Codes of honor must be revered in order to provide strong grounds for contesting the abuse of power. After all, who would risk life and limb in defense of principles that could be discarded at will? This explains why Montesquieu says of Orte that he regarded a cowardly action as an "impossible thing." Killing innocents was not only unsavory for Orte, or undignified, but *impossible*.⁷⁰ This is how seriously Orte took his code of honor, how he revered his principles. The categorical quality of honor is tied to the reverence the honorable person holds for his or her code. Somewhat paradoxically, then, a measure of reverence fuels honor as a source of resistance to violations of political right.

Honor's need for reverence distinguishes it from Machiavelli's *virtù*, but there are similarities, as well.⁷¹ Like both the "great men" of Machiavelli's *Discourses* and his "new prince," Montesquieu's *honnêtes hommes* seek glory. And as in Machiavelli, the individual pursuit of glory indirectly produces public benefits. In republican governments, according to Machiavelli, the glory-seeking of princely types contributes to their "tumults" with the people and to "the good effects" that they engender.⁷² In a principality, the pursuit of glory by a single individual leads to the consolidation of power and thus to political stability. Montesquieu wants to divide power, not consolidate it, but the pursuit of honor supplies the defect of better motives in a way that parallels the pursuit of glory in Machiavelli, since with honor each person works for the common good, believing he works for his individual purposes (III.7). The nobility's prideful defense of its prerogatives serves the liberty of all by checking the perpetually encroaching power of the sovereign.

Although honor yields general benefits, those with honor sometimes distinguish themselves at the expense of particular others, if only because, as Montesquieu says, "one excessively great man renders others small" (IV.2). Even aside from the social inequalities that accompanied honor in the old regime, honor is intrinsically inegalitarian in the sense that those with honor stand out from the rest of us and thereby command our respect.⁷³ Honorable persons show up their fellows. Occasionally, they may even make use of their fellows. For this reason, the

concept of honor has been called Machiavellian, "in the morally pejorative sense in which Montesquieu understood it."⁷⁴ Even though Montesquieu seems sincerely to see in honor a "more noble" motive than immediate interest, nevertheless one must admit that the "velvet gloves" of the gentleman sometimes may "conceal claws."⁷⁵ Still, honor does not engender the great acts of terror that made "Machiavellianism" a pejorative term for Montesquieu. Honor impresses and sometimes stings, but it does not "stupefy" others the way that Cesare Borgia's bisection of Remirro d'Orco did, because it does not terrify them.⁷⁶

Honor is less fearsome than *virtù* because it is more moderate. The example of Orte is striking in this regard. As a soldier, Orte initially makes us think of the honor of the medieval knight, with its thirst for military glory and the ambition to conquer and to subjugate. But Orte's ambition does not consist in conquest and subjugation. Indeed, he refuses even to take the battlefield against the Huguenots, much less subdue them. Even his disobedience is moderate, for while he resists his king's command, Orte does not attempt to unseat him. His honor issues in an act of conscientious objection, not a regicide.⁷⁷ Orte's disobedience is counterbalanced by respect for the king's authority, which is what makes it civil. Montesquieu maintains that while "there is nothing in monarchy that the laws, religion, and honor prescribe so much as obedience to the wills of the prince," nevertheless "this honor dictates to us that the prince should never prescribe an action that dishonors us because it would render us incapable of serving him" (IV.2). The fact that honor supports both obedience to the crown and (when necessary) principled disobedience makes it resemble "a force that repels without ceasing all bodies from the center and a force of gravity that brings them back to it" (III.7).⁷⁸ Honor preserves the balance of power that sustains moderate monarchies by maintaining a balance of obedience and disobedience to sovereign authority. Respect for the authority of the crown makes honor's disobedience civil rather than a simple act of anarchy. At the same time, it is only because the honorable man also reveres his code of honor that he is willing to take the risks that civil disobedience entails. Honor thus brings courage together with moderation, as the merging of the manners of the *noblesse d'épée* and the *noblesse de robe* also suggests.

Honor is further distinguished from the virtue of Machiavelli's "new prince" by being tied to particular social codes, political traditions, and a constitutional order. Killing innocents is something that the Viscount of

Orte simply will not do because his code of honor forbids it. By contrast, there is nothing, in principle, that the new prince will not do. He will do anything because there is no standard above him to limit him.⁷⁹ His virtue is his self-assertion; he is a self-made man. This quality of being self-made explains the *newness* of the new prince and his virtue. He should found his own principality, rather than inheriting one, and he must establish new modes and orders rather than binding himself to the old standards.⁸⁰ The new virtue of the new prince is unbounded because of its newness. But honor is old and limited by its past. It depends on the old modes and orders, and this dependence constrains and directs its ambitions. Unlike *virtù*, then, honor has an inheritance consisting of traditional, customary codes of conduct. This means that honor leans on reverence, even though it sometimes leads to political resistance. Indeed, honor's reverence for its codes supports its resistance to encroaching political power.

If honor's history is a constraint from the point of view of *virtù*, however, it is a liberation when seen from the standpoint of Aristotelian magnanimity. Aristotle defined magnanimity as complete virtue directed toward oneself, and distinguished it from complete virtue in relation to another person, which he called justice.⁸¹ Montesquieu's distinction between honor and virtue parallels Aristotle's distinction between magnanimity and justice. Like Aristotelian magnanimity, honor is concerned with what one owes to oneself; like Aristotelian justice, what Montesquieu calls political virtue is concerned with obligations to others (IV.2). The honorable person is like the magnanimous one "who, being worthy of great things, requires of himself that he be worthy of them."⁸² And much as the honorable person "aims for superiority" (V.4) and demands preferences and distinctions (III.7), so the magnanimous one "wishes to be superior" and expects to be recognized as such.⁸³ Thus Aristotle's magnanimous man was concerned with public honors most of all.⁸⁴

Yet Aristotle emphasized that a magnanimous man should be a "good" man, for honor was the prize of virtue, and it was "bestowed only on good men."⁸⁵ Magnanimity without both nobility and goodness was impossible.⁸⁶ By contrast, Montesquieu maintains that those with honor are not necessarily *good*, as we have seen, for one judges honorable actions not as good but as fine. While the magnanimous man must do the right thing for the right reason,⁸⁷ it is enough for Montesquieu's man of honor to do the right thing, even if his reasons are not, morally speak-

ing, the right ones. The honorable man's reasons for doing great things may not be morally pure, for "mores are never as pure in monarchies as in republican governments" (IV.2). The morally mixed character of honor does not mean that anything goes, however. Even though the honorable person's reasons for doing great things may not be morally pure, honor as a quality of character is guided by established codes of honor rather than by arbitrary will. If honor does not require a city of angels, then, neither would it be possible for a race of devils.

The morally mixed character of honor partly explains why Montesquieu sometimes refers to modern monarchical honor as "false honor": "It is true that, philosophically speaking, it is a false honor that drives all the parts of the state; but this false honor is as useful to the public as true honor would be to the individuals who could have it" (III.7). "Philosophically speaking," honor is "false" because it does not presuppose perfect virtue and does not aim directly at the common good.⁸⁸ Honor in Montesquieu is not, in contrast to Aristotelian magnanimity, the "crown" of all the moral virtues. This point emphasizes Montesquieu's distinction between honor and virtue, a distinction that puzzled readers in his own day as much as in our own.⁸⁹ After all, if honor is admitted to be a form of excellence that "elevates the heart," why not call it a virtue? And how can a quality of character that requires virtues such as courage and moderation nevertheless fail to be a virtue itself? The term virtue can be employed without conveying moral value, of course, as when it is used to mean efficacy in fulfilling some function.⁹⁰ Virtue in this sense is related to virtuosity or technical skill, and it has no intrinsic moral value. Montesquieu's concept of honor clearly is a "virtue" in this limited sense, insofar as honor is instrumental to the regime of monarchy. As the "spring" of monarchical government, Montesquieu says, honor "makes all the parts of the body politic move," and it preserves the balance of power and the rule of law that distinguish monarchy from despotism.

Yet Montesquieu makes it clear that honor has more than merely instrumental value, which indicates that honor cannot be contained within the category of virtue as virtuosity. He describes honorable actions as "great," "fine," and "extraordinary," for example, and his reference to the "great and generous courage" of Orte clearly carries moral weight. Elsewhere Montesquieu contrasts honor with the debasement of subjects under despotic government who act "only out of hope for the

conveniences of life" or else from fear (V.17–18). By contrast, monarchy, the regime of honor, gives each subject, "so to speak, a larger space" in which "he can exercise those virtues that give the soul not independence but greatness" (V.12). Finally, Montesquieu's remarks on the corruption of honor indicate indirectly the moral worth of honor in its noncorrupt forms. Honor is corrupted "when *honor* has been placed in contradiction to *honors* and when one can be at the same time covered with infamy and with dignities" (VIII.7).⁹¹ As an example, Montesquieu cites the triumphal ornaments given to informers in the reign of Tiberius, which, he says, "so demeaned these honors that those who merited them disdained them" (VIII.7, n. 10). For these reasons, it is not sufficient to characterize honor as mere virtuosity. Yet honor does not presuppose moral purity or perfection. And to complicate matters further, honor in contrast to virtue is more than merely a quality of character. Honor as a quality of character is also constitutively tied to codes of honor and public honors. To act from a sense of honor involves following rules and seeking distinction, neither of which is intrinsic to moral virtue per se. This explains why the common classificatory division between virtue-centered and rule-governed theories of right action cannot comprehend honor, which contains elements of both. Honor is tied to virtue but remains distinct from it.⁹² Honor is more than virtuosity (although it is that, too) because it draws on some true virtues and may yield others, but it neither requires nor produces complete virtue. And it is constitutively tied to general rules and public recognition, which have no part in virtue traditionally conceived.

The differences between honor and Aristotelian magnanimity reflect Montesquieu's reluctance to endorse in any simple way the idea of nature as a standard. Like everything else under the sun, Aristotelian magnanimity had its place in the natural order. It was important that the magnanimous man also be a good man⁹³ because political recognition should reflect natural deserts,⁹⁴ and this was important because the political order should be commensurate with the natural order.⁹⁵ By contrast, honor is embedded in a social and historical order, not a natural one; in traditions and constitutions rather than cosmology. To be sure, the ambition, courage, and attachment to principle that give rise to honor as a quality of character have roots in human nature. Honor as a quality of character has a natural basis, but honor as a whole is underdetermined by its natural basis because the content of its codes is not

specified by nature. Montesquieu denies that nature determines human ends directly and that it can be a definitive guide for politics. It is true that he opposes despotism, like slavery, on the grounds that they are bad for "human nature" (VIII.8, XV.13).⁹⁶ To the extent that human nature has a role in political standards, however, it is one that is mediated by the "spirit" of the laws of particular societies; by the climate and conditions of a country; by the customs, manners, and religion of the inhabitants; and by their political histories (I.3). Montesquieu does not fully exclude nature from political standards, but neither does he believe that absolute, universal standards of political right are given to human beings fully formed by nature, or that such standards can be taken directly from an analysis of human nature. Montesquieu's skepticism in this regard marks another point of convergence with earlier liberals. Like Hobbes and Locke, Montesquieu thought that the nature of the highest goods was impossible for human beings (even the best human beings) to know with any certainty.⁹⁷ This skepticism leads Montesquieu, as it led Hobbes and Locke, to defend political orders that aim for individual liberty rather than the perfection of the soul, which would require certain knowledge of the nature of the highest goods. In contrast to magnanimity, then, honor has a history. The social codes and political constitutions that underwrite it change over time. And they are human constructs, rather than natural endowments or commands of God.⁹⁸

These considerations illuminate the two sides of honor as a historical phenomenon. On the one hand, the historicity of honor limits it by setting constraints on what one can honorably do. These constraints, grounded in the weight of tradition, distinguish honor from Machiavelli's *virtù* and from mere willfulness. On the other hand, the historicity of honor frees it from what Montesquieu regarded as the determinism of ancient metaphysics.⁹⁹ Even though the Viscount of Orte did not personally choose his code of honor, this code was the product of a long series of collective human choices rather than a dictate of nature or command of God.¹⁰⁰ And so the historicity of honor is simultaneously a constraint and a freedom. Consequently, honor is both a limit on agency and a source of agency, and reverence for its codes makes both its power and its limits possible.

If honor rests on reverence, however, it is far from simple obedience. After all, Orte risked his life to oppose the command of his king, not obey it. Most of the time today a soldier's disobedience to the chain of

command is grounds for a dishonorable discharge, not a mark of honor. This fact makes the story of Orte all the more striking as an example of honor. It disrupts our conventional association between honor and obedience, for Orte distinguishes himself by his disobedience.¹⁰¹ By contrast, obedience is central to the motive that Montesquieu calls "political virtue," which requires that one's particular self be made to obey the common self of the political community. Honor works with our particular inclinations, or at least with some of them, and so cannot be reduced to obedience, even in effect. Similarly, because honor "is favored by the passions and favors them in turn" (IV.5), it does not require a heavy-handed education.¹⁰² The principal education of honor is not in the public institutions where children are instructed. Instead, Montesquieu says that "the world is the school of what is called honor, the universal master that ought everywhere to guide us" (IV.2). The world is the school of honor because the world is a stage for the rivalries and the achievements that inspire (rather than coerce) the ambition to do the "great things" that bring self-respect and public recognition. The particular associations and roles that one inhabits from the time one enters the world shape the standards that guide one's ambition, and provide the recognition that rewards it. By contrast, "in republican government . . . the whole power of education is needed" because the obedience that political virtue demands, its self-renunciation, "is always a very painful thing" (IV.5). For the same reason, virtue needs the continual support of censors. Thus the Spartans were "always correcting or always corrected, always instructing and being instructed" (XIX.16). Virtue needs supervision and enforcement (V.19), whereas honor cannot be enforced because it cannot be forced. For while "it is easy to regulate by law what one owes others, it is difficult to include in them all that one owes to oneself" (VII.10). Honor "attracts rather than orders" in the words of one interpreter,¹⁰³ and this makes it "impressive," for honor can motivate difficult and risky actions that otherwise would require force (III.7).

While virtue can be habitual and even half-forgotten, honor is always aware of itself, for better or worse. Virtue can be forgotten when one is sufficiently habituated to it to act automatically. And political virtue, as Montesquieu construes it, is by definition self-forgetting because it gives priority to purposes other than one's own. But the world, the school of honor, "teaches man never to forget himself," as one commentator puts it.¹⁰⁴ Honor is always aware of itself because it is always self-regarding

and because it is never automatic, since honor interrupts the automatic processes and resists the necessities that constrain us. Those with honor are self-regarding and self-aware *agents*. This self-awareness, or the reflexive character of honor, can be seen in its claim to be the "arbiter" (*l'arbitre*) of its obligations:

Honor prescribes nothing more to the nobility than serving the prince in war. In effect, this is the most distinguished profession because its hazards, successes, and even misfortunes lead to greatness. But, in imposing this law, honor wants to be the arbiter; and if it finds itself offended (*choqué*) it requires or permits one to retire to one's home. (IV.2)

Orte's "great and generous courage" was the result of an arbitration over which he was the presiding judge. He regarded his situation, his orders, and his code of conduct, and he adjudicated the conflict between them (IV.2). The claim to arbitrate one's obligations opens up a field of action not available to those whose material interests constitute their only legitimate source of agency. For whereas we are moved by our interests, as arbiters we move ourselves. Indeed, honor rests upon some conception of human autonomy, albeit not Kant's conception of autonomy. Orte's disobedience reflects an awareness of himself as arbiter but not as legislator: he judges and he executes but he does not *legislate* the laws of honor. These laws are given to him rather than legislated by him, which separates honor from autonomy in the Kantian sense. But for Montesquieu, as for Kant, liberty is possible only if there is more to the self than its material interests and more to action than either a response to necessity or an obedience to command.

Honor's claim to be an arbiter does not make it intrinsically arbitrary, but it does open the door to this possibility. Montesquieu sometimes refers to honor as "eccentric (*bizarre*)," saying that honor "makes the virtues only what it wants and as it wants them: on its own, it places rules on all that which is prescribed to us; it extends or limits our duties according to its fancy (*fantaisie*), whether they have their source in religion, politics, or morality" (IV.2). Yet the eccentricity of honor (leaving aside the special case of its corrupt forms) should not be understood as arbitrary caprice. Honor is eccentric from the standpoint of the king, who cannot control it and whose laws do not define its codes. But Montesquieu emphasizes that honor has "its supreme rules, and education is obliged to conform itself to them," which means that honor is

embodied in publicly known, shared, and socially regulated codes of conduct (IV.2). Honor is not intrinsically arbitrary and capricious, then, but it is independent of the will of the prince as well as the standards of religion, and to some extent those of morality as well. It is precisely the "eccentricity" of honor in this sense that makes it an effective source of the resistance that checks encroaching political power.¹⁰⁵ Thus "in monarchical and moderate states, power is limited by that which is its spring; I mean honor, which reigns, like a monarch, over the prince and the people" and "from that there result necessary modifications of obedience" (III.10).

Still, if honor is not intrinsically arbitrary it can become excessively reflexive, which may be dangerous for political liberty. The responsibility for arbitrating one's obligations may be pushed to the point of license rather than balanced with a measure of reverence for those obligations, and so may issue in acts of arbitrary willfulness. In other words, the activity of arbitrating one's obligations may undermine their power to guide and to limit individual ambition. After all, if Orte can disobey the king, why not also disobey his own code of honor? There is a paradox at the heart of honor, for it presses conflicting demands upon us. It brings together reverence and reflexivity because it requires both, but it does not dissolve the tension between them. This paradox reveals a fundamental tension within human agency more generally. If one's reverence is too complete, then one's actions are nothing more than obedience and so not free. But with perfect reflexivity, or radical autonomy, one has no good reason to act in one way rather than another, and then it is difficult to distinguish one's choices from mere willfulness or simple impulse. In other words, there is a point at which radical choice fades into non-choice.¹⁰⁶ The unchosen attachments, identities, and obligations that constrain our choices also give us reason to choose one course of action over another. In this sense, they support our capacity for choice and thus for agency. The paradox of honor as both reverent and reflexive captures this deep feature of individual agency. By preserving the tension rather than dissolving it, the concept of honor helps us see why a theory of agency that privileges one at the cost of the other is bound to be incomplete. It reminds us that even the self-determination of the modern subject rests on reverence of one sort or another. Honor balances choice with limits on choice. Our limits make our choices meaningful and effective, and if these limits are not to be coerced from the outside (by God or nature or king), they will need to be revered from the inside.

The Partiality of Honor

Honor does not require an abstraction from human partiality but instead makes public use of it. There are two aspects to the partiality of honor in Montesquieu. First, honor is grounded in particular social and political identities that yield specific standpoints and obligations. Honor does not take a universal view. It is not an altogether subjective view, because honor is tied to general codes of conduct that extend its scope beyond the particular case and give it wider bearing than individual interest can achieve. Yet honor always is a view from somewhere.¹⁰⁷ And even though honor is self-serving rather than collectivist in its aims, its beginnings are corporate in character, not individualistic. The substantive content of one's code of honor in Montesquieu grows out of one's condition or membership in a particular social body, so that the same action that would dishonor a noble might have no significance if done by a commoner. Thus honor is "the prejudice" not simply of "each person" but also of "each condition" (III.6). The collective dimension of honor is significant for its role in checking the crown. Individual acts of honorable disobedience carry weight because they draw on the existing recognition and independent authority of the particular intermediary bodies to which individual nobles belong. Thus when an Orte defends his honor against the command of his king, he is more than a solitary man facing off against the state; he is a member of a recognized body exercising a legitimate political prerogative. His association with the traditional authority and prestige of this larger body both makes possible his honorable disobedience and makes it effective as a check on the crown. These conditions constitute part of the equipment of honor. Yet the group identities that support honor are not comprehensive. Honor rests on the multiple shared identities of the "intermediary bodies" of monarchical society, not on the single shared identity of the political community as a whole, and so honor cannot "be linked with a unified vision of society enforced from the center," as one interpreter puts it.¹⁰⁸ The shared but partial identities and social ties that sustain the intermediary bodies of monarchy are crucial to honor.

Honor also is partial in the sense of being based on affective attachments rather than on a form of reason that abstracts from such attachments.¹⁰⁹ Those with honor defend their codes on the basis of an attachment to them as much as a reasoned assessment, which helps explain why Montesquieu calls honor the "prejudice" of each person and each

condition (III.6). Honor is a prejudice because it prejudices the worth of one's principles and one's claim to distinction, rather than arising directly from rational scrutiny of them. The honorable person is self-confident without being particularly self-examining, and perhaps even self-confident *because* not so very self-examining. This is not meant to be a criticism of honor, as the effectiveness of honor in motivating risky action is tied to its partiality in this second sense, which engages the desiring part of the human psyche. Nor does the partiality of honor mean that it is without rational foundations altogether. It only means that rational scrutiny is not the basis of this form of agency, or of political agency in general. So even though Orte did not scrutinize the foundations of his code of honor, Montesquieu does. In his presentation of French constitutional history in Books XXVIII, XXX, and XXXI of *The Spirit of the Laws*, for example, Montesquieu examines the history of the codes of honor of the French nobility, and he evaluates them as to their reasonableness.¹¹⁰ In fact, *The Spirit of the Laws* as a whole is a study of the reasons for different codes of conduct the world over. But the rational scrutiny of the principles that underlie honor is Montesquieu's job, not Orte's. Or at least, it is not Orte's job *in the moment*. In the moment of crisis, Orte's attachments, not his reason, make him act. And this is true even though what he is attached to in this case is an established code of conduct, not something purely private or subjective. Honor itself is not strictly cognitive, but it is bound by codes the rationality of which can be cognitively evaluated. Soldiers should fight fair, for example; they should fight each other, not civilians; they should not kill innocents; and so on. These codes distinguish honor from motivations such as ethnic nationalism, in which the foundation of one's allegiance is blood ties and not anything that is even open to rational scrutiny or justification.

Still, honor is incomplete in the sense that it needs the direction—and sometimes the correction—of impartial reason. In this respect, honor calls to mind *thymos*. Like *thymos*, which Aristotle called the capacity of the soul by which we feel affection,¹¹¹ honor shares in reason even though it is not simply reducible to reason. On Aristotle's account, it was spirited attachments that moved those who guarded the city to defend it bravely. And not only the defense of the city but also the capacity for ruling and the capacity for political freedom stemmed from *thymos*.¹¹² In a similar way, the partiality of honor, its spirited attachments to its principles, makes it effective as a guardian of individual liberties. Yet honor is

incomplete because of its partiality. Without the critical reflections of impartial reason (and the fixed and fundamental laws of constitutional government), honor may find itself defending unreasonable codes, even unjust ones. Honor needs reason, but even when honor is guided by reason it cannot be simply reduced to reason.

Montesquieu's idea is to channel and direct human partiality rather than suppress it. Efforts to suppress partiality usually fail because it tends to come out anyway, and when suppressed, it comes out in uncontrolled and extreme ways. Repression breeds zealotry, as Montesquieu's description of Christian monks and virtuous republicans illustrates (V.2). There is nothing that a religious zealot will not do for God, and nothing that a virtuous republican will not do for the sake of his homeland. Similarly, Montesquieu remarks in passing that "speculative sciences" render men "savage (*sauvage*)" (IV.8). Contemporary usage of the term *sauvage* carried the meaning of ferocious (*féroce*) as well as uncultivated and shy (*farouche*).¹¹³ The suppression of human partiality whether by virtue or by reason leads to extremism and so makes for immoderate and unstable politics. Moreover, it is difficult to suppress partiality without forcing the issue, which means relying on fear, which is despotism.¹¹⁴ The partial attachments and desires that inspire action can be moderated more effectively by being channeled and directed than by being suppressed. Montesquieu's concept of honor channels them by tying individual ambition to established codes of honor and by arranging political institutions in such a way that particular ambitions check and balance one another.

Montesquieu can resist the temptation to suppress partiality because of his conviction that liberty is possible without perfect unity. This conviction explains much of the difference between Hobbes's scorn for pride and Montesquieu's defense of honor. Honor resembles pride, which Hobbes defined as the breach of the precept that "every man acknowledge others for his equal by nature."¹¹⁵ Honor is more principled than Hobbesian pride, because it is tied to established codes of conduct, but like pride honor is a form of personal ambition, a preference for oneself the nature of which is to seek distinction (III.7). Like pride, too, honor sometimes ignores the dictates of narrow self-interest. But whereas honor in Montesquieu serves liberty, Hobbes thinks that pride undermines liberty because it threatens political stability. Pride is a threat to the sovereign because prideful subjects think too much of themselves

and consequently forget the constraints that the necessity of self-preservation imposes upon them, in particular the constraint of perfect obedience. For "the laws of nature . . . of themselves, without the terror of some power to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our natural passions, that carry us to partiality, pride, revenge, and the like." There is, therefore, no "peace without subjection."¹¹⁶ Hobbes hates pride because he thinks that the consequence of pride is the division of power, and he thinks that divisions of power destroy the authority that makes individuals secure. For Montesquieu, too, the consequence of honor is the division of power, but he believes that the division of power is not the enemy of liberty but its best guarantee.

Rousseau also was troubled by the partiality of honor. He thought the desire for distinction a form of enslavement. It divided the individual from himself and from his fellows by making him dependent on the opinions of others. The *honnête homme* was a dissembler for whom "to be and to appear became two entirely different things."¹¹⁷ In other words, *amour-propre* fractured the original unity of the human being and the unity of humankind because honor inexorably seeks honorers, and the "ardor to have ourselves talked about . . . this frenzy to distinguish ourselves almost always keeps us outside ourselves" and in conflict with others.¹¹⁸ Montesquieu does not distinguish between *amour-propre* (what Rousseau disdained as vanity) and *amour de soi* (what Rousseau accepted as authentic love of self) because he thinks that being self-divided can be a source of liberty and not only a form of subjugation.¹¹⁹ Montesquieu does not conceive of the human being as originally whole, and so does not regard the divisions of self that one finds in civil society as a loss.¹²⁰ He does not resist the divided self any more than he resists divided authority in politics, and for him the two are related.

There are some perfectly complete, undivided characters in *The Spirit of the Laws*, to be sure. The first is the despot, whose unlimited will is subject to nobody's opinion. His authority rests on force, not public recognition. In relation to him, everyone else "is nothing" (VI.2) and so there is no one whom he must please. He is not divided from himself because he is the only one who matters. Nor is he self-divided by being an "arbiter" of conflicting obligations, although he may suffer from conflicting appetites, as the character of Usbek in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* illustrates. The despot's personal will is the source of all obligations, and consequently "he does not have to deliberate, to doubt, or to reason;

he has only to want" (IV.3). The government of despotism, too, displays perfect unity; it is uniform throughout because it is unopposed from within, much like the despot himself (V.14). The second complete character in *The Spirit of the Laws* is the virtuous republican. His wholeness is artificial, as it rests on the "renunciation" of himself as a particular being. He is not tormented by a division between his public and his private selves because he has relinquished his private self, but he is made complete only by extinguishing his particular passions. Because virtuous republicans sacrifice their individual interests to the common good, there is no dissembling among them, no conflict between what I want and what I want you to think that I want. There is no conflict because there is no "I" that is separate from the "we."¹²¹ And just as there is no private self among virtuous republicans so there is no private sphere in a good republic as Montesquieu understands it, for everything is public there.¹²² The republican regime is as much a whole as the despotic one; both are perfect unities undifferentiated from within. There is too little partiality here for Montesquieu, who resists undifferentiated politics populated by undivided selves. For him, perfect unity is indistinguishable from perfect subjection.¹²³ As a general rule, he says, "whenever we see everyone tranquil in a state that calls itself a republic, we can be sure that liberty does not exist there."¹²⁴ The partiality of honor supports the division of power in a differentiated and divisive, and therefore limited, regime.

Recognition and Resistance

Although honor as a quality of character is distinct from public honors in the form of recognition and distinction, the two are closely linked. Montesquieu's concept of honor leans on public honors because the honorable person desires public recognition. One can imagine that Orte might have done what he did this time even if, this time, nobody happened to be watching. But probably he would not do this kind of thing regularly if no one ever were to watch. Being seen is important to honor. Those with honor want to be the kinds of persons who live up to their principles and they want to be *seen* as the kinds of persons who live up to their principles. Their ambition has these two sides to it, an internal and an external dimension.¹²⁵ The public dimension of honor provides a measure of accountability. With honor, one respects oneself with reference to a standard; but at the same time, the visibility of honor means

that other people can judge, by the same standard, whether one is right to respect oneself.¹²⁶ Honor is not an altogether subjective condition, both because it is tied to established codes of conduct and because it is in principle visible, even if not every instance of honor is in fact seen.

The fact that honor takes public opinion seriously rather than disdaining it also makes honor political. The political concern with appearances and public acceptance is tied to the this-worldly character of honor. The worldliness of honor moderates it and provides further protection against the potential zealotry of what Montesquieu calls virtue. Honor is not prone to the extremism that comes from locating one's ends in another life. Similarly, if honor has been offended, "it requires or permits one to retire to one's home" (IV.2)—not to fight a holy war. Honor has no zeal for proselytizing; the honorable person does not wish to save the world but only to be able to face himself in the mirror and look his fellows in the eye without shame or regret. Honor is more a civil disobedient, or a conscientious objector, than a missionary.¹²⁷ Its attachment to public opinion moderates its actions; honor does not require the consent of others, but it leans on their goodwill. Of course the desire for recognition is no guarantee of moderation. One has only to think of the violence engendered by the struggle for recognition in Hegel's master-slave dialectic.¹²⁸ More generally, history does not lack examples of immoderate glory-seekers whose hunger for public acclaim led them to extremism and brought ruin on their countries.¹²⁹ Then, too, the desire to win approval may tempt one to abandon one's code if it is unpopular, which could lead to unprincipled and immoderate action. If the interest in public recognition is no guarantee of moderation, however, neither are the limits it provides insignificant. Nor is it possible to fully dispel the dangers that arise from strong exertions of agency without also dissolving agency itself, which would be devastating for liberty.

Although honor leans on public recognition, it cannot be reduced to recognition. The fact that one's honor is tied to one's code and to self-respect gives honor a measure of independence from recognition, or public opinion. Orte's principles will always be there for him to defend even when no one is looking. His code of honor gives him a consistent standard to live up to, and so a consistent foundation for his self-respect, whatever anybody else may think of him, even when nobody recognizes him. These features of honor distinguish it from contemporary "recognition," the sole basis of which is public opinion. To have recognition, one

need only be recognized by others, but one *must* be recognized by them. The problem with substituting recognition for honor is that you cannot be recognized if everybody, or the majority, does not like you or your class or your tribe. But you can honorably defend your principles (and thereby respect yourself) even when you are unpopular. The recognition recommended by some contemporary political theorists is a gift, not a quality of character, whose main players are "beneficiaries," not agents.¹³⁰ And this is a dangerous thing to rely on, especially when the times are against you and your liberty is at stake. Honor's attachment to its codes gives it standards to live up to and so implies a concept of desert that lends it protection from the vagaries of public opinion and political power.¹³¹

The disjunction between honor and recognition is important to sustain honor's capacity for political resistance. As we have seen, resistance is an essential feature of honor despite Montesquieu's reputation as a conservative thinker. He did not favor revolution or even aggressive reform, but the idea of resistance to overreaching political power is central to his understanding of political liberty and moderate government. Both Orte's disobedience and the "interference" of the *parlements* exemplify this element of resistance. The division of moral authority and the balance of political powers partly explains how honor's need for recognition can be reconciled with its capacity for resistance. In modern monarchies, as we have seen, there are three tribunes that are almost never in accord: that of the laws, that of honor, and that of religion.¹³² This competition between authorities may tend to undercut reverence for any one of them, much as the capacity for reflexivity does. A society of multiple and conflicting authorities could never sustain forms of motivation that were based on a pure and comprehensive reverence for any set of standards. Yet honor does not presuppose pure reverence. Pure reverence would be simple obedience, which would not be conducive to individual liberty. Indeed, the unity of authority that characterized ancient republics was partly responsible for the extreme and obedient self-renunciation of republican virtue and was implicated in the immoderate tendencies of republican government. Important as it is to individual agency, reverence, like virtue, has need of limits, and should be taken in moderation. The multiplicity of moral authorities, the division of political power, and the plural sites of recognition in modern monarchical society moderate reverence. Orte's reverence for his particular code of

honor leads him to resist the encroaching power of the king, and if he distinguishes himself in the eyes of his peers, perhaps this is sufficient. He can resist the king's command because he does not need the king's recognition, since he receives recognition from other sources and looks to the authority of other "tribunes."¹³³ As long as the sources of recognition and moral authority are not consolidated into a single set of hands, then honor, which rests on recognition, also can animate political resistance.

Honor is above all a form of personal ambition, but one that is guided and constrained by established codes of conduct. By promising the pleasures of self-respect and public renown, honor makes the defense of its codes and its obligations desirable. Its high ambitions make honor difficult to subjugate and inspire resistance to the abuse of power. Honor reveres the codes that direct and elevate its ambitions, and this reverence both limits and fuels honor. Reverence fuels honor by giving it something to take seriously. Yet honor also claims to be the arbiter of its obligations and therefore to stand above them. This reflexivity makes it possible for honor to resist political authority but also invites resistance to honor's own codes and so threatens the reverence that fuels it. Finally, much as honor balances reverence and reflexivity, so too does it mix recognition with resistance. Together, the fragmentation of political obligation and the attachment to principle explain how honor, which depends on recognition, does not therefore end in subjection. Honor must be seen, but not necessarily by everyone and not only by those in power. Plural sites of recognition and divided sources of moral and political obligation are good for honor as they are good for liberty.

The substantive content of honor is variable.¹³⁴ Codes of honor vary from one society to the next, and even within a society codes of honor may be multiple. Orte's military code of honor, for instance, was substantially different from the code that guided Montesquieu himself as a judge and parliamentarian. As Montesquieu presents it, there is no one comprehensive and universal code of honor. Honor as a quality of character is compatible with a variety of codes of honor. What is not compatible with honor is the rejection of principled action or the denial of human agency.¹³⁵ The features of honor as a quality of character elaborated

here illuminate important aspects of political agency in general and suggest that the significance of honor extends beyond the particular context of constitutional monarchy. The high ambitions of honor remind us that elevated and principled expectations of oneself are crucial to strong exertions of individual agency, and that the desire for distinction can be a powerful source of motivation. Honor's balance of reverence and reflexivity illuminates the productive power of this tension for individual agency, and it suggests that a theory of agency that privileges one at the cost of the other is bound to be incomplete. The partiality of honor emphasizes the effectiveness of mixed motives and self-concern in inspiring political action and supporting political obligations, as against the purity of forms of reason that abstract from partial attachments and the self-renunciation of civic virtue and other forms of altruism. Finally, the mix of recognition and resistance that honor entails suggests that recognition on its own is an insufficient foundation for agency and that the division of political power and moral authority is good for both individual agency and political liberty.

Montesquieu's concept of honor faces a fundamental dilemma, however. On his account, honor can support the balance of power that sustains individual liberty only in the context of a relatively entrenched social order. The nobility's spirited resistance to the crown is possible because it has an independent base of power, authority, prestige, and wealth. Honor requires equipment as well as an ambitious character. The equipment of honor, on Montesquieu's account, includes titles, wealth, political office, established prerogatives, and especially land, because one cannot separate "the dignity of the noble from that of his fief" (V.9). And the independence of the nobility is sustainable only if it is hereditary, as the principle of heredity is needed to protect the nobility from being captured by the crown (V.9). The prerogatives of the nobility must also be exclusive, Montesquieu continues, and must not transfer to the people "unless one wants to attack (*choque*) the principle of the government, unless one wants to diminish the force of the nobility and the force of the people" (V.9). Indeed, the nobility should regard it as the "sovereign infamy to share power with the people" (VIII.9). Although the nobility's "demand for preferences and distinctions" (III.7) can degenerate into empty vanity (VIII.7), Montesquieu sees these social distinctions and political prerogatives as crucial to maintaining the balance of power that protects liberty.

At the same time, however, Montesquieu defends what appears to be a contrary position. He suggests that an inflexible social order is antithetical to political liberty, as "the laws that order each to remain in his profession and to pass it down to his children are and can be useful only in despotic states, where no one can or ought to have rivals" (XX.22). "The political world," and especially a regime of political liberty, "is sustained by the inner desire and restlessness that each one has for leaving the place where he has been put."¹³⁶ Suppressing this natural restlessness is despotic. Moreover, restlessness can be used to good effect if it is harnessed and channeled in such a way as to fuel the rivalries between political powers. This is one reason why Montesquieu advocates venality, the practice of buying offices (V.19). Venality supports the rise of the ambitious and the industrious and so puts political influence into the hands of individuals who are, if not necessarily wiser or more virtuous than others, at least more assertive and therefore more likely to enliven the rivalries between political powers that sustain liberty. A hereditary nobility tends toward "ignorance," "inattention," and "scorn for civil government," which undercuts its effectiveness as a rival to the king (II.4). And the royal appointment of posts or selection by the courtier class gives political prerogatives to persons who are more likely to flatter the king than to offer principled resistance (V.19). An overly fixed social order thus works against the separation of powers because it suppresses rivalries and the personal ambitions that sustain them and prevents persons of "merit" from coming to the fore.¹³⁷ Thus the fixity of ranks and orders needed to protect the nobility from manipulative monarchs also invites its degradation and with it the enervation of honor. The implication is that for honor to operate effectively, the social and political orders must be democratized in the sense of providing more equality of opportunity. Only when the prerogatives that give individuals leverage in contesting political power are open to ambition and merit rather than closed by lineage can honor reliably animate the tumults between political powers that protect liberty. Paradoxically, old-regime honor needs but cannot tolerate a fixed social order. It simultaneously requires and resists democratization.

Honor and Democracy in America

The suggestion that honor must escape the entrenched inequalities of the old regime to preserve itself is unexpected, as honor today most often is associated with these very conditions. The contemporary associations are not altogether wrong, since as much as honor needs a regime of opportunity and mobility, these conditions may also undercut it. Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of democracy in America brings honor's dilemma to the fore and provides a foundation for our investigation of honor's status in modern democratic regimes.¹ Tocqueville shows the consequences of democracy that generate its resistance to honor, but he also shows why democracy needs honor and where in American society honor might be found. To support individual liberty against the twin dangers of majority tyranny and "mild" despotism, Tocqueville seeks to inspire in the democratic character qualities associated with aristocratic mores and tied to old-regime honor. Courage, pride, high and principled ambition, the desires for distinction and self-respect, the sense of duty to oneself, and the love of liberty as an end in itself all prove to be crucial supports for democratic freedom on Tocqueville's account.

Today Tocqueville's interest in these qualities is largely neglected in favor of the more egalitarian and collectivist aspects of democratic civic virtue that are emphasized by his contemporary interpreters.² Tocqueville himself tends to confound the collectivist, egalitarian elements of civic virtue with the more "heroic" qualities tied to honor, an obfuscation that is in keeping with his explicit intention to address modern democracy in friendly terms.³ Yet he recommended participation and civic virtue for the liberal purposes of restraining the power of public opinion,