

## Notes on the Foreword and Introduction to Pierre Manent's *The City of Man*

by David Alexander

In the Foreword to Pierre Manent's *The City of Man*, the illustrious Jean Bethke Elshtain observes that the book does not fit into current categories. She says that Manent demonstrates the multifacetedness of the Western tradition. She notes that his primary concern is a "history of the present, a present that is always a presence." She quotes Manent saying that modern man flees the law given to him by nature, or God, or his own past. He seeks to be a law unto himself and seeks not to be the plaything of the law of nature, of God, or of his own past. By this flight of the one law and pursuit of the other, he makes what he calls History.

We are burdened in ways we cannot acknowledge because any acknowledgment would mean admitting that we are not as free and sovereign as we claim. Modernity was to release us from our nature. We are "obsessed with man and everywhere today people talk about man" but, simultaneously, we deny that there is such a thing as a nature to man or the person. [Note that Charles Taylor makes the same point about our fixation on man in *A Secular Age*, where he writes of the excarnation and the immanent frame of our time, and our culture of authenticity. We live within an anthropocentric *Zeitgeist* in which any idea of the spiritual must be totally constructive and positive and the wrath of God disappears, leaving only His love.]

According to Manent, beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century in England and France, there was a contest between the ancient world of virtue and the modern world of commerce and liberty. The later ultimately won. Manent writes that "the primary intent of [Montesquieu's] *The Spirit of the Laws* is... to weaken decisively the authority of the Ancients, of the idea of the 'best regime,' the idea of virtue, in order to replace it with the authority of the present moment, of the modern experience, summed up in the notions of 'commerce' and 'liberty.'"

The consequent new regime is "the Age of Enlightenment." Manent says about this regime that its active principle is neither Reason nor Nature but the present moment. This present can only be justified in terms of itself. The moment we offer a justification, that moment itself is past. We must never stop to catch our breaths and begin to remember what we have forgotten for, if we did, we would no longer be modern. [NB This reminds me of Hans Jonas's remark that moderns such as Heidegger live in the continual present as if in a state of emergency. Charles Taylor warns of the peril of nostalgia in our position].

Elshtain praises Manent's discussion of virtue as one of the treasures to be found in this "complex and erudite text." Manent observes that virtue was one of the ideas of moral and political philosophy that assured communication between the Greek and Roman philosophy on the one hand and Christianity on the other hand. Though differing in their notions of virtue, there was enough in common to engage one another over. With the transformation of the language of virtue away from the general and what is "in common" to a principle of singularity and particularity exclusively, communication across virtue is destroyed. "The danger and seduction of incommensurability looms." [Put in this context, the stakes of what Taylor calls modernity's "occulting" of its moral sources becomes clearer. The growing rift of incommensurability in our society is tied to a breakdown in a common language of virtue across which to engage each other].

The city-state was the institutional embodiment of classical and republican virtue, but in modernity the city as the locus of civic life is denuded and institutional religion is disarmed in the face of temporal power. Virtue falls into disrepute and is despised as merely a way of promoting "unnatural obedience

to repressive rule.” The modern state’s emergence is dependent on both the legacy of the Greek civic state and the Christian religion, even while the two cities, or the two Romes, are being driven more and more apart.

Manent distinguishes the ancient and the modern in a second way. In classical political thought up through the Middle Ages, bearings are taken from the viewpoint of the actor, citizen, or statesman. Modern man, as constructed from the viewpoints of sociology and economics, takes his bearing from the view point of the spectator. This approach accords no real initiative to the agent. Hence, a paradox of modernity is that we proclaim our sovereignty as a form of restless presentism but we “embrace modes of analysis...that reduce us to entities caught like flies in the spider’s web of social and economic forces.” We end up with laws of history and of economic life, sociological laws, and so forth, but we lose politics and actions. [Charles Taylor notes that the “nomolatry” and “code fetishism” of modern liberal society are an inadequate source for morality. James K. A. Smith sums up Taylor’s point: “In other words, modernity can’t have what it wants on its own terms.”]

Elshtain says Manent’s discussion of sociological viewpoints and economic systems will illuminate why he claims Reason has been abandoned in modernity as well as virtue. Reason is moved from real human actions to the scrutinizing gaze of the scholarly spectator. Manent writes, “Thus the tissue of implicit common deliberation connecting every man to the men he seeks to understand has been torn” and another mini-sovereignty is set up, that of the sovereign “spectator’s viewpoint” which is constitutive of social science. There is no human nature constraining the investigator as humanity, under the anthropological lens, becomes an “unknown X” and the sociological lordling is free to choose his approach from any angle to man as X. This contrasts greatly with the pre-set notion that man is a political animal.

Politics loses any distinguishable subject matter in this “sublimation of the political” because man is refitted to the metrics of sociology and econometrics. Society is fragmented and we live in an age of separations. But behind the official separations, the state grows more powerful and politics is ingested into society in a general sociological morass. As a result, *we can no longer think politically*. In the midst of the inchoate confusion, we are called upon to affirm ourselves, but if the sociological subject or economic man is pushed too far, you find yourself pushing against thin air.

Manent sees Hobbes and Locke as putting the finishing touches on “modern man.” Each reaffirms man as the arbitrary creator of his laws. Manent writes, “You cannot simultaneously destroy ontological perspectives and then try to drive a pylon deep enough into ground you have excavated in order to sustain commitments to a regime of rights.” We are contenting ourselves with a thin tautology: “Man is the being that defines himself by the fact of having rights.” It is thin because the “liberation” has “freed” modern man from the moorings which alone secure and make enduring his liberty. “...severed from being, the notion of human rights by itself lacks ontological density.” In conceiving ourselves as “giving birth” to ourselves we have abandoned that which alone can nurture and sustain us. (Our contingency denied, the claim on us to acknowledge with gratitude God’s providence seems an impertinence, a constraint on our freedom).

### **Introduction: The Question of Man**

In his opening reflection, Pierre Manent notes that guidance by ancient authorities is no longer available to moderns when they attempt to answer the question “What is man?” People today are glad that democracy leaves us free to think about ourselves as we wish, and they often respect religion’s claim to teach man his destiny. However, Manent notes an irony about this modern condition: “Man commands humanity’s attention everywhere today, yet never perhaps since the time of Homer has the

question embodied in the word man been so little explored.”

There are immediately two perilous temptations that we face when we endeavor to answer the question. One is overconfidence which treats the question as simple and an accompanying indifference to the history of ideas. The other is a lack of confidence which is expressed in getting lost in an endless search of history, a resort to pedantry, and it constitutes a cowardly refusal to answer the question.

Manent says we need first to ask what modern man is, but this puts us on guard because we realize that, by asking this question, we cut ourselves off from the prior question, what man is. “How are we able to inquire into what we presuppose?” If man is man by the fact of being modern, then the question what is man no longer arises. Yet one is left to be in perpetual doubt whether one is a man if that is so. Common sense says we know very well what a man is, but, Manent acerbically notes, “Unfortunately, that has not stopped it from thinking or acting as if it believed that a ‘new man’ was being constructed precisely when inhumanity reigned over a quarter of humanity.” Manent paradoxically says the two questions what is a man? and what is modern man? cancel each other out, and it is both necessary and impossible that being a man and being a modern man are one and the same thing.

Manent remarks, “Modern philosophy is founded on this impossibility.” Modern man defines himself by self-consciousness distinct from the pre-modern absence of self-consciousness. In the past man defined himself as a rational animal, but modern man determines himself in a completely different way. Man was commonly spoken of as being this or that or simply being, but modern man cannot be said to be without qualifications. Modern philosophy went so far as to reject the word “man” itself and spoke instead of self-consciousness, mind, the will to power, etc. The old language of being, substance, and genus was eschewed for a newly invented language.

In recent centuries, everything has come to be qualified as “modern,” usually in a way that celebrates the difference between modern and premodern life. Despite the ubiquity of the adjective, to banish it as meaninglessness would be to deny a felt sense within all of us of the superiority and difference of the modern. “We are modern, which means we are ‘historical’...The consciousness of being historical is the central and perhaps also the strangest aspect of the modern experience.” Manent notes that modern philosophy is convinced that the experience of history is the most profound and decisive experience, and he says in *The City of Man* that he is going to examine the paths modern philosophy took to arrive at this conclusion.

### **Summary of Manent’s *The City of Man*, Ch. 1, “The Authority of History”**

Manent identifies the goal as finding the point at which the self-consciousness of being modern is first formulated in explicit terms. Of course, as everyone knows, being modern and being aware of self as being modern begins in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century in England and France. More specifically, it begins in France where the quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns emerges in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. It is Montesquieu whom Manent finds to be the first formulator of what it is to be modern. He notes that Montesquieu’s 1721 book *The Persian Letters* signals the departure of the ancient world and the entrance into the new, and his *The Spirit of the Laws* is the first major philosophical work to take becoming modern as its theme.

In his *The Spirit of the Laws*, “the Ancient-Modern polarity is the world’s wellspring.” Montesquieu differentiates three types of regimes in it: republic, monarchy, despotism. Oddly, despite Montesquieu’s preference for the English regime, England does not appear to fit into his categories. “Why does a philosopher construct such an original classification of political regimes from which he omits the one regime he prefers and which he sees as the regime of the future?” Manent analyses a

“critical passage” at the end of chapter 5 of *The Spirit of the Laws*. He notes that it contains the implication that “we Moderns have found, or ought to have found what we were not seeking, what neither the Ancients nor those who, like Harrington, want to imitate or surpass them, were seeking.” Montesquieu, by opposing “seeking” and “finding,” opposes two attitudes, the former a search for a principle or foundation residing in the nature of things or of man, the later a turning to “what fate brings” in order to turn it to good account.

Montesquieu rejects the rational and deliberate quest for the best regime. He would avert the eyes from the past or heaven above to the present reality. While he is in harmony with Machiavelli in criticizing those who seek imagined republics, “he places the accent elsewhere and even inverts the critique from an active to a passive stance.” Montesquieu’s approach is to avoid going directly to the salutary things, preferring to allow them to appear then to be recognized, and to allow them to produce their wholesome effects.

“The primary intent of *The Spirit of the Laws* is thus to weaken decisively the authority of the Ancients, of the idea of the ‘best regime,’ the idea of virtue, in order to replace it with the authority of the present moment, of the modern experience, summed up in the notions of ‘commerce’ and ‘liberty.’” Montesquieu has to convince his readers of the superiority of the Modern and of modern liberty while avoiding a comparison of the Ancient and the Modern regimes. He has compare in order to establish the superiority of the modern while at the same time eliminating the notions of comparison and superiority. This difficulty is crucial to explaining the complexity of the book. This is reflective of the complexity of the steps reason must make to find its way in a world that is no longer unified by a single principle, that of Nature.

This new regime has been called the Age of Enlightenment but in reality it is lethal to both reason and nature. Its active and sovereign notion is not either of these but the “present moment.” Reason and Nature have lost their place as principles in the world of the emerging new authority. Manent believes that Montesquieu gave the most exact description and the most faithful phenomenology of the Enlightenment. He is the first to examine in theory the idea that reason cannot give a reasonable account of the New.

Montesquieu does not rest content with noting the inadequacy of traditional reason but, instead, he seeks to forge new approaches to re-establish some kind of equality between the new reason and the new world. He seeks to explain the ineptitude of the ancient in order to close off its return. A case in point which Manent focuses on is Montesquieu’s critical analysis of virtue. Montesquieu noted that the political men of Greece under popular government recognized no other force to sustain government than virtue while those of Montesquieu’s day spoke only of manufacturing, commerce, finance, wealth, and history. Manent notes that this seems like a criticism of Modernity but it is actually a radical critique of the Ancients. Montesquieu allows himself bad faith in order to weaken and to do away with the venerable notion of virtue.

Virtue was one of the ideas of political and moral philosophy that assured communication between Greek and Roman philosophy on the one hand and Christianity on the other hand. Both Greek philosophy and the Christian religion held that all men throughout the world are equally called to live according to virtue to the best of their ability, despite great inequalities in their capacities. Montesquieu brackets Greek philosophy, dependent as it is on virtue, and suggests it has nothing to say to the Modern reader.

Thomas Hobbes degraded the notion of the virtues by “politicizing” or “socializing” the virtues, reducing them to instruments. Rather than being ends in themselves, they are reconfigured as mere

means for protecting physical life. Hobbes grounded his claims by claiming they were rooted in “principles of nature” and were universal to man. Montesquieu avoids this formulation, preferring to be content with particularizing virtue by linking it to a particular political regime and avoiding judgment of its universal validity. [Note in contrast Plato’s rejection of “the mean slavery of the particular case.”] Montesquieu ends up suggesting that the fate of all virtues and of the whole of virtue is contained in the fate of Greek virtue thus particularized. His procedure or characteristic move is to particularize and “democratize” the idea of virtue and then to turn the converted “virtue” into the type of all virtue, political as well as moral or religious.

In this approach, the distance between the particular and the general is abolished from the start. Virtue goes through a reduction: first it is bound strictly and inseparably to the specific body politic that was the Greek city and then it is reduced even more to one of the particular forms of the Greek city, democracy. This process causes the general idea to go through a violent compression and consequently we lose the ability to distinguish between a general idea and a particular reality. Previously the human world was interpreted according to the immovable distance between the particular whose existence one could measure and the essence whose general character could be contemplated. The condition of the human mind in the modern world is to be caught in the tension between the particular and the general, the position of causal sovereignty. The new idea allows the human mind to see itself or contemplate itself outside and above this tension.

Manent remarks that Montesquieu has fashioned a fiction which, taken up by Rousseau, was to have a tremendous historical legacy. “The modern understanding, our understanding, of virtue and of moral life is shaped by Montesquieu’s critique of the Greek city.” We have to grasp the key points of this critique if we want to understand fully this fundamental trait of modern moral life. [It occurs to me that this is the point of occultation which Charles Taylor refers to when he says that we moderns have occulted our moral resources]. For the modern, virtue may be admirable but it is never lovable. Where is the eros for virtue?

Montesquieu stresses that what he calls virtue in a republic is love of the homeland which he equates with love of equality. He says that it is a political virtue, not a moral virtue. Montesquieu nonetheless is careful to connect all virtue including moral virtue to preference for the public interest over oneself. “Montesquieu tends to liken the ancient city to a religious order and to identify the political virtue of the citizen with the ascetic virtue of the monk. Thus the two types of virtue, whose conflict had made for the complexity and vitality of the European moral traditions, are melded one into the other.”

Montesquieu seeks to diminish the importance of Plato and Aristotle, but more than this, he particularizes and politicizes all virtue, above all Christian virtue. “The prototype for all virtue consists of nothing other than the preference for the general over the particular.” Montesquieu emphatically underlines the exceptional and non-generalizable nature of the Greek regime, so that their evocation leaves an impression of an improbable, monstrous venture. Manent illustrates on p. 24 Montesquieu’s emphasis on the strangeness of the Greek city. Montesquieu also separates the idea of virtue from its wedding in the Greek mind with the idea of excellence, and he deconstructs the Greek identification of virtue with happiness. For Montesquieu, virtue is the principle of a regime that is particular and singular. It is founded not on mastery of the passions, but the absorption of passionate energy by a unique passion, love of country and of equality. It makes a man neither wise nor happy, it is disconnected from grandeur of the soul, and it is love of a rule that oppresses.

Montesquieu’s idea of a virtue is a truly strange thing, an amalgam of ancient political and Christian virtue in which the constitutive elements have lost their specific traits and have been denatured. European moral life had been organized and animated by the dialogue between the ancient Aristotelian

virtue of magnanimity and the Christian virtue of humility. The two ends are antagonistic but also in solidarity in that the two moral traditions proposed to man that he fulfill his nature by seeking out lofty ends. The rhythm which for a long time held sway in the West was an alternating emphasis on nature (Dante) and grace (Luther). The two facets jeopardized each other. In France, despite its grandeur and beauty, the classical project had in it “something taut, excessive, artificial, and false.” When the artifice was exposed, the attempt to unite the two ancient versions of the “good life” was abandoned. But the artifice had produced the nation-state and this persisted as a remainder. The nation-state would not defer to the authority of either Antiquity. The result was “the supranational society of English, French, Dutch, and Italians, too much citizens to be truly Christians, too Christian to be truly citizens, who find in property, conversation, and commerce those mediating spiritual entities that speak to their situation.”

Nevertheless, many upright minds and noble hearts continue to take their bearings from Antiquity and Christianity. Still, the current that runs through Europe heralds something altogether new and it is a question if it will liberate Europe interminably from “the dead and dying stars” of Athens and Jerusalem. Montesquieu brings to light the common denominator of obedience to rule in the two traditions. He makes them seem like the simple oppression of nature and no longer the education of nature for its perfection, as a means to attain higher goods. The ancient city and the Christian church are classed as equally oppressive and we are encouraged to rest in a polemical dismissal of both of them.

#### Postscript

I have been reading a book by C.S. Lewis lately, *Letters to an American Lady*, and I am reminded of Lewis’s very Christian emphasis on and modeling of humility. At the same time I am meditating on the reactions to the events in Paris and the refugee crisis and the tensions which seem to bring out in more relief the disparateness of the two traditions belittled by Montesquieu. On the one hand there is the pull toward a militant and martial virtue, on the other a pull toward Christian humility and compassion. Lewis though suggested in one essay that we need men shaped like Lancelot, fierce in battle and meek in court. ISIS seems to provide a clear justification and call for warrior virtues. But at the same time, many are adopting intemperate speech toward the refugees and all Muslims and they seem to forget the Christian virtues of humility and compassion. There is a real need to tread carefully. I recall Nietzsche biting remarks against Christianity as being a slave religion and there is a danger of embracing the merciless course he suggested. Much prudence is needed.

PSPS- If you would like to hear a series of lectures by Leo Strauss on *The Spirit of the Laws*, here is a link to them: <http://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/course/montesquieu-i-winter-quarter-1966>.

#### **Summary of Manent’s *The City of Man*, Chp. 1, “The Authority of History”, pp. 26- 36; 36-49**

Manent notes that nature and grace combat one another and he observes that what the church and grace say about the city and nature, and what the city and nature say about them, both tend to strip the adversary of legitimacy and rid it of substance. “To each of the two protagonists, the sacrifices the other calls for are vain.” The offensive edge of the conflict, when pushed to its logical conclusion, means a situation of conflict more or less has prevailed. “For centuries the spiritual forces turned on one another like two grindstones. City and church, nature and grace wore each other down as they went from conflicts to conciliations.” In the remains of the spent forces of nature and grace were left “the confused traces of an almost common law.” On this foundation, Montesquieu worked out his fictitious prototype of a virtue combining pagan political virtue and Christian virtue. His action becomes fitting only based on the reciprocal action of the two traditions. *The Spirit of the Laws* draws its force and meaning from the spent force of the two traditions after the failed effort of the classical age to affirm

the two together.

Montesquieu, however, favors the pagan or civic tradition over the Christian tradition. This should not be allowed to obscure, however, that what matters most to Montesquieu is that a third possibility be allowed to appear which is different and which has a novel authority. Manent praises Montesquieu's admiration of Greek and Roman antiquity, writing, "Since he was supremely capable of understanding all things, he admired in it a thousand beauties that will escape our petty souls." Despite his admiration of antiquity, however, Montesquieu regarded the ancient way of life as no longer a possibility, something irretrievably lost in the past. Up until Montesquieu, recognizing the authority of the Ancients meant admiration of an ever present model founded on the permanent capacities of universal, unchanging Man. The principle of Nature which elicited the Ancients' highest adherence and was the heart of ancient spiritual life, once its authority was rejected, meant the introduction of grave reservations. Manent introduces a note of censure into his admiration of Montesquieu when he writes, "I cannot fathom just how admiration and reprobation could each find a place in Montesquieu's spacious mind."

Montesquieu deliberately veils in irony his critique of virtue. The authority meant to replace the authority of virtue brings with it no new idea of man and his nature, possibilities, or vocation. Manent says Montesquieu was "humanity itself" (which sounds a little fulsome to my ears), and so he could not purely and simply destroy or subvert the image of virtue and the "good life." He destroys the intellectual and political authority of virtue but puts in its place an imaginary "aesthetic," or "historical" authority which will remain in place until the 1960s. Manent says this accomplishment should not be underestimated since the imaginary construct plays a real moral role. "One has only to think of what will happen in Eastern Europe when modern man, inebriated and, as it were, possessed by the sole authority of History and the Future, completely wipes out all ancient images from his imagination and undertakes to bring into existence the unknown quantity of a New Man." (Now that sounds like stronger censure).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau achieves a conversion of Montesquieu's fiction in a way that served the opposite of what Montesquieu intended. Montesquieu re-conceptualized virtue as an unnatural obedience to a repressive rule in order to stir readers away from the past and the authority of Antiquity. However, Rousseau rejected the novel authority of the modern experience and kept the nostalgia for civic and ancient greatness and the Christian taste for equality, and these now began to exert a positive attraction. The "modern" period became the "revolutionary" period.

Rousseau also did not love virtue despite his celebration of it, for he imputes to it cruelty. "Both Montesquieu and Rousseau equally perceive the ambivalence of the law and its cruelty. What makes it odious is also what can make it lovable or rather the object of a strange intellectual desire." The disagreement between the two is a philosophical disagreement over the meaning and place of law. Montesquieu imagines a society where the repressive law that modifies nature would be abolished. Rousseau believes that man cannot live in society without obeying a law that deeply mutilates his soul. Rousseau's repugnance for the cruel law, as he saw it, causes him to flee into solitude (while the lawlessness of his being allowed him to cruelly deposit his own flesh and blood again and again at places they almost certainly died).

For both the ancient philosophers and Christians, "virtue is the subjection of passions to reason, of the soul's lower to its higher parts, an ordering and an order wrought by the soul." In the new virtue and new law, there is a denial of individual nature and it is not clear whether this denial brings with it any higher or lower state for the man who practices virtue. This incertitude is the decisive element in this

new formulation. Montesquieu characterized the Ancients and the Christians as having as their common denominator obedience as an end in itself. Manent critiques this characterization by Montesquieu and looks for a truer common denominator, given that they both have the aforesaid idea of the order of the soul. There is a clear common denominator in the sacrifice of individuality and obedience to law because it is law which may be summed up as saying that the law is formal.

When we deal with the order of the soul, we need to discriminate what order the human soul knows or ought to know: Stoic, Epicurean, Aristotelian, or Christian. For the common denominator, it is enough to specify that the soul, or individual nature, is negated or negates itself in its empirical attachments. This can be said without specifying the content of the soul's order. Since human thinking is inclined to negative determination over remaining indeterminate, and even more so to positive determination, if it is not possible to determine in some small way the soul's order, then, simultaneously or successively, the most rigorous negative formulation and the most rigorous positive formulation will be sought. "Much of modern philosophy has been taken up with this twofold and unified quest."

The action of the two great traditions that constitute Europe can move in two opposing directions. "From the permanent critique that nature and grace, the city and the church make of one another there emerges Law, the Form of law, as the consequence and locus of their discord but also as their common achievement."

The polemical relationship between the Ancients and the Christians out of which the Law arises was explicated and proclaimed by Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes's edifice is founded on the human individual's entitlement to rights. The individual finds his fundamental right in the commanding need he has for survival. His acute necessity for survival is felt in the state of nature, where no state effectively prevails. The idea that every man is a whole sufficient unto himself prior to the existence of law will become a central element of democratic man's self-consciousness. Hence, the genesis of this radical man who is prior to the citizen and Christian alike. Manent describes the new, radical man. "With the citizen and against the Christ, he is of this world; but with the Christian and against the citizen, he belongs to no city of this world." The new, radical man rejects each form of sacrifice. He needs the law, but only to protect his nature as it is prior to the law.

Montesquieu formulates and brings to light the self-consciousness of the Enlightenment. The ancient law, characterized as pure repression, and the new law which serves as a mere instrument to nature, are in some way the same law since each law has no substantial connection to nature. Law can become a mere docile instrument of nature only because it was first nature's pure negation. Neither the repression nor the freedom are essentially connected with nature.

### **Pp. 36-49**

Manent quotes Montesquieu observing that commerce softens mores and he remarks that this is the starting point and the focal point of Montesquieu's interpretation of European history. He suggests that commerce is the one thing that softens mores as a general rule, thus ascribing to buying and selling (or the whore of Babylon) rather than to Christianity the improvement of mores. However, he ends up suggesting a correspondence between "pure mores" and "barbarous mores," both of which are conditioned out of Europeans by commerce. (In this way he seems in hindsight to foreshadow both a libertarian faith in capitalism's ennobling capacities and a postmodern moral fog). Montesquieu "bases himself" on the tastes of his readers who have been formed by centuries of commercial progress and who cherish gentleness and perfection. He substitutes new criteria for virtuosity in place of pagan and

Christian criteria and encourages in his readers the sentimental education which in effect repudiates Plato in favor of the new.

Whoever is sensitive to the gentleness of the present begins to prefer himself to Plato and Antiquity and Montesquieu seeks to persuade him to love what he loves. The gentleness and perfection of mores is the new criterion, not their purity (This reminds me of John Henry Newman's discussion of the gentleman in *The Idea of the University*, who can have a refined sensibility while at the same time being lost and unredeemed, and barred by his pride in his refinement). Montesquieu holds that the natural effect of commerce is to lead to peace. "Ancient virtue's logic of war gives way to the logic of peace of modern commerce." Man thus has the two successive guises of warrior and merchant and Montesquieu does not ask which one is the truer face of man.

Montesquieu does not describe commerce as "according to nature" in diametrical contrast to ancient virtue, which he condemns as "contrary to nature." Montesquieu's 19<sup>th</sup> Century disciples, such as Benjamin Constant, did not refrain from claiming that the passage from war to commerce was rooted in human nature itself. Manent notes that Constant "commercializes war much more than he renders commerce warlike" and sees the history of humanity as "contained in man's acquisitive nature." Unlike Constant and Adam Smith, Montesquieu does not see man as commercial by nature. Instead he sees commerce as less an activity than a reaction to geographical necessity and the demands of sterile nature. Virtue becomes a means to the end of economic commerce which is driven by the need to survive.

For Thomas Hobbes, the moral virtues are not ends to be sought in themselves, but a means of self-preservation, and Montesquieu's vision of commerce concretizes Hobbes's theory. "In the commercial cities the birth and maintenance of the body politic are rooted in the individual's desire for self-preservation." The citizens of the warrior cities possessed virtue in order to know how to die and the citizens of the commercial cities possess virtue in order to know how to survive. In both cases, however, the virtues are ordered solely in terms of preservation. The preservation of the warrior group often entails the sacrifice of the individual. For Montesquieu, what makes the cause of commerce necessary and good is that it is rooted in "violence and harassment" which are fled from. The founders of commercial cities are outcasts, exiles, and refugees who no longer have any land on which to subsist. Commercial activity is remarkable in not having or needing territory of its own.

Political bodies ordinarily are defined by geographical borders. Self-sufficiency is the very goal of the city, except for the commercial city. Commercial cities draw their subsistence from outside of themselves. Commercial activity robs the distinction between interior and exterior of its hitherto decisive importance.

Hence, Montesquieu discards the presupposition behind the classification of regimes by antiquity which took for granted definable boundaries. "The analysis Montesquieu offers of commercial cities shows that they function morally, socially, and politically in essentially different ways than do other political bodies that always tend to be warlike," Manent notes. The principle or belief of the new regime of political life could be said to be that good results are attained in politics by fleeing evil rather than by pursuing good.

Montesquieu is certain that the benefits of commerce can be generalized and that this generalization is the salutary moving force of European history. Manent says that he "shows" this and that he "leaves no doubt" of it in "what is perhaps the most important chapter in *The Spirit of the Laws*, chapter 20 of

book 21, entitled ‘How Commerce in Europe Penetrated Barbarism.’” Montesquieu starts from “lending at interest,” and its condemnation by Aristotle and the Schoolmen. Montesquieu regards lending at interest as necessary and its prohibition as leading to “usurious” rates. He allows for religious negative judgment with respect to lending at interest, but he says that it must only be expressed as a counsel of perfection and not promulgated as law. The prohibition produces its aggravation, which is usury, and so Montesquieu concludes that “extreme laws for good give rise to extreme evils.”

Because of the Christian prohibition of lending at interest, it became the special province of the Jews, who profited from it, thereby arousing the envy of princes, which led to pogroms and atrocities. The Jews then found the means for saving their possessions by inventing letters of exchange, according to Montesquieu, enabling them to avoid violence, “for the richest trader had only invisible goods, which could be sent everywhere and leave no trace anywhere.” The Jews became a commercial city, which could be present everywhere and whose wealth was nowhere visible. Thanks to the letter of exchange, commerce becomes more and more universalized. To Montesquieu, commerce has the good effects that religion has of softening mores of subjects and princes, but it lacks the bad effects of religion of “dividing” human life and “establishing a second sovereignty” and of “nurturing fanaticism.”

Necessity corrupts the good and corrects the evil. Montesquieu’s council in effect is that, since necessity will always be at work among men, the more judicious and salutary regime of action is one which does not humiliate necessity by affirming the good but rather knows in a humble way how to make of it a permanent ally and to benefit from its boundless energy.

Once the ingenious method of payment, the letter of exchange, is invented, commerce tends to become invulnerable. The indefinite alteration of good and evil is replaced with the moving force of progress. Commerce is most recommended to observers by the cumulative character of its effects. Invisible wealth spreads and consolidates and the motives princes have for misbehaving lose ground little by little. Collapse of exchange or retaining of credit excommunicate the criminal prince from reasonable society. Modern princes have recourse less and less to the great coups and spectacles that Machiavelli had urged princes to make. This is because they have much greater interest in conducting themselves in a decent way compared to their ancestors.

Montesquieu makes every effort to show the positive effects of commerce, but he is not interested in indicating the source or root of commerce in the human soul. He never describes commerce as the expression of a positive natural desire (in contrast to Benjamin Constant’s stress on acquisitiveness and Adam Smith’s stress on the desire of bettering one’s condition). Man is not a commercial animal in Montesquieu’s view in the sense that he is a political animal in Aristotle’s view.

The regime, whether civic or Christian, before the 18<sup>th</sup> Century for European man was one in which the wellspring of human action is the quest for the good and hence for the best. The regime after that was one where what matters above all is to flee from evil. If we take our bearings from nature we can hardly understand how it can present two so contrary faces. These two possibilities which succeed one another and exclude one another cannot be brought back to the unity of nature. They show the inadequacy of the concept of Nature and the classical philosophy rooted in Nature. Hence, Montesquieu’s failure to give a rigorous answer in terms of Nature is not a problem, according to Manent.

“Modern liberty is not moved by the attraction of the good or the best, but by a force that comes from

behind: the fear of evil, real or imaginary, the 'feeling of ills.'" A moral effect of commerce is to replace the fatal weakness of monarchy, its propensity to succumb to tyranny, with a restless vigilance in an extreme freedom. The moral effects of commerce are also, however, not all favorable to the greatness or the happiness of man in his nature.

The classification of political regimes according to their greater or lesser conformity to nature gives way to the succession of the two great regimes of law and liberty. History, and no longer Nature, is the umbrella under which the two regimes are joined in their succession. "The modern experience is forever severing itself from the past and dividing the past and future world in terms that reinforce their separation." Modern man is methodically intent on taking all steps that are destined to free him from all discomfort. He is concerned only with the instruments of his emancipation and the obstacles to it. Nothing holds him back now. "He has become a runner and will go on running until the end of the world." The man who wishes to expiate his fault now wishes to escape from discomfort and guilt. As part of the unencumbering of the modern man, the family becomes closed. Whereas disobeying the law is common to mankind, modern man is distinguished by making fleeing the law the sum of his whole experience.

Manent raises in closing the question whether this affirmation of History as the ultimate element and Whole does not denature the modern experience. "Modern consciousness negates the ancient regime of life under the law in the name of nature and at the same time it negates nature in the name of liberty." Because of its unawareness of this, it has a singular confidence and capacity to be diffused. This is a duplicity and a contradiction. Does not modern philosophy, with its ever more radical historicity, remain deceived about this duplicity?