

**“The politics of distinction or oppression? Rousseau against Montesquieu on
the relation between honour and liberty”**

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The politics of distinction or oppression? Rousseau against Montesquieu on the relation between honour and liberty

Is action motivated by a desire for honor compatible with liberty? Philip Pettit argues that in securing persons from domination republican institutions also protect their honor. The republican conception of freedom as non-domination is superior to the liberal view of freedom as non-interference in this crucial respect. Republican institutions protect persons from humiliation because they recognize that even in the absence of interference domination poses a serious threat to someone's sense of self-worth insofar as this sense depends on social recognition.¹ In contrast, Pettit cites Isaiah Berlin who distinguishes freedom as non-interference from the demand for social recognition. Those who follow this line of argument, argues Pettit, must necessarily conclude that "it is possible to get rid of interference without yet getting rid of humiliation."² In contrast, republican institutions recognize that "honor is a basic human good."³ According to republicans a person's honor is necessarily tied to her liberty and vice versa. More recently Sharon Krause has argued that action motivated by a desire for honor may be necessary for protecting individual liberty. She relies on Montesquieu's account of aristocratic honor to make the point that in the rare cases where great acts of resistance to political authority are called for, action motivated by honor "can make all the difference."⁴ In fact, "the spirited defense of liberty once was explained as a point of honor", she states, "as when the first Americans pledged to defend their independence with 'our lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.'"⁵

Though both Pettit and Krause point to the close relationship between honor and the defense of liberty, however, it appears that what they mean by honor is quite different. For Pettit a person's honor is annihilated when she is excluded from the ranks of those capable of public esteem, and consequently of self-esteem. Though "people differ...in how far they are thought worth listening to", he argues, "to be deprived of honor is to be denied the possibility of ever figuring in the esteem stakes."⁶ Insofar as Pettit refers to honor as a basic human good his conception of honor resembles the modern idea of *dignity*, understood as the indisputable worth of every human being.⁷ It is precisely this understanding of honor that Krause wishes to challenge. She argues not only that the two cannot be equated but that they *ought not* to be equated. Modern democratic societies are hostile to honor not only because of its aristocratic pedigree but primarily because of honor's relation to inequality. "Public honors are always distributed unequally" and they ought to be because it is only in this way that they can inspire us,

¹ Philip Pettit, "Freedom with Honor: A Republican Ideal", *Social Research* 64 (1997), p.53

² Ibid, p.57

³ Ibid, p.53

⁴ Sharon Krause, "The Politics of Distinction and Disobedience: Honor and the Defense of Liberty in Montesquieu", *Polity* 31 (1999), p.480

⁵ Sharon Krause, *Liberalism with Honor*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002, p.1

⁶ Pettit, "Freedom with Honor", p.52

⁷ "The underlying premise of human dignity is that everyone shares in it." See Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" (p.27) in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

she argues.⁸ One possesses dignity by the very fact of being human, but one does not possess honor in this way. Krause points out that “everyone has dignity and has it in the same measure inherently...Dignity conceived in this way is impossible to lose.”⁹ Liberal democrats are thus called upon to acknowledge that dignity and honor are not identical phenomena, for “the ideal of dignity is a normative standard, not a motivation, or a quality of character, or a source of agency.”¹⁰ Honor, on the other hand, is all of those things. Because there is “no necessary connection...between intrinsic dignity and individual agency” the ideal of dignity cannot motivate action in its own defense.¹¹ According to Krause a society that is normatively committed to dignity and non-domination, therefore, requires the motivating force of honor.¹²

What is interesting about this disagreement is that both Krause and Pettit point to a political tradition that understood the defense of liberty as a point of honour. And yet, Krause seeks to divorce honour from dignity while Pettit implicitly suggests that honour is the same as dignity. In this paper I turn to a similar disagreement between two figures of the French Enlightenment, namely Montesquieu and Rousseau. Montesquieu argues that honour can serve the cause of liberty whereas Rousseau appears to hold the opposite opinion, namely that the desire for distinction is harmful to liberty. And yet, according to Rousseau the desire for distinction has the same source as the desire for equal consideration, or dignity, namely self-love or *amour-propre*. So in criticizing the type of honour that Krause defends Rousseau in fact wishes to show that this kind of desire is incompatible with both dignity and liberty. He wishes to show that it is a corrupted form of self-love that results in the annihilation of liberty rather than its preservation.

Liberty and the love of honour in *The Spirit of the Laws*

Montesquieu argues that liberty is not the preserve of any form of government, though it is often thought to exist in democracy. People normally identify a government as promoting liberty if it suits their “customs” or “inclinations”, he says.¹³ This means that they differ greatly in their definitions of liberty. For example, “for a certain people, liberty has long been the usage of wearing a long beard.”¹⁴ The case is that of Russia under Peter I who introduced a law that “obliged the Muscovites to shorten their beards” in an effort to make them appear more

⁸ Krause, *Liberalism with Honor*, p.2

⁹ *ibid*, p.15

¹⁰ *ibid*, p.16

¹¹ *ibid*,

¹² I take it for granted that dignity necessarily presupposes an understanding of freedom as non-domination. A society that is normatively committed to dignity rejects the institution of slavery *on principle*. The same cannot be said of a society that is committed only to freedom as non-interference.

¹³ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne M. Cohler et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2004, [XI.2, p.155]

¹⁴ *Ibid*, [XI.1, p.154]

European.¹⁵ The law was experienced as tyrannical because of the violence required in enforcing it. One way in which liberty has been defined, therefore, is in opposition to violent acts of power. Another way has been to identify it with a certain form of government. Democratic government is thought to promote political liberty because “the laws seem to speak more and the executors of the laws to speak less.”¹⁶ This observation is consistent with liberty defined in opposition to violent acts of power. The need for violence to enforce certain decisions suggests that the populace is unwilling to accept that decision of its own accord. It suggests a hostile relationship between a people and its government. Democracies are thought to promote liberty because the people as a whole hold sovereign power and “seem to do what they want.”¹⁷ Violent acts of power are not required because the people rules itself and follows its own inclinations.

But Montesquieu qualifies this picture of democracy twice with the word *seem*. He does not endorse either the idea that in democracies the laws are always more authoritative than the executive *or* the idea that the people always do what they want. “Democracy and aristocracy [i.e. republican governments] are not free states by their nature”, he states. Political liberty “is found only in moderate governments...where power is not abused.”¹⁸ He further explains that liberty is not the same as independence, or doing what one wants. Rather, it is the freedom to do whatever the laws permit. Political liberty is not the absence of all constraints on action but only the absence of extra-legal constraints. Laws cannot grant any citizen the right to disobey them because then all other citizens would have the same right given their equal status as citizens. If this were the case there would be no law and nothing to prevent citizens from attempting to subject their fellows through violence. Liberty understood as the absence of extralegal constraints is thus consistent with liberty understood as the absence of violent acts of power. It also corresponds with Montesquieu’s definition of liberty of the citizen as “security, or...one’s opinion of one’s security.”¹⁹ The citizen can be free in this way only if power is divided as it was in the case of England.

Though Montesquieu treats the English constitution as the model of political liberty this case does not fit easily in the threefold typology of regimes that he advances in the first ten books. Prior to his discussion of political liberty in book eleven, Montesquieu classifies all forms of government as either republican, monarchic or despotic. He distinguishes these in terms of their *nature* and *principle*. The nature of a government is identified according to the “idea [of it]...held by the least educated of men.”²⁰ This results first in a distinction between the rule of many (republican) and the rule of one (monarchic and despotic), and then a further distinction between the rule of one according to “fixed and established laws” (monarchical) and the rule of one “without law and without rule” (despotic).²¹ The nature of the government, then, corresponds to the institutional structure of the state and its principle to the human passion that

¹⁵ Ibid, [XIX.14, p.316]

¹⁶ Ibid, [XI.1, p.154]

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid, [XI.4, p.155]

¹⁹ Ibid [XII.1, p.187; see also 11.6,p.157]

²⁰ Ibid [II.1, p.10]

²¹ ibid

animates that structure. Each form of government has a principle uniquely suited to its nature that makes it function effectively as what it is. Virtue is the principle of republican governments, honour the principle of monarchies, and fear the principle of despotic governments. Clearly fear is a passion but so are honour and virtue. Honour is the desire for distinguishing oneself and virtue is love of the laws of one's country. The case of the English constitution, however, does not fit easily in either of these three categories. In one case Montesquieu calls it a "nation where the republic hides under the form of monarchy" but he explicitly denies that its principle is virtue.²² On the other hand, in book eleven he speaks of England as a monarchy but does not suggest that its principle is honour. This case and the interpretive problem that it raises has been discussed at length in the scholarly literature and I do not intend to reproduce these debates here. But it does bear on the present topic in one specific respect.

The English constitution provides the model of political liberty because it is "the only nation in the world whose constitution has political liberty *as its direct purpose* [*my emphasis*]." ²³ In contrast, the other European monarchies, which are animated by honour, aim "for the glory of the citizens, the state, and the prince."²⁴ In what way, then, is political liberty related to honour, or the desire for distinction? My argument is that what Montesquieu means when he calls England 'the model of political liberty' is that the English constitution provides the clearest example of how to distinguish correctly between the three types of power found in every state. These are the legislative, the executive and the judicial. It also provides the clearest example of how to balance these properly in order to moderate the exercise of power. The English, in contrast to other states, have been able to do this properly precisely because the aim of their constitution was political liberty, or the moderation of power. What they wanted out of government, in other words, was liberty. Montesquieu distinguishes between political liberty in relation to the constitution and in relation to the citizen. Political liberty in relation to the constitution refers to the separation of powers in such a way that each power checks the others. Political liberty in relation to the citizen, on the other hand, is that citizen's opinion of her security. While not all constitutions possess political liberty to the same degree citizens may nonetheless be free to the same degree. This possibility exists precisely because Montesquieu distinguishes political liberty in relation to the constitution from political liberty in relation to the citizen. The citizen's liberty has to do with the *probability* of being subjected to violent acts of power, whereas constitutional liberty has to do with a structural arrangement of powers in the state. As Montesquieu puts it: "It can happen that the constitution is free and that the citizen is not. The citizen can be free and the constitution not."²⁵ The case of England provides the model of political liberty in relation to the constitution as well as strong proof for Montesquieu's thesis that the three powers must never coincide in the same office, whether this be a person as in the case of the Ottoman Empire, or a body of magistrates as in the Italian Republics. In contrast, in the European monarchies "the prince has the executive and the legislative power, or at least a part of the legislative power, but he does not judge."²⁶ While they, unlike England, may not aim

²² *ibid*, [V.19, p.70]

²³ *ibid*, [XI.5, p.156]

²⁴ *Ibid*, [XI.7, p.166]

²⁵ *Ibid*, [XII.1, p.187]

²⁶ *ibid*, [XI.11, p.169; see also XI.6, p.157]

at political liberty their dedication to glory nonetheless “results in a spirit of liberty that can, in these states, produce equally great things and can contribute as much to happiness as liberty itself.”²⁷ Montesquieu clearly suggests, therefore, that honour and liberty are compatible.

In fact, he suggests that honour is necessary for the preservation of liberty in monarchies because it serves to moderate the prince’s power. This point can be seen most clearly by contrasting monarchy with despotism. Despotism acts as the negative image of both effective government and liberty. Though Montesquieu does not raise the issue of *political liberty* until book eleven, the contrast between liberty and despotism is present from the beginning of the work. In fact, Montesquieu’s thesis that liberty is the preserve of moderate governments underlies his distinction between monarchy and despotism. In both cases the government is defined as the *rule of one*. But a monarch is different from a despot because the former rules according to fixed laws while the latter rules according to his own caprice. While neither the monarch nor the despot is himself bound by law, the exercise of the sovereign will is different in each case. In despotic governments power serves the whims of the prince and its goal is to fulfill the prince’s every desire. His will cannot be known until the prince expresses it because to know it beforehand is to suggest that the prince is somehow bound by something outside of himself and more authoritative than his will. As the prince’s will cannot be bound so his power, whose purpose is to execute it, cannot be limited: “...the prince’s will, once known, should produce its effect as infallibly as does one ball thrown against another.”²⁸ Under despotism everything in the state is reduced to the status of a mere instrument to the prince’s will, resembling an automaton. In practice this means that despotic power must operate through the threat of violence, or through the passion of *fear*. The despot’s power is simply his ability to kill. Under despotism, Montesquieu claims, “man is a creature that obeys a creature that wants.”²⁹ Though this type of government can be moderated in practice, especially through the influence of religion, its ultimate tendency is to annihilate all obstacles to the prince’s will through violence. This is not the case with monarchy. Since the monarch rules according to fixed laws the presence of intermediary bodies that aid him in administering the state becomes both possible and necessary. It is possible for these bodies to exist because the will of the prince need not be continuously expressed in order to be known. It is necessary for them to exist in order to prevent the monarch’s will from becoming despotic and self-defeating.

In general terms, intermediary bodies are distinguished by their service to the prince. They occupy a middle position between the people who merely obey and the prince who commands. While “there is nothing in monarchy that laws, religion, and honour prescribe so much as obedience to the wills of the prince”, intermediary bodies such as the nobility obey by *servicing* the prince in administering his state.³⁰ Service is distinct from passive obedience because it implies agency, responsibility and merit. Being an instrument of another’s will, as in the case of despotism, suggests that one has neither agency nor responsibility for one’s actions. It also suggests that one is not distinct from anyone else in terms of merit because despotic power operates at the lowest common denominator, namely fear of death. In contrast, monarchical regimes distinguish their subjects according to rank. The status of intermediary bodies is

²⁷ *ibid*, [XI.7, p.166]

²⁸ *ibid*, [III.10, p.29]

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ *ibid*, [IV.2, p.33]

guaranteed by prerogatives, or rights distinct to each rank and fixed by the state's laws. "If you abolish the prerogatives of the lords, clergy, nobility, and towns in a monarchy" Montesquieu states, "you will soon have a popular state or else a despotic state."³¹ Since it is these prerogatives that define and distinguish each intermediary body, their abolition would lead to the concentration of power either in the hands of the people or in those of the prince. Due to the presence of intermediary powers the monarch's authority is exercised differently from that of the despot.

In both cases power must flow downwards in order to enable action in accordance with the prince's will. Under despotism the prince's authority is transferred fully to the next node in the chain of command. The authority of the agent entrusted with executing the prince's will cannot be limited since there is nothing that defines his function but the fact that he must satisfy the prince's whims. In this way the agent becomes a stand-in for the sovereign ruler. The same is not true in monarchy. Because intermediary bodies with fixed administrative functions exist the prince need not transfer his authority fully to the next node in the chain of command. The monarch "distributes his authority in such a way that he never gives a part without retaining a greater part. Thus, in monarchical states individual governors of towns are not so answerable to the governor of the province as not to be even more answerable to the prince."³² Under despotism authority flows down a chain of command in which each power is fully dependent on the one above it. The relationship between a provincial governor and the governor of a town is identical to the relationship between the despot and everyone else. In monarchy, on the other hand, the chain that links the monarch with his subjects is not one of perfect subordination of powers. Rather, each power is responsible both to the one above it *and* to the prince. No power has complete authority over another. As it flows downwards monarchical authority is moderated because it is divided. Its only point of unification is the prince himself and no body in the state can represent the sovereign authority except for the prince. The weakness of despotism lies in the despot's tendency to annihilate all agency in order to establish absolute control over his state. Since no part of the state ought to act without being empowered by the prince's *current* will there can be no intermediary bodies or ranks under despotism "for, if those who had no current employment nevertheless had prerogatives and titles, there would be men in the state who were great in themselves, and this would run counter to the nature of this government."³³ Under monarchy intermediary bodies are defined not by their current service to the prince but by their ability to serve him whenever they are needed, i.e. by their merit and responsibility. In this way they enjoy an existence that is independent of the prince's current will or desires. Liberty exists in monarchies because of the way in which sovereign power is exercised, i.e. because of the moderating effects of intermediary bodies.

What makes it possible for intermediary bodies to enjoy an independent existence is *honour*, the animating force of monarchical government. Honour is closely related to ambition, or the desire for distinguishing oneself. Its nature is to "demand preferences and distinctions."³⁴ It is uniquely suited to monarchical government which favors inequality. Though the same can be said of despotic government Montesquieu explains that honour cannot be its principle both

³¹ *ibid*, [II.4, p.18]

³² *ibid*, [V.16, p.66]

³³ *Ibid*.

³⁴ *ibid*, [III.7, p.27]

because it is in the nature of such action to scorn life, and because honour has its own caprices and cannot endure those of another. Though Montesquieu calls honour a “prejudice” of one’s condition and even “false”, this does not mean that he is not serious about its useful role in preserving the spirit of liberty by acting as a bulwark against the monarch’s caprice. Montesquieu is forthright about the fact that honourable action is motivated less by “what one owes others than what one owes oneself.”³⁵ In other words, an honourable man is not a virtuous man or a socially responsible one. Honourable action is not identical with just, good or even reasonable action. Rather, it is about noble or beautiful action, a kind of action that shows one to be superior to others or that inspires awe. For example, the code of honour praises frankness, or truthful speech. “But is this for the love of truth?” Montesquieu asks, “Not at all. It is desired because a man accustomed to speaking the truth appears to be daring and free. Indeed, such a man seems dependent only on things and not on the way another receives them. This is why, commending this kind of frankness here, one scorns that of the people, which has for its aim only truth and simplicity.”³⁶ Frank speech is considered admirable, therefore, not because it is socially useful and shows one to be concerned with the good of others. Rather, it is considered admirable because of what it shows about the opinion that the agent has of himself. This opinion shows him to be entirely unconcerned with the good of others in fact. He appears unconcerned with whether his words offend or harm them. The aim of such action is to project an admirable opinion of oneself upon others, not to show oneself concerned for their well-being. The fact that one scorns the simplicity of the people suggests as much. For among the common folk truth-telling is a social, or other-regarding virtue. It is admired not because the truth-teller is superior to others but because he is concerned about their well-being.

While honour is distinct from virtue and in fact incompatible with it, however, it is useful for moderating the prince’s power. Precisely because honour is a prejudice insofar as it suggests that one ought to be admired or preferred *over others* it can act as a bulwark against the possible caprices of sovereign power. Thus, while the code of honour dictates that a nobleman must obey his king, it also dictates “that the prince should never prescribe an action that dishonours us because it would make us incapable of serving him.”³⁷ Unlike the common man who obeys the prince but does not serve him, the nobleman obeys the prince by service. This is what distinguishes the nobleman as a man capable of honour, his *merit* or his ability to serve the prince. This means, however, that the prince cannot demand something dishonourable. It is in this sense that “honour...reigns like a monarch over the prince and the people.”³⁸ While several scholars have correctly pointed out that it is doubtful whether the prince is himself subject to the requirements of honourable action, he nonetheless remains bound by these requirements with respect to the demands that he can make on his subjects. The nobleman considers dishonourable action demanded by the king to be impossible. Undertaking such action would show the nobleman to be merely another common man, a man who simply obeys sovereign commands. Such men are not capable of serving the king and therefore dishonourable action in the service of the king is impossible. Monarchies preserve the spirit of liberty, then, insofar as those who serve

³⁵ *ibid*, [IV.2, p.31]

³⁶ *ibid*

³⁷ *ibid*

³⁸ *ibid*, [III.10, p.30]

the king are not reduced to mere instruments of his will. They are not identical with the subjects of a despotic prince.

The case of despotism suggests that Montesquieu defined liberty as the absence of unlimited acts of power. Despotism in its pure or abstract form provides evidence for the character of power as Montesquieu understood it. Power is by nature oppressive and operates according to a single principle, namely fear of death. It is for this reason that Montesquieu calls despotism the most *natural* form of government, i.e. the most natural form of power. When not bound by anything power results in the annihilation of liberty. It seeks to reduce all individuals to mere automata, or instruments of a single will. So Montesquieu defines liberty in terms of power. Liberty becomes the *absence* of unlimited power, or what he calls “pure acts of power.”³⁹ Power can only be held in check by power, and liberty is the *effect*, whether accidental or not, of this balancing act. Since the exercise of power depends on fear of death, honour, which prides itself in scorning that fear, makes an effective bulwark against the monarch’s power. In monarchies, therefore, liberty is the effect of the opposition between love of honour and fear of death. To put it another way, in monarchies liberty is the effect of a balancing act between the monarch’s power and the noble’s ambition, or the noble’s love of power grounded in a love of honour.

Rousseau’s critique of aristocratic honour

For Rousseau aristocratic honour is incompatible with individual liberty for liberty has two equally necessary sides. Rousseau agrees with Montesquieu that liberty is not the same as independence or doing whatever one wants. In the *Letters from the Mountain* he writes that liberty is not so much doing one’s own will as not being subjected to the will of another. But liberty also requires, he adds, the we not subject another to our will. In other words, liberty is incompatible with the desire for power or command over others.⁴⁰ For Rousseau aristocratic honour presupposes the loss of liberty and cannot be relied upon to serve for its preservation. Though he never speaks directly of aristocratic honour he speaks extensively of *amour-propre*, often translated as vanity. Importantly, in the *Second Discourse* he calls this same passion “the genuine source of honour.”⁴¹ Much controversy surrounds Rousseau’s conception of *amour-propre*, however, because on the one hand he claims that it is distinct from a more benign form of self-love, namely *amour de soi*, and on the other he states that it is merely a modification of *amour de soi*.⁴² In this paper I focus especially on his account of *amour-propre* and its effects on liberty as they are presented in the *Second Discourse*, or Rousseau’s hypothetical account of the state of nature. In this work *amour-propre* manifests itself both as the concern not to be thought contemptible and as the desire to be thought superior to others. In other words, it manifests itself

³⁹ *ibid* [XIX.14, p.316]

⁴⁰ Lettre VIII. See *Lettres ecrites de la Montagne* in Rousseau, *The Political Writings*, Vol.II, ed. C.E. Vaughan (London: Basil Blackwell, 1962), p.234

⁴¹Note XV of the *Second Discourse*. See Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.218

⁴² Contrast Note XV above with the following passage in *Emile*: “The sole passion natural to man is *amour de soi*, or *amour-propre* taken in an extended sense [*emphasis in the original*].”. See Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom, Basic Books (1979), p.92

both as the desire to defend one's dignity and as the desire to flatter one's vanity. In the first case it preserves liberty while in the second it destroys liberty.

Rousseau's hypothetical history of mankind moves from the first stage in which individuals are alone and unaware of others, through a stage of familial relations, then tribal relations, and towards a final stage of anarchic conflict. It is only at this latter stage that we encounter "the petulant activity of our amour-propre."⁴³ But this does not imply that *amour-propre* was born at this point, however, only that it became unruly and pernicious. In the *Emile* Rousseau in fact suggests that *amour-propre*, taken in the general sense of self-love, is both natural and beneficial to the individual. "This *amour-propre* in itself or relative to us is good and useful; and since it has no necessary relation to others, it is in this respect naturally neutral", he says.⁴⁴ It is good and useful for the individual person because it suggests that she ought to do whatever is necessary for her own well-being. It is not reducible to the desire for self-preservation, or fear of death, because it does not take the preservation of life as the only object of personal wellbeing. But Rousseau also emphasizes that this passion does not imply anything about others because it has no 'necessary relation' to them. His description of *amour-propre* here resembles something that Bernard Mandeville calls 'self-liking'.

In Mandeville's dialogue entitled *An Enquiry into the Origins of Honour* the character Cleomenes advances the thesis that the desire for honour or praise is the effect of a natural passion "for which there is no word coined yet."⁴⁵ He calls this passion "self-liking...that great value that all individuals set upon their own person, the high esteem that all men are born with."⁴⁶ Cleomenes further argues that this passion is distinct both from the desire for self-preservation *and* from the desire for merited praise. It is distinct from the desire for self-preservation because it often makes people choose death over shame. It is also distinct from the desire for merited praise because it is experienced "before we have time or capacity to think of anyone else."⁴⁷ For example, very small children are overjoyed when praised even if they do not believe that they deserve such praise. When blamed or chastised they feel sorrow even when they know that they deserve it. The point is that people favor themselves irrespective of considerations of merit. The passion of self-liking is not inherently related to the merit of others. For we do not acquire a good opinion of ourselves after having considered our merit, or standing with respect to others. In other words, we do not like ourselves because we believe that we are better than others. We are naturally born with such an opinion of ourselves because of our 'self-liking'. This argument by Mandeville is useful in explaining why Rousseau states that *amour-propre* is naturally neutral with respect to others. But while self-liking implies nothing about our merit, or standing in relation to others, it can be influenced by their opinions. When someone approves of something we do they say that this action brings honour to us, explains Cleomenes. What they mean by this is that they agree with our own assessment of ourselves and urge us to indulge in our self-liking. In other words, it is not their opinion itself that we are adopting as if

⁴³ *Second Discourse* [II.18, p.167]

⁴⁴ *Emile*, p.92

⁴⁵ Bernard Mandeville, *An enquiry into the origin of honour and the usefulness of Christianity in war*, London: Cass, 1972, p.27

⁴⁶ *Ibid*

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.28

before this we were neutral towards ourselves. It is the concurrence of their opinion with our own that pleases us because our own good opinion of ourselves is a source of pleasure. The same explanation holds for shame or chastisement. When someone does not approve of something that we do they say that the action brings dishonour to us. In doing say they attempt to challenge our own good opinion of ourselves in order to cause us pain. Shame is painful because it suggests that we may be mistaken to like ourselves. The crucial point of this discussion is to suggest that the opinions of others matter to us because our own good opinion matters to us first. We are biased in our own favor. If we were in fact neutral towards ourselves the good or bad opinions of others wouldn't matter to us. Secondly, it also becomes clear that we are not motivated to like ourselves by the idea of desert or merit. Merit suggests a relation between at least two objects of comparison. It suggests that one is superior to the other in some way. Consequently all value derived from merit is relative. Our self-liking is absolute because it is not derived from merit. In fact, our principal desire is not to *deserve* our own good opinion, but to *have* a good opinion of ourselves.

In Rousseau's hypothetical account of the state of nature the first manifestation of this passion in a social context is responsible for the first human convention, namely the establishment of duties of civility. Having left the state of complete isolation and settled next to one-another, people begin to make comparisons between one-another and "imperceptibly they acquire ideas of merit and beauty which produce sentiments of preference."⁴⁸ But personal merit becomes important to the individual only when it is seen as the price of public esteem. In the course of describing nascent society Rousseau says:

"Mankind continues to grow tame, contacts expand and bonds tighten. It became customary to gather in front of the Huts or around a large Tree: song and dance, true children of love and leisure, became the amusement...of idle men and women gathered together. Everyone began to look at everyone else and to wish to be looked at himself, and public esteem acquired a price. The one who sang or danced best; the handsomest, the strongest, the most skillful, or the most eloquent came to be the most highly regarded."⁴⁹

The desire to be though better than others does not arise immediately upon recognizing that natural inequalities exist, in other words. It arises only when public esteem becomes a desired good and merit, or one's superiority to others, its price. As Maurizio Viroli has suggested Rousseau appears to make an analogy between the way in which we attribute a price to things and the way in which we attribute esteem to men: "Just as the price of things is fixed by the buyer and not by the one who possesses the merchandise, so the esteem enjoyed by each is attributed to him by the others."⁵⁰ But Viroli does not give due importance to the fact that Rousseau's story does not end here. If it did then this state of affairs might be unpleasant for those who found themselves ignored or disparaged by the public, but it would pose no serious threat to the well-being of society itself. To use Viroli's metaphor once again, the reason why it does pose a

⁴⁸ *Second Discourse* [II.15, p.165]

⁴⁹ *Ibid* [II.16, p.166]

⁵⁰ See p.15 in Viroli, Maurizio, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the "well-ordered society"*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988

problem is because individuals are not content with allowing the market to ascribe them their value. As Rousseau puts it: “As soon as men had begun to appreciate one another, and the idea of consideration had taken shape in their mind, *everyone claimed a right to it* and one could no longer deprive anyone of it with impunity. From here arose the first duties of civility even among Savages. [*my emphasis*].”⁵¹ Clearly, then, though the public may have deemed some superior to others no individuals simply concluded that they were undeserving of esteem or consideration given their lack of merit. In fact, it appears that everyone claimed a right to be treated with due consideration by others irrespective of merit.

The establishment of this basic social convention prevented nascent society from degenerating into a war of all against all. According to Rousseau public preference for some over others had resulted in “vanity and contempt on the one hand, shame and envy on the other.”⁵² At this point *amour-propre* became transformed from a passion that was independent of considerations of merit to one that was dependent on such considerations. The self-liking of those deemed superior by the public became inherently dependent on the self-disliking of those deemed inferior. The former became vain and the latter humiliated. In this way public esteem had given rise to that form of pernicious social dynamic that Pettit claims republican institutions seek to avoid: the humiliation of some by others. But the establishment of duties of civility prevented the worst social outcome, the birth in the heart of every man of “a black inclination to harm his fellows.”⁵³ Montesquieu provides a helpful explanation of civility when he contrasts it with politeness. “Politeness flatters the vices of others, and civility keeps us from displaying our own; *it is a barrier that men put between themselves in order to keep from being corrupted* [*my emphasis*]” he says.⁵⁴ In the context of nascent society civility kept those who were vain from displaying their contempt and provoking anger or hatred in those whom they consider contemptible. Duties of civility were established precisely because individuals who found themselves inferior to others in some quality nonetheless demanded that they be treated as possessing an undisputed right to consideration by others. Rousseau does not explain what motivated this demand but one could argue that it was precisely *amour-propre* understood as self-liking, the passion that is independent of considerations of desert or merit. Those who claimed a right to consideration did not claim a right to be thought superior to others but only to *not* be thought contemptible or worthless. They established a right to possess value irrespective of their merit, i.e. a right to absolute value. This right appears closely related to dignity, or what Pettit calls honour. But this version of personal honour is incompatible with the aristocratic form of honour that Montesquieu describes and Krause favors.

Rousseau suggests that when one’s worth becomes dependent on one’s standing relative to others the result is a corrosive social dynamic that is harmful to individual liberty. The sense that one deserves to think well of oneself because one is superior in some quality simultaneously suggests that others do not deserve to think well of themselves because they are inferior in that same quality. Vanity, or the desire not simply to be liked by others but to have them like us better than they like themselves, is an inflamed form of *amour-propre*, Rousseau argues. When human relations are structured in such a way that some individuals can indulge their self-liking only if

⁵¹ *Second Discourse*, [II, 17, p.166]

⁵² *ibid*, [II.16, p.166]

⁵³ *ibid*, [II.27, p.171]

⁵⁴ *The Spirit of the Laws*, [XIX.16.p.317]

others cannot then relations between them become animated by a secret hostility. Such relations cultivate ambition and vanity among all involved, whether they be rich or poor, strong or weak, masters or slaves. Rousseau attributes the loss of liberty precisely to the ambition of all men to “raise [their] relative fortunes less out of genuine need than in order to place [themselves] above others.”⁵⁵ While the desire to be respected irrespective of merit is useful to preserving social order, the desire to be thought better than others leads to disorder and the loss of liberty. “Citizens let themselves be oppressed only so far as they are swept up by blind ambition”, Rousseau argues, “and, looking below more than above themselves, come to hold Domination dearer than independence, and consent to bear chains so that they might impose chains [on others] in turn.”⁵⁶ In the *Emile* Rousseau suggests that we desire power and command because making others into instruments of our will “flatters our *amour-propre*.”⁵⁷ But the desire to command others is harmful to our liberty because it leads us to become instruments of the wills of some, or to enslave ourselves, just so that we may reduce others to this same status.

This is Rousseau’s critique of the relationship between monarchs and their nobles, or of aristocratic honour as Montesquieu presented it. In a note to the eight letter of the *Letters from the Mountain* he states:

“There are few men with hearts healthy [*sains*] enough to know how to love liberty. All wish to command; at that price, none fear to obey. A little upstart gives himself a hundred masters to acquire ten valets. One needs only to look at the pride of nobles in monarchies; with what emphasis they pronounce these words of service and serve; how they esteem themselves great and respectable, when they can have the honour of saying: the king, my master; how much contempt they have for republicans who are only free, and who are certainly more noble than they. [*my translation*].”⁵⁸

In the same context Rousseau affirms his thesis that liberty and the desire to command are incompatible. Liberty means not being subject to the will of another *as well as* not subjecting another to one’s will. Measure according to this standard nobles in monarchies are anything but free. They serve the king precisely because this allows them to command their subjects. The liberty that exists in monarchies cannot be called so according to Rousseau’s definition because it is simply the byproduct of a balancing act between people motivated by the desire for command or power. Honour, or the desire for distinction, in fact presupposes the loss of genuine liberty. It presupposes subjection to the will of a master for the purposes of subjecting others.

In fact, there is evidence in Montesquieu’s description of monarchies to suggest as much. The reason why honour serves the cause of liberty is because it moderates the prince’s power. This suggests that the prince’s power is not by nature different from that of a despot. If the prince were to exercise his power without the friction created by intermediary bodies his activity would be no different from the activity of a despot. Though honour provides a useful bulwark against immoderate power Rousseau doubts whether it can genuinely serve the cause of liberty. The

⁵⁵ *Second Discourse*, [II.27, p.171]

⁵⁶ *ibid*, [II.51, p.183]

⁵⁷ See *Emile*, p.68

⁵⁸ Note no.2 to *Lettre VIII*, p.234

noble who seeks honour seeks distinction but such distinction has a specific character. Montesquieu points out that what the noble seeks is *privilege*. He makes an important distinction between public honours given out in republics and in monarchies. In republics citizens are honoured for their service to the state and its laws, or to the public. These distinction, he states, do not contradict the principle of equality before the law that characterizes republics. They are testimonials to civi virtue, understood as love of the laws and of equality before the laws.⁵⁹ They recognize that in acting for the public benefit the citizen has affirmed his commitment to republican government, or his agreement to the equality of all citizens. Though he receives public honours the distinguished citizen does not thereby become exempt from his obligation to follow the law in the same way as everyone else. This is not so with monarchical honours. What one acquires in return for service to the king is privilege or rank. One thereby becomes distinguished from the common mass that merely obeys the king's will, and enters the ranks of those who are deemed superior because they can serve the king in the task of ruling his state. The desire for honour in monarchies, therefore, presupposes that men are not in fact free. It presupposes that all are subjected to the will of the monarch and this subjection corrupts their love of liberty. As Montesquieu puts it, "One excessively great man makes all others small."⁶⁰ And in a passage that is strikingly close to the spirit of Rousseau he states: "In monarchies and despotic states, no one aspires to equality...everyone aims for superiority. The people of the lowest conditions desire to quit those conditions *only in order to be masters of the others* [*my emphasis*]."⁶¹

Because nobles, like the king, are motivated by the desire for power and command, they make unreliable defenders of liberty. In the *Second Discourse* far from placing any hope on the role of honor to prevent monarchy's transformation into despotism, Rousseau in fact makes it into the chief catalyst of that transformation. "Chiefs", or masters who seek to rule alone, "foment everything that can weaken assembled men by disuniting them;...everything that can inspire mistrust and mutual hatred in the different estates by setting their Rights and interests at odds, and so strengthen the Power that contains them all."⁶² Much more so than Montesquieu, therefore, Rousseau emphasizes the way in which ambition and aristocratic honour remain in the service of the prince's immoderate power. Montesquieu's characterization of honour as the "prejudice of each station and each condition" suggests to Rousseau that it cannot be relied upon to advance the cause of the state as a whole.⁶³ The aristocrat may sometimes act to defend his own liberty from the encroachments of arbitrary power, as Krause emphasizes, but he can also easily become an oppressor of others. What the aristocrat ultimately seeks is not liberty but superiority and command.

⁵⁹ Charles Taylor seems to confuse these two senses of public honour that Montesquieu keeps distinct. Speaking of aristocratic honour he says: "For some to have honour in this sense it is essential that not everyone have it." But he then adds that this is also the sense "in which *we use the term* when we speak of honouring someone by giving her some public award. [*my emphasis*]" If we understand our own regime as republican or democratic then Montesquieu would argue that this cannot be how we use the term. See Taylor, "Politics of Recognition", p.27

⁶⁰ *Spirit of the Laws*, [VI.2, p.32]

⁶¹ *ibid*, [V.4, p.44]

⁶² *Second Discourse*, [II.54, p.185]

⁶³ *Spirit of the Laws*, [III.6, p.26]

Krause may have been too rash, therefore, to suggest that republican liberty and aristocratic honour are compatible. Montesquieu does maintain that honor and liberty are compatible, and this is where Rousseau disagrees. But he also suggests that honor and republican government are incompatible because ambition corrupts republican politics. On the other hand, Rousseau's characterization of aristocratic honor as *inflamed* amour-propre highlights its corrosive effects not only for republican government but also for individual liberty. This thesis is particularly intriguing insofar as his definition of liberty resembles what is usually thought to be the liberal definition: liberty is not so much doing your will as not being subjected to the will of another. But Rousseau adds another clause, namely that liberty also requires not subjecting another to one's will, which distinguishes it from what Berlin calls 'negative liberty'. This leads him to maintain, against Montesquieu, that liberty and ambition are incompatible. Lastly, while Rousseau cannot be considered a proponent of the Kantian thesis about human dignity, he does seem to recognize something resembling what Pettit calls 'honour', namely the worth that every individual places on his own person. Insofar as this opinion is by nature independent of relative value or merit it approaches quite closely the modern norm of dignity, or the absolute worth of every human being. But while dignity as a norm may lack motivational power, Rousseau's version does not precisely because it is a kind of passion.