Name: _____ Class: _____

Excerpt from Spirit of Laws

By Charles-Louis de Secondat Montesquieu
1748

Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu (1689 – 1755) was a French lawyer and political philosopher during the Age of Enlightenment. His writing has influenced constitutions around the world with his emphasis on the need for separation of powers in government. In these excerpts from his political work Spirit of Laws, Montesquieu discusses slavery and equality. His country, France, would abolish slavery in all its territory and colonies in 1794. As you read, note the author's main arguments on the reasons slavery exists and why it is natural or unnatural in certain societies.

Chap. I. Of Civil Slavery

"Montesquieu" by Unknown is in the public domain.

[1] Slavery, properly so called, is the establishment of a right which gives to one man such a power over another as renders[1] him absolute master of his life and fortune. The state of slavery is in its own nature bad. It is neither useful to the master nor to the slave; not to the slave, because he can do nothing through a motive of virtue;[2] nor to the master, because by having an unlimited authority over his slaves he insensibly[3] accustoms[4] himself to the want[5] of all moral virtues, and thence becomes fierce, hasty, severe, choleric,[6]

1. **Render** ***(verb)*** to cause (someone or something) to be in a specified condition
2. **Virtue** ***(noun)*** something that is morally good
3. **Insensible** ***(adjective)*** not aware of something
4. **Accustom** ***(verb)*** to cause (someone) to become adjusted or familiar with

voluptuous,[7] and cruel.

In despotic[8] countries, where they are already in a state of political servitude,[9] civil slavery is more tolerable than in other governments. Every one ought to be satisfied in those countries with necessaries and life. Hence the condition of a slave is hardly more burdensome[10] than that of a subject.

But in a monarchical government,[11] where it is of the utmost importance that human nature should not be debased[12] or dispirited, there ought to be no slavery. In democracies, where they are all upon equality; and in aristocracies,[13] where the laws ought to use their utmost endeavors to procure[14] as great an equality as the nature of the government will permit, slavery is contrary to the spirit of the constitution: it only contributes to give a power and luxury to the citizens which they ought not to have.

Chap. IV. Another Origin of the Right of Slavery

I would as soon say that religion gives its professors[15] a right to enslave those who dissent[16] from it, in order to render its propagation[17] more easy.

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something

5. **Want** ***(noun)*** the state or condition of not having any or enough of something
6. **Choleric** ***(adjective)*** made angry easily
7. **Voluptuous** ***(adjective)*** giving pleasure to the senses
8. **Despotic** ***(adjective)*** of or relating to a despot, a ruler that has total power and often uses that power in cruel and unfair ways
9. **Servitude** ***(noun)*** the condition of being a slave or having to obey another person
10. **Burdensome** ***(adjective)*** tough; oppressive
11. A monarchy is a country that is ruled by a monarch, such as a king or emperor. Most monarchies in Europe were constitutional monarchies, where constitutions limited the power of the monarch.
12. **Debase** ***(verb)*** to lower the value or reputation of (someone or something)
13. An aristocracy is a form of government in which nobility holds power.
14. **Procure** ***(verb)*** to get (something) by action of effort
15. **Professor** ***(noun)*** one that professes, or says or declares (something) openly
16. **Dissent** ***(verb)*** to publically disagrees with an official opinion

[5] This was the notion that encouraged the ravagers[18] of America in their iniquity.[19] Under the influence of this idea they founded their right of enslaving so many nations; for these robbers, who would absolutely be both robbers and Christians, were superlatively[20] devout.[21]

Louis XIII[22] was extremely uneasy at a law by which all the negroes[23] of his colonies were to be made slaves; but it being strongly urged to him as the readiest means for their conversion,[24] he acquiesced[25] without further scruple.[26]

Chap. V. Of the Slavery of the Negroes

Were I to vindicate[27] our right to make slaves of the negroes, these should be my arguments:

The Europeans, having extirpated[28] the Americans, were obliged to make slaves of the Africans, for clearing such vast tracts of land.

Sugar would be too dear if the plants which produce it were cultivated[29] by any other than slaves.

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17. **Propagation** ***(noun)*** the spread or enlargement of something
18. **Ravager** ***(noun)*** one who violently destroys (something)
19. Iniquity is the quality of being unfair or evil.
20. **Superlative** ***(adjective)*** of very high quality
21. **Devout** ***(adjective)*** deeply religious
22. Louis XIII of France (1601-1643) was King of France from 1610 to 1643.
23. Negro is an antiquated term to refer to those of black ancestry or appearance.
24. conversion to Christianity
25. **Acquiesce** ***(verb)*** to accept, agree, or allow something to happen without arguing
26. **Scruple** ***(noun)*** reluctance on the grounds of ethical reasons
27. **Vindicate** ***(verb)*** to show that (someone or something) is correct, true, or reasonable
28. Extirpate means to destroy or remove completely. This is a reference to European settlers destroying Native American populations. Some Europeans did try to enslave indigenous Americans but quickly lost them to European diseases.
29. **Cultivate** ***(verb)*** to grow and care for (plants)

[10] These creatures are all over black, and with such a flat nose that they can scarcely be pitied.

It is hardly to be believed that God, who is a wise Being, should place a soul, especially a good soul, in such a black ugly body.

It is so natural to look upon color as the criterion[30] of human nature, that the Asiatics, among whom eunuchs[31] are employed, always deprive the blacks of their resemblance to us by a more opprobrious[32] distinction.

The color of the skin may be determined by that of the hair, which, among the Egyptians, the best philosophers in the world, was of such importance that they put to death all the red-haired men who fell into their hands.

The negroes prefer a glass necklace to that gold which polite nations so highly value. Can there be a greater proof of their wanting common sense?

[15] It is impossible for us to suppose these creatures to be men, because, allowing them to be men, a suspicion would follow that we ourselves are not Christians.

Weak minds exaggerate too much the wrong done to the Africans. For were the case as they state it, would the European powers, who make so many needless conventions among themselves, have failed to enter into a general one, in behalf of humanity and compassion?

Chap. VI. The True Origin of the Right of Slavery

It is time to inquire into the true origin of the right of slavery. It ought to be founded on the nature of things; let us see if there be any cases where it can be derived[33] thence.

In all despotic governments people make no difficulty in selling themselves; the political slavery in some measure annihilates[34] the civil liberty.

30. **Criterion** ***(noun)*** something that is used as a reason to make a judgment
31. An eunuch is a man who has had his sexual organs removed.
32. disapproving or critical
33. **Derive** ***(verb)*** to have something as a source

According to Mr. Perry,[35] the Muscovites[36] sell themselves very readily: their reason for it is evident--their liberty is not worth keeping.

[20] At Achim[37] every one is for selling himself. Some of the chief lords have not less than a thousand slaves, all principal merchants, who have a great number of slaves themselves, and these also are not without their slaves. Their masters are their heirs, and put them into trade. In those states, the freemen being overpowered by the government, have no better resource than that of making themselves slaves to the tyrants[38] in office.

This is the true and rational origin of that mild law of slavery which obtains in some countries: and mild it ought to be, as founded on the free choice a man makes of a master, for his own benefit; which forms a mutual convention[39] between the two parties.

Chap VII. Another Origin of the Right of Slavery

There is another origin of the right of slavery, and even of the most cruel slavery which is to be seen among men.

There are countries where the excess of heat enervates[40] the body, and renders men so slothful and dispirited that nothing but the fear of chastisement[41] can oblige[42] them to perform any laborious[43] duty: slavery is there more reconcilable[44] to reason; and the master being as lazy with respect to his sovereign[45] as his slave

34. **Annihilate** *(verb)* to destroy
35. John Perry wrote The State of Russia under the present Czar: in Relation to the Several Great and Remarkable Things He has Done (1716).
36. An inhabitant of Moscow, a city in the modern-day country of Russia.
37. Achim is an ancient kingdom in the island of Sumatra, in modern-day Indonesia.
38. **Tyrant** *(noun)* a ruler with complete power who is cruel or unfair
39. **Convention** *(noun)* agreement; contract
40. Enervate means to make very weak or tired.
41. **Chastisement** *(noun)* criticism
42. **Oblige** *(verb)* to force or require (something of someone)
43. **Laborious** *(adjective)* requiring a lot of effort or time
44. **Reconcile** *(verb)* to make agree

is with regard to him, this adds a political to a civil slavery.

Aristotle[46] endeavors to prove that there are natural slaves; but what he says is far from proving it. If there be any such, I believe they are those of whom I have been speaking.

[25] But as all men are born equal, slavery must be accounted unnatural, though in some countries it be founded on natural reason; and a wide difference ought to be made between such countries, and those in which even natural reason rejects it, as in Europe,[47] where it has been so happily abolished.[48]

Plutarch,[49] in the "Life of Numa," says that in Saturn's[50] time there was neither slave nor master. Christianity has restored that age in our climates.

Chap VIII. Inutility of Slavery among Us

Natural slavery, then, is to be limited to some particular parts of the world. In all other countries, even the most servile drudgeries[51] may be performed by freemen.

Experience verifies my assertion. Before Christianity had abolished civil slavery in Europe, working in the mines was judged too toilsome for any but slaves or malefactors:[52] at present there are men employed in them who are known to live comfortably. The magistrates[53] have, by some small privileges, encouraged this profession: to an increase of labor they have joined an increase of gain; and have gone so far as to make those people better pleased with their condition than with any other which they could have embraced.

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45. sovereign ruler, such as a king or queen
46. Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) was a Greek philosopher and scientist.
47. Europe is still heavily involved in the slave trade at the time that Montesquieu writes.
48. **Abolish** ***(verb)*** to put an end to (something)
49. Plutarch (46 – 120 A.D.) was a Greek writer.
50. Saturn is the Roman god of liberation.
51. **Drudgery** ***(noun)*** boring, difficult, or unpleasant work
52. A malefactor is a criminal.
53. A magistrate is a local official with powers similar to a judge.

No labor is so heavy but it may be brought to a level with the workman's strength, when regulated by equity,[54] and not by avarice.[55] The violent fatigues which slaves are made to undergo in other parts may be supplied by a skillful use of ingenious machines. The Turkish mines in the Bannat of Temeswaer, though richer than those of Hungary, did not yield so much; because the working of them depended entirely on the strength of their slaves.

[30] I know not whether this article be dictated by my understanding or by my heart. Possibly there is not that climate upon earth where the most laborious services might not with proper encouragement be performed by freemen. Bad laws having made lazy men, they have been reduced to slavery because of their laziness.

54. equality
55. **Avarice** ***(noun)*** greed

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best summarizes the text?
    A. While slavery is unacceptable in free societies, slavery is acceptable in tyrannical societies where slavery is always voluntary and political.
    B. Slavery in theory is unnatural; however, in practice, it is natural to enslave black people due to their obvious inferiority.
    C. It is human nature to reject slavery as unfair and harmful to all, yet some societies embrace it because those in power are not willing to work for their prosperity.
    D. Religion is responsible for the majority of civil and political slavery in the world, although Christianity is now working to undo this pattern.

2. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports the answers to Part A?
    A. "I would as soon say that religion gives its professors a right to enslave those who dissent from it, in order to render its propagation more easy." (Paragraph 4)
    B. "It is impossible for us to suppose these creatures to be men, because, allowing them to be men, a suspicion would follow that we ourselves are not Christians." (Paragraph 15)
    C. "But as all men are born equal, slavery must be accounted unnatural, though in some countries it be founded on natural reason; and a wide difference ought to be made between such countries, and those in which even natural reason rejects it," (Paragraph 25)
    D. "Before Christianity had abolished civil slavery in Europe, working in the mines was judged too toilsome for any but slaves or malefactors: at present there are men employed in them who are known to live comfortably." (Paragraph 28)

3. PART A: Which statement best describes the relationship between civil slavery and political slavery?
    A. Political slavery is worse than civil slavery because those living under tyranny are less likely to buy their way to freedom.
    B. Political slavery is a choice in which the metaphoric slave chooses a master for political advantage, unlike a civil slave who has no choice.
    C. Political slavery is a choice in which the literal slave chooses a master for political advantage, unlike a civil slave who has no choice.
    D. Those who make themselves into political slaves lose all civil liberties, making themselves civil slaves.

4. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
    A. "In despotic countries, where they are already in a state of political servitude, civil slavery is more tolerable than in other governments." (Paragraph 2)
    B. "In all despotic governments people make no difficulty in selling themselves; the political slavery in some measure annihilates the civil liberty." (Paragraph 18)
    C. "the freemen being overpowered by the government, have no better resource than that of making themselves slaves to the tyrants in office." (Paragraph 20)
    D. "mild it ought to be, as founded on the free choice a man makes of a master, for his own benefit; which forms a mutual convention between the two parties." (Paragraph 21)

5. What word best describes the author's tone throughout this text?
    A. Self-righteous
    B. Defiant
    C. Critical
    D. Evasive

6. PART A: What is Montesquieu's overall purpose in these excerpts?
    A. To encourage reform
    B. To shame Christians
    C. To question virtue
    D. To mock the pious

7. PART B: Which quotation from the text best supports the answer to Part A?

    A. "slavery is contrary to the spirit of the constitution: it only contributes to give a power and luxury to the citizens which they ought not to have." (Paragraph 3)

    B. "It is hardly to be believed that God, who is a wise Being, should place a soul, especially a good soul, in such a black ugly body." (Paragraph 11)

    C. "Plutarch, in the "Life of Numa," says that in Saturn's time there was neither slave nor master. Christianity has restored that age in our climates." (Paragraph 26)

    D. "No labor is so heavy but it may be brought to a level with the workman's strength, when regulated by equity, and not by avarice." (Paragraph 29)

8. How does the conclusion of Chapter V, given in paragraph 16, contribute to the development of the author's argument?

9. Citing evidence from the text, explain how the author views the current, active slavery in Europe.

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the context of this text, why does slavery exist? Cite evidence from the text, your own experience, literature, art, or history in your answer.

2. What does Montesquieu's justifications of slavery of black bodies in Chapter V contribute to his main argument?

3. Do you believe that religion is still used to promote inequality among people of the same nation?

4. Montesquieu discusses slavery as abolished in Europe, when in fact, many countries would not abolish it for decades. Why do you think he writes that it has been abolished in these excerpts?

5. Montesquieu's Spirit of Laws was heavily influential to America's Founding Fathers who wrote the Constitution. They took his recommendation for three branches of government that have checks and balances of power. Why do you think they might not have taken to heart his advice on slavery?