

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“The Happiest of Mortals”: Prejudice and Montesquieu’s Project in *The Spirit of the Laws*

Bridget Wu Isenberg 

The University of Texas at Austin, TX, USA
Email: bywu@utexas.edu

(Received 18 December 2024; revised 19 June 2025; accepted 19 June 2025)

Abstract

In *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu announces that he would be the happiest of mortals if he could help men cure themselves of their prejudices. Though he demands that we understand prejudice’s role in his work, scholars have not excavated his whole strategy regarding it. Preliminary investigations have concluded that he sought to destroy prejudices because he had a high estimation of popular reason. This article argues that, while he does seek to eliminate prejudices that support despotism, he also encourages salutary ones for liberty. His whole strategy regarding prejudices shows that his use of them reflects a modest assessment of reason. By demonstrating that two of his well-known strategies for political reform—reinterpreting Christianity and encouraging commerce—concern salutary prejudices, this article reveals the centrality of prejudices to his political project overall.

Keywords: Montesquieu; enlightenment; prejudice; commerce; religion

Introduction

The spirit of the Enlightenment shaped Montesquieu, and he shaped it. In the spirit of the times, he attacks despotism; he employs passions for political ends; he promotes security, champions the separation of powers, and encourages commerce.¹ Central to the Enlightenment was the hope that popularizing reason could cure ignorance, thereby, as Jonathan Israel notes, “[conferring] enormous benefits to mankind.”² Dan Edelstein adds that the *philosophes’* goal “was to demolish Scholastic prejudices and *idées reçues*,” which they hoped would improve

¹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), trans. Anne Cohler, Basia Miller, and Harold Stone, II.5.20, III.8.28, XII.2.188, XI.4.155–56, XX.1.338.

² Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 9.

society.³ Montesquieu too proclaims his hope to destroy prejudices in the Preface to *The Spirit of the Laws*. He demands that we understand prejudice's role in his work. He opens the *Laws* by tying his happiness to enlightenment: "I would consider myself the happiest of mortals if I could make it so that men were able to cure themselves of their prejudices."⁴ On his deathbed, when his confessor asked him on "what principle [he] had expressed in his works ideas which cast doubt on the faith," he "replied that it was from his desire to rise above prejudice and accepted maxims."⁵

I argue that Montesquieu's modest view of popular reason's capacities leads him to employ salutary prejudices for liberty. He defines "prejudice" as "what makes one unaware of oneself."⁶ Prejudices conceal human nature, especially our natural desire for liberty. By demonstrating that two well-known features of his project concern salutary prejudices—reinterpreting Christianity and encouraging commerce—this article shows the centrality of salutary prejudices in his efforts for political reform.

Though scholars have noticed that Montesquieu's political project concerns removing prejudices and promoting salutary ones, they have not excavated his use of the latter. Diana Schaub notes that "curing ... prejudice is absolutely central to Montesquieu's enterprise" and that "some prejudices ... may be salutary; they form the gears that drive the dynamic equilibrium of liberty."⁷ Thomas Pangle adds that because "certain communal prejudices are so powerful that they can erase from humans, on a wide scale, even the feeling for their underlying nature ... Montesquieu chiefly targets [these] for removal, as much as possible."⁸ Elsewhere, Pangle remarks that he "did not feel it was possible to dispense entirely with salutary moral prejudices. Some remnant was needed to preserve order and cooperation."⁹ This article builds on Schaub and Pangle's work by explaining the reciprocal relationship between prejudices and despotism, identifying the beneficial prejudices, showing how Montesquieu weaponizes them against despotic ones, and explaining how this strategy fits into his moral psychology. This is the article's first contribution.

While scholars have not fully explained prejudice's place in Montesquieu's thought, they are clearer on a related subject—whether he thought popular enlightenment could found rational politics. Prejudice and rational politics are intertwined: The rational society will be unprejudiced. Scholars fall into two

³ Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 35, 97.

⁴ Montesquieu, *Laws*, Preface, p. xliv, and *Œuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, ed. Roger Cailliois, 2 vols (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1949–51), II.230. Henceforth, the *Œuvres complètes* is referred to as OC with volume and page number. Every use of "prejudice" from Montesquieu's text is the French *préjugé* unless otherwise noted. The OC is cited each time he uses the term *préjugé* in a quotation or paraphrase from the *Laws*.

⁵ Robert Shackleton, *Montesquieu: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 395.

⁶ Montesquieu, *Laws*, Preface, p. xliv, and OC, II.230.

⁷ Diana Schaub, "Montesquieu, Commerce, and Science," in *Mastery of Nature*, ed. Svetozar Minkov and Bernhardt Trout (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 73, 82.

⁸ Thomas Pangle, *The Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity in Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010), 27.

⁹ Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 15.

groups on this topic. The dominant group argues that he had moderate expectations of reason, which led him to be cautious about rational, universal political solutions and willing to use multiple tactics for liberty that cohere with his complex moral psychology. This group includes Keegan Callanan,¹⁰ Cecil Courtney,¹¹ Nathaniel Gilmore,¹² and Céline Spector.¹³ Dennis Rasmussen summarizes this position well: Montesquieu “stressed the limits and fallibility of human understanding and advocated a cautious reformism in politics.”¹⁴ I add that his promotion of salutary prejudices also flows from his moderate expectations of reason. This article is concerned with his understanding of popular reason.

The second group argues that Montesquieu thought popular enlightenment and rational society were possible. This group, which consists of Pangle,¹⁵ Schaub,¹⁶ Robert Bartlett,¹⁷ and Timothy Brennan,¹⁸ holds that he had a higher opinion of human reason, which is why he attempted to make politics more rational, especially by overcoming religious ideas. His condemnation of prejudice in the Preface underpins this view: He attacks prejudices to improve politics.¹⁹ His proclamation is why, despite extensive evidence to the contrary, some still argue that he thought popular enlightenment was possible. The article’s second contribution is to show how his attitude towards prejudices is compatible with a moderate view of reason, thereby removing the Preface’s statements as a support for this group’s view.

This article has two parts. The first reveals Montesquieu’s double strategy regarding prejudices: He seeks to destroy them because they have a reciprocally causal relationship with despotism, but he also employs salutary prejudices to combat despotic ones. He considers prejudices salutary when they are milder than other alternatives or support moderate regimes and ideas. The second part argues that salutary prejudices are integral to his efforts for political reform.

¹⁰ Keegan Callanan, *Montesquieu’s Liberalism and the Problem of Universal Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 9.

¹¹ Cecil Courtney, *Montesquieu and Burke* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott, 1963), 8.

¹² Nathaniel Gilmore, *Montesquieu and the Spirit of Rome* (Liverpool: Oxford Studies in the Enlightenment, 2022), 178. Gilmore argues that the legislator must account for the general spirit, which is why Montesquieu rejects the universal social contract. See *Rome*, 169, 172–79.

¹³ Céline Spector argues that Montesquieu thought institutions were necessary for encouraging the citizenry’s proper behavior. See *Montesquieu: Pouvoirs, richesses et sociétés* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004), 33, 56.

¹⁴ Dennis Rasmussen, *The Pragmatic Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 4. Rasmussen does document how commerce and science can destroy prejudices. But, because it is not his primary aim, his analysis of Montesquieu’s view of reason is not an analysis of his strategy to replace despotic prejudices with salutary ones. See *Pragmatic Enlightenment*, 61, 156.

¹⁵ Pangle, *Liberalism*, 15–16, 206, and *Theological Basis*, 6, 82, 88, 128–29.

¹⁶ Schaub, “Montesquieu,” 73, 75–77.

¹⁷ Robert Bartlett, “On the Politics of Faith and Reason: The Project of Enlightenment in Pierre Bayle and Montesquieu,” *Journal of Politics* 63, no. 1 (2001): 1–3, 15–17, 26.

¹⁸ Timothy Brennan, “Teaching by Contradictions: Montesquieu’s Subversion of Piety in *The Spirit of the Laws*,” *Review of Politics* 84 (2022): 520–25, 542–44.

¹⁹ Montesquieu, *Laws*, Preface, p. xlv, and OC, II.230. See Bartlett, “Politics,” 25–26; Brennan, “Contradictions,” 520–21, 527–28, 542–43; Pangle, *Liberalism*, 22–24, 206, and *Theological Basis*, 8–9, 26–27; and Schaub, “Montesquieu,” 75–76.

Prejudice against prejudice

Montesquieu's manifest goal is to conquer prejudices.²⁰ Prejudices are erroneous ideas that make us unaware of ourselves, of which superstitions are the worst kind.²¹ Prejudices are often propagated by religion but can also be engendered by activities and passions, which, by fostering particular dispositions, mislead people about what human nature is. All societies have prejudices, but what society can do to people varies. Mild prejudices obscure human nature without smothering the fundamental need for liberty, while despotic prejudices pervert human nature so much that they oppress that crucial natural desire. I extend Jean Starobinski's general argument that poisons can be transformed into cures to Montesquieu's use of prejudices.²²

Montesquieu aims to destroy prejudices because they support despotism, which, as scholars have observed, is the *summum malum* that orients the *Laws*.²³ Despotism is the supreme evil because it makes liberty, which is the opinion of security and the greatest political good, impossible.²⁴ As Pangle has shown, seeking security is integral to human beings.²⁵ But despotism does not make its subjects feel secure. Because despotism is the government of one "without law and without rule," it dominates with fear.²⁶

Though Pangle has noted that the prejudices Montesquieu intends to remove are religious prejudices, which "emerge out of and reflect existence under despotism,"²⁷ I add that two religious prejudices also make despotism possible. The despot may claim divine descent or the local religion may worship despotic fatherly authorities, which prepare the people to accept an earthly counterpart.²⁸ Montesquieu reveals both kinds of prejudices in his discussion of the native Louisianans, who suffer from the first.²⁹ They worship the sun, and their despot, who claims to be the sun's brother, rules them. They reveal the second despotic prejudice by analogy. The Louisianan king is an implicit reference to King Louis XIV, another sun king. The Louisianan despot is "like the Grand Seigneur," the Turkish emperor,³⁰ and, as Shackleton has noted, Montesquieu compared Louis XIV and the Turkish emperor in the *Persian Letters*.³¹ *Seigneur* is

²⁰ Montesquieu, *Laws*, Preface, p. xliv, and OC, II.230.

²¹ Montesquieu, *Laws*, Preface, p. xliv, XVIII.18.294, and OC, II.230.

²² Jean Starobinski, "The Antidote in the Poison," in *Blessings in Disguise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), trans. Jean Goldhammer, 127–31.

²³ See Bertrand Binoche, *Introduction à l'Esprit des lois de Montesquieu* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), 199–242; Krause, "Despotism," in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. David Carrithers, Michael Mosher, and Paul Rahe (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 231; Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 28; Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 19; Shackleton, *Montesquieu*, 269.

²⁴ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XII.1.187.

²⁵ Montesquieu, *Laws*, I.2.6–7; Pangle, *Liberalism*, 41.

²⁶ Montesquieu, *Laws*, II.1.10.

²⁷ Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 27.

²⁸ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XVIII.18.294, XIX.19.320.

²⁹ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XVIII.18.294 and OC, II.541.

³⁰ Montesquieu, OC, II.541, translation my own.

³¹ Shackleton, *Montesquieu*, 35. See Montesquieu, *Persian Letters* (New York: Penguin Publishing, 2004), trans. C. J. Betts, Letter 37.91.

also an eighteenth-century name for God.³² As worshipping the sun prepares the Louisianan people for despotism, worshipping God prepares the French for Louis XIV, who revived the aspiration for a universal monarchy, which, as Mark Hulliung notes, invites despotism.³³ Though Brennan also noticed this analogy, he neither explicitly identifies that there are two religious prejudices supporting despotism nor adds that Montesquieu's use of the term *seigneur* strengthens the comparison.³⁴ Montesquieu calls the prejudices that make despotism possible "superstitions."³⁵ Christianity even encourages the religious to act despotically.³⁶ The hope to convert souls drove slavery, and the religion gave monarchs a model for universal rule.³⁷ As Vickie Sullivan writes, "These barbaric practices of the Christians, in fact, bring despotism to Europe."³⁸

Prejudice in despotism

The relationship between prejudices and despotisms is reciprocal, which is why Montesquieu aims to conquer both.³⁹ Not only do prejudices cause despotisms, but despotisms also spread prejudices, which make human beings forget three of the four natural laws that are integral to human nature and describe natural feelings, pursuits, and the original bonds that prompt human beings to enter society.⁴⁰ As Michael Zuckert remarks, society can "transform [human beings] in such a way that the original natural laws are nearly effaced."⁴¹ In the state of nature, there are four laws. The human being seeks peace because her weakness motivates her to preserve herself; she eats; she is attracted to her own kind, a

³² "Seigneur," 3rd edn, 1740. *Dictionnaire de l'académie française* <https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr/> (accessed December 16, 2024). The entry signifying God as one meaning of *Seigneur* is succeeded by the entry explaining its use for the Turkish emperor.

³³ Mark Hulliung, *Montesquieu and the Old Regime* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 35. See also, Krause, "Despotism," 234.

³⁴ Brennan, "Contradictions," 527–28.

³⁵ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XVIII.18.294, and OC, II.541.

³⁶ Opinions vary as to whether Montesquieu thought that Christianity always encourages despotism. For views that it does, see Bartlett, "Politics"; Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 61; Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, 17, 63, and "Of Believers and Barbarians: Montesquieu's Enlightened Toleration," in *Early Modern Skepticism and the Origins of Toleration*, ed. Alan Levine (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999). For opposing views, see Callanan, "'Une infinité des biens': Montesquieu on Religion and Free Government," *History of Political Thought* 35, no. 4 (2014); and Shackleton, *Montesquieu*, 342. For a moderate position, see Clifford Orwin "For Which Human Nature Can Never Be Too Grateful: Montesquieu as the Heir of Christianity," in *Recovering Reason: Essays in Honor of Thomas L. Pangle*, ed. Timothy Burns (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 280. For the similarity between despotism and Christianity, see Krause, "Despotism," 252–53.

³⁷ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XV.4.249, XVIII.18.294, XXV.13.490–92.

³⁸ Vickie Sullivan, *Montesquieu and the Despotism of Europe: An Interpretation of The Spirit of the Laws* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 93. See also Schaub, "Believers and Barbarians," 229.

³⁹ Montesquieu, *Laws*, Preface, p. xliv, X.4.142.

⁴⁰ For a discussion of Montesquieu's conception of natural laws, especially of the oddities in his presentation, see Michael Zuckert, "Natural Law, Natural Rights, and Classical Liberalism: On Montesquieu's Critique of Hobbes," *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 18, no. 1 (2001): 227–31.

⁴¹ Zuckert, "Montesquieu's Critique of Hobbes," 242.

feeling tied to familial love and sexual pleasure; and she desires to live with others, which the pursuit of knowledge stimulates.⁴² While the state of nature is not the only normative standard that Montesquieu uses to evaluate regimes, its principles, as Krause⁴³ and Zuckert⁴⁴ note, still guide his thought. This section builds on the work of Gilmore,⁴⁵ Krause,⁴⁶ Pangle,⁴⁷ and Zuckert⁴⁸ by arguing that the effects of despotism are prejudices that conceal human nature by making human beings forget the natural laws, except for the second.

Despotisms efface the first law, which is peace. As noted above, human beings naturally seek security, but, as Zuckert writes, despotism creates “a false sort of peace ... The fear under a despotism only imperfectly secures what the law of nature provides—namely, preservation of the individual and the species.”⁴⁹ Despotism perverts the third law of nature, which is the pleasure human beings feel around each other. While Montesquieu presents this pleasure as primarily sexual, as Pangle has argued, it also seems to encompass familial love.⁵⁰ As Gilmore adds, because despotism uses fear to enforce obedience, it perverts love.⁵¹ When the despot demands, the subject will even sacrifice her loved ones.⁵² Despotism also twists the fourth law, “the desire to live in society,” which two bonds promote: The feelings of self-preservation and pleasure that draw human beings to each other and knowledge.⁵³ Though Montesquieu is ambiguous about what kind of knowledge people seek and whether they do obtain it in society, he is clear that the human being has the capacity to gain knowledge, which is why she enters society. As Krause has shown, despotism, however, causes ignorance.⁵⁴ Because despotism demands “extreme obedience,” the subject’s education consists of fear and knowing a few religious principles.⁵⁵ Because the despot rules on his whims, neither does he need “to deliberate, to doubt, or to reason; he has only to want.”⁵⁶ While it treats subjects as subhuman, despotism convinces

⁴² Montesquieu, *Laws*, I.2.6–7.

⁴³ Krause, “Despotism,” 258, and “The Spirit of Separate Powers in Montesquieu,” *Review of Politics* 62, no. 2 (2000): 241–42.

⁴⁴ Though Zuckert sees the state of nature and the laws of nature as “not normative in its own terms,” especially since he is comparing the latter to traditional natural law doctrines, he notes that Montesquieu’s natural law “might have some normative implications.” See “Montesquieu’s Critique of Hobbes,” 246.

⁴⁵ Nathaniel Gilmore, “Venus’s Temple: Pleasure and Politics in Montesquieu,” *History of Political Thought* 45, no. 4 (2024): 694–95.

⁴⁶ Krause, “Despotism,” 258.

⁴⁷ Pangle, *Liberalism*, 28, 163–66, and *Theological Basis*, 26–27.

⁴⁸ Zuckert, “Montesquieu’s Critique of Hobbes,” 245.

⁴⁹ Zuckert, “Montesquieu’s Critique of Hobbes,” 245. See also, Montesquieu, *Laws*, I.2.6, III.9.28.

⁵⁰ Pangle, *Liberalism*, 37. “Affection is more deeply rooted” in human nature than for Montesquieu’s named interlocutor on the state of nature, Hobbes.

⁵¹ Gilmore, “Venus’s Temple,” 694–95.

⁵² Montesquieu, *Laws*, III.10.29–30.

⁵³ Montesquieu, *Laws*, I.2.7.

⁵⁴ Krause, “Despotism,” 235–40.

⁵⁵ Montesquieu, *Laws*, IV.3.34.

⁵⁶ Montesquieu, *Laws*, IV.3.34.

princes that that they are more than human.⁵⁷ And as Pangle has argued, despotism also makes human beings ignorant by cultivating a psychological need for religious prejudices.⁵⁸

Monarchy and prejudice

In his presentation of honor, the monarchic principle, Montesquieu reveals that there are salutary prejudices in the *Laws* that he endorses because they preserve liberty. As previously noted, salutary prejudices conceal human beings from themselves, but they do not obscure the desire for liberty, the most fundamental human need. These salutary prejudices sustain moderate regimes. When Montesquieu introduces honor, he identifies it as a prejudice and compares it to virtue, the principle of participatory republics, which supports liberty. "HONOR, that is, the *prejudice* of each person and each condition, takes the place of the political virtue of which I have spoken and represents it everywhere."⁵⁹ As Krause,⁶⁰ Michael Mosher,⁶¹ and Paul Rahe⁶² argue, honor uses the desire for ambitious self-distinction for high ends. I add that honor is a prejudice because it makes individuals esteem themselves to be better than they are, but it is salutary because the nobility's desire for honor protects liberty from the monarch, who tries to expand his power by eroding their privileges.⁶³

By praising honor, Montesquieu indicates that he does not aim to destroy all prejudices. He seeks to conquer only the worst that promote despotism, which requires encouraging salutary ones that support liberty. His evaluation of honor makes this standard clear: "Speaking philosophically, it is true that the honor that guides all the parts of the state is a false honor, but this false honor is as useful to the public as the true one would be to the individuals who could have it."⁶⁴ Since he introduces honor by comparing it to political virtue, he implies that the latter is also a salutary prejudice.⁶⁵ By demanding that the citizen prefer "the public interest over one's own," virtue requires an unnatural "renunciation of oneself," which is why "the full power of education is needed."⁶⁶ Despite its unnatural severity, virtue still protected liberty. Though Pangle⁶⁷ and Rahe⁶⁸

⁵⁷ Montesquieu, *Laws*, II.5.20, III.10.29, V.11.58.

⁵⁸ Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 34–39, 46–50.

⁵⁹ Montesquieu, *Laws*, III.6.26, emphasis added, and OC, II.256.

⁶⁰ Krause, "Separate Powers," 244; "The Politics of Distinction and Disobedience: Honor and the Defense of Liberty in Montesquieu" *Polity* 31 no. 3 (1999); *Honor*, 43–47.

⁶¹ Michael Mosher, "Monarchy's Paradox: Honor in the Face of Sovereign Power," in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. David Carrithers, Michael Mosher, and Paul Rahe (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 198–214.

⁶² Though Rahe does not view monarchy as Montesquieu's preferred form of government for the modern age, he does note that honor has positive political effects in monarchies. See *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 78–85.

⁶³ Montesquieu, *Laws*, III.3.22, III.6.26, III.8.28, III.10.30.

⁶⁴ Montesquieu, *Laws*, III.7.27.

⁶⁵ Montesquieu, *Laws*, III.6.26.

⁶⁶ Montesquieu, *Laws*, IV.5.35–6.

⁶⁷ Pangle, *Liberalism*, 5.

⁶⁸ Rahe, *Logic of Liberty*, 71–72.

have noticed that political virtue is harsh, it has not been shown that virtue's strict demands and positive effects indicate that it is a salutary prejudice. Pangle remarks that Montesquieu does not prefer participatory republics because of virtue's severity.⁶⁹ Rahe adds that virtue demands an "unnatural" self-discipline.⁷⁰

By employing honor to preserve liberty, Montesquieu indicates that philosophic knowledge includes understanding that prejudices may sometimes benefit liberty more than popular enlightenment. Even though honor promotes false vanity and human beings are not honor-seeking by nature, honor preserves human beings from despotism, which, as noted above, severely twists them. He therefore employs salutary prejudices, such as honor, if they protect human beings from despotism and the worst prejudices, which prepare human beings to cede their liberty. Though he never calls himself a philosopher in the *Laws*, his discussion of honor is the only time he "speaks philosophically" in the whole work. Philosophy recognizes that false honor obscures self-knowledge, but his political aims lead him to promote a prejudice for liberty. When he speaks philosophically, he reveals that there are prejudices he will endorse but not identify as such. Since he does not speak philosophically again, he leaves the task of identifying useful prejudices to his reader, which is consistent with his general view on writing.⁷¹ To use prejudices effectively against despotism, Montesquieu must attack them but also conceal the prejudicial nature of those he endorses. Honor is a feasible safeguard for liberty only if the nobility believes in their inflated self-worth. For this end, he pairs his use of prejudice with criticisms of them.

Montesquieu's revelation that honor is a prejudice, however, does not undermine his aim. Honor admires playful boldness, and his claim that honor is a prejudice without regard for the consequences is boldly honest.⁷² Truth in speech is desirable "because a man accustomed to speaking the truth appears to be daring and free."⁷³ In addition, revealing honor's prejudicial nature is less blasphemous than suggesting religion is a prejudice, which is a view he also holds.

Prejudices, moderation, and the general spirit

Montesquieu's use of salutary prejudices is consistent with moderation, the principle that guides his thought. Moderation informs both his modest assessment of reason and his recommendation that political reforms be tailored to the needs and customs of specific places, which is also what the general spirit demands. Even though his proclamation of his hopes to enlighten men and dispel prejudices in the Preface initially seems to reveal an immoderate belief that popular reason could dispel ignorance, to conclude from these sentences

⁶⁹ Pangle, *Liberalism*, 5.

⁷⁰ Rahe, *Logic of Liberty*, 71.

⁷¹ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XI.20.186.

⁷² Montesquieu, *Laws*, XIX.5.310.

⁷³ Montesquieu, *Laws*, IV.2.32.

that he unequivocally hated prejudices ignores his instructions for reading the *Laws*.⁷⁴ Readers should “not judge by a moment’s reading the work of twenty years ... If one wants to seek the design of the author, one can find it only in the design of the work.”⁷⁵ The work’s design indicates that he hopes to cure the worst prejudices that support despotisms, yet, paradoxically, to weaken despotisms he must also use salutary prejudices that better fit the general spirit of the peoples he seeks to help. His hopes for what his work will accomplish are therefore more ambiguous than they first appear in the Preface. Though he aims to make people more knowledgeable about their fundamental need for security, this does not include dispelling all prejudices that make us unaware of ourselves.

In Montesquieu’s view, the general spirit hinders popular enlightenment and guides his efforts for political reform, which is why he employs salutary prejudices for liberty. As Catherine Volpilhac-Augier remarks, the general spirit “is a complex composite of climate, but also, and especially, of the history of nations, their political regime, their institutions, laws, behaviors, etc.”⁷⁶ The general spirit facilitates the existence of prejudices, which always exist in society because the human being is “that flexible being who adapts himself in society to the thoughts and impressions of others.”⁷⁷ Because the general spirit tends to conceal us from ourselves, Montesquieu thinks that the Enlightenment hope to rid society of prejudices entirely is immoderate. He even acknowledges that he is not immune to prejudices. Opposing prejudice and nature, he notes, “I did not draw my principles from my prejudices but from the nature of things.”⁷⁸ Despite the apparent discord between nature and prejudice, the nature of things, including that of human society, requires him to employ useful prejudices. Each society’s general spirit provides unique opportunities that can be leveraged for liberty and therefore become salutary prejudices.

Montesquieu’s hopes to improve society are tempered by his concern for moderation, which, as Aurelian Craiutu notes, is the legislator’s highest virtue.⁷⁹ In the Preface, Montesquieu’s declaration of his hopes is paired with his worry about the Enlightenment’s immoderation in correcting old abuses, which is caused by overestimating human reason’s capacities. The falsely enlightened who are confident in their own knowledge inadvertently blunder in their reforms because they do not see the interconnectedness of the society that they seek to improve. Only “those who are born fortunate enough to fathom by a stroke of genius the whole of a state’s constitution” will propose the right changes.⁸⁰ True enlightenment, which moderation informs, leads Montesquieu

⁷⁴ Montesquieu, *Laws*, Preface.xliv and OC, II.230.

⁷⁵ Montesquieu, *Laws*, Preface.xliii.

⁷⁶ Catherine Volpilhac-Augier, *Montesquieu: let there be enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), trans. Philip Stewart, 183. For Montesquieu’s longstanding interest in the general spirit, see 182–83. For criticisms of his concept of the general spirit after the *Laws* was published, see 195–96.

⁷⁷ Montesquieu, *Laws*, Preface.xliv–xlv, I.3.9.

⁷⁸ Montesquieu, *Laws*, Preface.xliii and OC, II.229.

⁷⁹ Aurelian Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748–1830* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 33. See also Montesquieu, *Laws*, XXIX.1.602, which Craiutu cites.

⁸⁰ Montesquieu, *Laws*, Preface.xliv.

to make three related recommendations for proper political reform: First, to consider possible evils that result from correcting abuses, which is why the legislator ought to preserve a lesser good that exists instead of reaching for one that may introduce new evils.⁸¹ Second, to advise reforms that are tailored to the local conditions.⁸² And third, because human beings are “very attached to their customs,” it is preferable either to revise existing customs to support liberty or to “engage the people to change them themselves” rather than to coerce change.⁸³

These recommendations inform Montesquieu’s use of salutary prejudices. Though honor is a prejudice because it encourages a false sense of esteem, he would be immoderate to undermine a liberty-supporting institution woven into the French spirit. As Krause has noticed, “Honor is embedded in a social and historical order.”⁸⁴ Montesquieu remarks that honor originates from Germanic judicial combat, a method to resolve disputes.⁸⁵ While settling lawsuits by dueling is of questionable merit, an unreasonable practice can be well executed: “Men who are fundamentally reasonable place even their prejudices under rules. Nothing was more contrary to common sense than judicial combat, but once this point was granted, it was executed with a certain prudence.”⁸⁶

Montesquieu’s support for salutary prejudices is a reason why he supports moderate governments. I agree with Callanan,⁸⁷ Gilmore,⁸⁸ Rasmussen,⁸⁹ and Paul Carrese,⁹⁰ who argue that he is convinced about the worst regime but flexible regarding the best—whether it be virtuous republics, honorable monarchies, or commercial republics. Each regime cultivates a unique political psychology that the local spirit shapes, and though all regimes are flawed because they distort human nature, these disadvantages do not disqualify them as choiceworthy regimes for particular nations. Scholars who think Montesquieu prefers only one mode often note his critiques of the others. Pangle,⁹¹ Rahe,⁹² Schaub,⁹³ Pierre Manent,⁹⁴ and Andrea Radasanu⁹⁵ argue that he prefers commercial republics and support their claim by criticizing the other moderate regimes. Against virtuous republics, Pangle remarks that “republican self-

⁸¹ Montesquieu, *Laws*, Preface.xliv, See also VI.12.85.

⁸² For Montesquieu’s discussion of how positive effects vary across peoples and nations (especially regarding his treatment of religion), see *Défense de l’Esprit des lois*, in OC II.1137–39.

⁸³ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XIX.3.14.316.

⁸⁴ Krause, “Distinction and Disobedience,” 483.

⁸⁵ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XXVIII.20.559–60.

⁸⁶ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XXVIII.563.

⁸⁷ Callanan, *Universal Politics*, 4, 12, 23.

⁸⁸ Gilmore, “Venus’s Temple,” 682, 702–6.

⁸⁹ Rasmussen, *Pragmatic Enlightenment*, 90–91.

⁹⁰ Paul Carrese, *Democracy in Moderation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 22–24.

⁹¹ Pangle, *Liberalism*, 82.

⁹² Rahe, *Logic of Liberty*, 40–58, 237–38.

⁹³ Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, 143, “Montesquieu on Slavery,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 34, no. 2 (2005): 70.

⁹⁴ Pierre Manent, *The City of Man* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 24.

⁹⁵ Andrea Radasanu, “Montesquieu on Moderation, Monarchy and Reform,” *History of Political Thought* 31, no. 2 (2010): 292.

devotion is ... always a restraint, a distortion of human nature.”⁹⁶ Manent adds that republicanism’s oppressive rule “makes a man neither wise nor happy.”⁹⁷ Radasanu criticizes monarchies as “inherently unstable ... always teetering on the brink of despotism.”⁹⁸ Krause⁹⁹ and Annelien de Dijn,¹⁰⁰ in contrast, argue that Montesquieu prefers monarchy, which is why, according to Krause, England “is not ... the simply best regime for [him]” because of “the predominance of material interest.”¹⁰¹ De Dijn adds that he “could be quite disparaging of the city-states of antiquity.”¹⁰² But Montesquieu’s criticisms of a regime do not mean that it is not preferable for its moderation, especially when compared to despotism. Political knowledge, which he cultivates in his legislator, entails seeing these regimes’ flaws and trying to balance them under specific local conditions partly by using the prejudices that are part of each society’s general spirit.

Salutary prejudices

As noted above, salutary prejudices are central to Montesquieu’s efforts for political reform. They guide some of his most prominent efforts for liberty, especially reinterpreting Christianity and encouraging commerce. While his reinterpretation of Christianity is itself a prejudice, commerce promotes a particular prejudicial idea, namely that human beings are acquisitive beings for whom procuring material goods is key to their wellbeing. Though this idea can cure despotic religious prejudices, it can also undermine liberty.

Christianity

Montesquieu views religions as politically useful prejudices whose teachings legislators can reinterpret to support liberty by emphasizing their more humane ideas. Though his revisions of Christianity are well-known, this article reveals that his view of prejudices is integral to understanding this tactic for promoting liberty. His view of prejudices is why he chooses to reform Christianity rather than immediately eliminate it or oppress the religious, which would result in a tyranny that invites despotism. Further, his assessment of prejudices explains why he evaluates religions on their utility—as salutary prejudices, religious ideas may be false but useful. He pushes a beneficial but still prejudiced interpretation of Christianity as a humane religion that prizes gentleness. His reinterpretation undermines a despotic prejudice, which is the severe religiosity that the Spanish Inquisition exemplifies. My argument therefore

⁹⁶ Pangle, *Liberalism*, 82.

⁹⁷ Manent, *The City of Man*, 24.

⁹⁸ Radasanu, “Montesquieu on Moderation,” 292.

⁹⁹ Krause, “Separate Powers,” 243, 263.

¹⁰⁰ De Dijn, “Was Montesquieu a Liberal Republican?,” *Review of Politics* 76, no. 1 (2014): 28.

¹⁰¹ Krause, “Separate Powers,” 243, 263.

¹⁰² De Dijn, “Montesquieu a Liberal Republican” 28. For de Dijn’s view of Montesquieu’s assessment of commercial republics, see 37.

aligns me with the views of Sullivan,¹⁰³ Rasmussen,¹⁰⁴ and Clifford Orwin.¹⁰⁵ As Sullivan remarks, “Although Christian ideas have remediated barbarities, they have also introduced their own form of barbarism to Europe.”¹⁰⁶ Orwin adds that Montesquieu wanted his audience “to value Christianity above all for its accomplishments in this world, but also to grasp the necessity of further reforms.”¹⁰⁷

Montesquieu’s mixed assessment of Christianity gives rise to two additional views. Scholars also argue, though in opposing directions, that he had a less ambivalent view of Christianity than those discussed above. Bartlett,¹⁰⁸ Brennan,¹⁰⁹ Pangle,¹¹⁰ and Schaub¹¹¹ argue that he hoped to destroy traditional Christian piety because it prevents rational politics. Though Pangle notes that Montesquieu may not have sought to destroy Christianity entirely, he primarily sees him as antagonistic toward it.¹¹² “Montesquieu’s project cannot succeed unless he can show the way to a destruction or emasculating transformation of Christianity.”¹¹³ Similarly, though Schaub acknowledges that Montesquieu “seeks to alter Christian sensibilities without needlessly antagonizing them,” elsewhere she emphasizes that Christianity must be thoroughly transformed by stating that “a real dose of the feminine is his cure for Christianity’s effeminization.”¹¹⁴ Other scholars argue that Montesquieu was friendly to Christianity because of its good political effects. According to Shackleton, “[Christianity] opposes despotism.”¹¹⁵ Callanan adds that “it was a source of moral restraint that freed the state to govern mildly.”¹¹⁶ Even though my argument that Montesquieu revised Christianity to make it a salutary prejudice seems to disagree with those who argue that he sought to destroy it entirely, these two positions can be compatible. Moderating religion by promoting good prejudices can cohere with the possibility that he hopes Christianity will eventually cease to exist. And some scholars would agree that Montesquieu encouraged Christianity’s gentler teachings. Pangle remarks that he “seeks to contribute to this process of the liberalizing and humanizing modern-day evolution of Christianity.”¹¹⁷ For Schaub, he “seeks to alter Christian sensibilities without needlessly antagonizing them.”¹¹⁸

¹⁰³ Sullivan, *Despotic Ideas*, 81.

¹⁰⁴ Rasmussen, *Pragmatic Enlightenment*, 176.

¹⁰⁵ Orwin, “Human Nature,” 280.

¹⁰⁶ Sullivan, *Despotic Ideas*, 81.

¹⁰⁷ Orwin, “Human Nature,” 280.

¹⁰⁸ Bartlett, “Politics,” 16–17.

¹⁰⁹ Brennan, “Contradictions,” 541.

¹¹⁰ Pangle, *Liberalism*, 248–50, 255–57, and *Theological Basis*, 106–7.

¹¹¹ Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, 147.

¹¹² Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 105.

¹¹³ Pangle, *Liberalism*, 248.

¹¹⁴ Schaub, “Of Believers and Barbarians,” 238, and *Erotic Liberalism*, 147.

¹¹⁵ Shackleton, *Montesquieu*, 342.

¹¹⁶ Callanan, “‘Une infinité des biens,’” 741, 767.

¹¹⁷ Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 105.

¹¹⁸ Schaub, “Believers and Barbarians,” 238.

For Montesquieu, human beings are not religious by nature. Organized religions are, as we have seen, prejudices that can conceal or twist human nature. Though he acknowledges that the desire to know one's creator is "the first of the natural laws in importance," he does not include it among the four natural laws that summarize our original human nature.¹¹⁹ The militant Christianity, of which the Spanish Inquisition is his premier example, is a prejudice because it contravenes three of the four natural laws. The Inquisition threatens security by examining heresy; it demands that religious devotion come before all, including familial love; and, by convincing its adherents that saving souls should be their primary goal, Christianity rejects that the proper knowledge we need concerns liberty.¹²⁰ As Gilmore and Sullivan explain, "Montesquieu depicts a form of Christianity, persisting in his own day, that maintains itself by inflicting the most severe punishments on those who do not maintain the religion's purity."¹²¹

Since Montesquieu generally sees religions as prejudices, he is concerned with their political usefulness and not their verity. "Among the false religions [one can] seek the ones that are the most in conformity with the good of society, the ones that ... can most contribute to their happiness in this [life]."¹²² His standard of political utility, which is the happiness in this life that constitutes the good of society, guides his treatment of religions and is consistent with his view of salutary prejudices as false but useful ideas. As Schaub notes, the truth of a religion does not necessarily correlate with its political utility.¹²³ Well-implemented but false religions can make people happy.¹²⁴

Montesquieu's reinterpretation of Christianity follows his general guidelines for promoting salutary prejudices as discussed above. Because the beneficial prejudices that he advances are either part of the general spirit or modify one of its constituent elements, he facilitates their adoption and refrains from contravening the general spirit. While defying the general spirit is tyrannical and detrimental to liberty, promoting beneficial prejudices that draw on the general spirit is not.¹²⁵ Since Christianity is widely established, Montesquieu cannot attack it without broadly undermining liberty in Europe. Further, imposing a new religion is tyrannical, while "open irreligion," as Schaub notes, risks fanaticism.¹²⁶ A successful moderation of Christianity therefore requires reinterpretation and, because Christianity is widely established, his reinterpretative work can be adopted across Europe to support liberty.

¹¹⁹ Montesquieu, *Laws*, I.2.6. His acknowledgment that human beings are led toward their creator is likely a rhetorical move to satisfy Christian readers. See also *Défense*, 1130–31.

¹²⁰ Montesquieu, *Laws*, III.10.28, XV.4.249, XXVI.11.504.

¹²¹ Gilmore and Sullivan, "Montesquieu's Teaching on the Dangers of Extreme Corrections: Japan, the Catholic Inquisition, and Moderation in *The Spirit of the Laws*," *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 3 (2017): 463.

¹²² Montesquieu, *Laws*, XXIV.1.459.

¹²³ Schaub, "Of Believers and Barbarians," 238.

¹²⁴ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XXV.19.472.

¹²⁵ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XIX.3.309, XXV.10–11.488–89.

¹²⁶ Schaub, "Believers and Barbarians," 238.

Second, Montesquieu judges prejudices to be salutary when they support moderate governments better than other alternatives. Even though Christianity is not his preferred religion because of its despotic tendencies, it is advantageous because, in contrast to other religions, it can promote liberty.¹²⁷ Revising Christianity so that it better supports moderate government is especially advantageous because Montesquieu fears that destroying it leaves a vacuum for Islam, which in his view is even less compatible with liberty.¹²⁸ His recognition of the probable consequence of destroying Christianity is why he praises it most highly when considering Islam: “From the character of the Christian religion and that of the Mohammedan religion, one should, without further examination, embrace the one and reject the other.”¹²⁹

As previously noted, religions best preserve liberty when they encourage people to be humane and moderate. The religions that Montesquieu prefers follow this general standard, which his praise of the Stoics expresses well: “There has never been one [religion] whose principles were more worthy of men and more appropriate for forming good men than that of the Stoics,” who “were occupied only in working for men’s happiness and in exercising the duties of society.”¹³⁰ To make Christianity more like his preferred religions, Montesquieu exhorts people to act as Christ would.¹³¹ In a fictional letter to Iberian inquisitors, he promotes his new religious prejudice, a humane Christianity. The letter writer, incensed at the Inquisitors’ recent auto-da-fé, argues that they do not embody Christian virtues. He appeals to Christ’s example: “We entreat you, not by the powerful god we both serve, but by the Christ that you tell us took on the human condition in order to give you examples you could follow; we entreat you to act with us as he himself would act if he were still on earth. You want us to be Christians, and you do not want to be Christian yourselves.”¹³²

Commerce

Commerce “cures destructive prejudices” and destroys despotisms by “[spread- ing] knowledge of the mores of all nations everywhere.”¹³³ Scholars generally agree that Montesquieu praised commerce but held some reservations. They disagree, however, on the gravity of those reservations. Commerce’s capacity to engender a prejudice explains his ambivalent stance toward it. Engaging in commercial activity can make human beings prize the accumulation of material

¹²⁷ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XXIV.3.461–62, XXIV.10.465–66. Though he remarks that “the Christian religion is remote from pure despotism,” he reserves his highest praise for Christianity only relative to Islam. See *Laws*, XXIV.3.461–62.

¹²⁸ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XXIV.3.461–62.

¹²⁹ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XXIV.4.462.

¹³⁰ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XXIV.10.465–66. For his defense of the Stoics against his critics, see also *Défense de l’Esprit des lois*, 1128. For other religions that he praises, see his discussion of the Pegu in *Laws*, XXIV.8.465 and the Essenes in XXIV.9.465.

¹³¹ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XV.13.491.

¹³² Montesquieu, *Laws*, XV.13.491.

¹³³ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XX.1–2.338. See Albert Hirschmann, *The Passions and the Interests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 69–80.

wealth to an unnatural extent such that monetary exchange dominates their relationships and interactions. They come to believe that procuring material goods is crucial to their wellbeing, even more than their natural need for liberty, which can encourage despotism. Because this misconception of our fundamental needs can cure religious prejudices, thereby weakening despotisms, it can also promote liberty, which is why Montesquieu also encourages commerce.

In general, scholars stake out two positions on Montesquieu's view of commerce. Bartlett,¹³⁴ Brennan,¹³⁵ Pangle,¹³⁶ Rahe,¹³⁷ and Schaub¹³⁸ argue that he promoted commerce because it best attacked despotism. As Pangle argues, "The outstanding benefit brought by commerce is that it enlightens and thereby 'softens' men ... Men are enlightened about their *common* insecurity and weakness."¹³⁹ Bartlett adds that, by spreading material comfort, commerce weakens traditional piety, a source of despotic ideas.¹⁴⁰ Though Pangle¹⁴¹ and Rahe¹⁴² acknowledge Montesquieu's reservations about commerce, in general, they argue that he enthusiastically promoted commerce because of its utility in securing moderate government. The second group, which consists of Krause,¹⁴³ Spector,¹⁴⁴ Roger Boesche,¹⁴⁵ and Emily Nacol and Constantine Vassiliou,¹⁴⁶ argues that, while he praised commerce, he had serious reservations about it. Krause explains, "Commercial ambition cannot fully supply the defect of higher motives because 'if the spirit of commerce unites nations, it does not unite individuals in the same way' (XX.2) ... While Montesquieu welcomes commerce and approves of its salutary effects, he is not blind on its limits."¹⁴⁷ Spector suggests that to read him as a simple proponent of commerce would be to reduce him to a simple democrat who cares only about creature comforts.¹⁴⁸

Both groups have neglected Montesquieu's judgment that commerce engenders a salutary prejudice. Human beings are not commercial by nature, which is to say that monetary exchange neither originally dominates nor ought to dominate human relationships and interactions. Commerce encourages the idea

¹³⁴ Bartlett, "Politics," 18.

¹³⁵ Brennan, "Contradictions," 541–43.

¹³⁶ Pangle, *Liberalism*, 203–6.

¹³⁷ Rahe, *Logic of Liberty*, 178–79.

¹³⁸ Schaub, "Montesquieu," 83.

¹³⁹ Pangle, *Liberalism*, 203–4.

¹⁴⁰ Bartlett, "Politics," 18.

¹⁴¹ Pangle, *Liberalism*, 106, 147–51, 240.

¹⁴² Rahe, *Logic of Liberty*, 175–76.

¹⁴³ Krause, "Separate Powers," 247 and "Despotism," 242–46.

¹⁴⁴ Spector, "Montesquieu et la crise du droit naturel modern: L'exégèse straussienne," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 1 (2013): 67. See also, Spector, *Montesquieu*, 22.

¹⁴⁵ Roger Boesche, "Fearing Monarchs and Merchants," *Western Political Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (1990): 758–59.

¹⁴⁶ Emily Nacol and Constantine Christos Vassiliou, "The Plague of High Finance in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*," in *The Spirit of Montesquieu's Persian Letters*, ed. Constantine Christos Vassiliou, Jeffrey Church, and Alin Fumurescu (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023), 103–23.

¹⁴⁷ Krause, "Separate Powers," 247.

¹⁴⁸ Spector, "Montesquieu et la crise du droit naturel modern," 67.

that we can put a price on everything for personal gain. “We see that in countries where one is affected only by the spirit of commerce, there is traffic in all human activities and all moral virtues; the smallest things, those required by humanity, are done or given for money.”¹⁴⁹ The priority, however, that human beings place on material wealth is useful. Their reliance on wealth undermines the religious prejudices that underpin despotisms. Montesquieu encourages commerce because “the comforts of life” are “a more certain way to attack religion.”¹⁵⁰ And commerce is especially useful because, similar to Christianity, it is not a principle tied to a particular regime. Commerce can spread because it is a part of human life more generally as it is one of the universal, primary relations that constitute “the spirit of the laws” but can have varying influence in different nations.¹⁵¹

Montesquieu’s reservations about commerce are rooted in its capacity to obscure human nature in two ways, which can support despotism. First, the commercial prejudice weakens and even destroys the natural affection that people feel for each other, which is the basis of the third natural law. As Pangle notes, while commerce can promote humanity by undermining despotisms, it also contravenes it by encouraging an “exact justice.”¹⁵² Albert Hirschmann adds, “[Montesquieu] regrets the way in which commerce brings with it a monetization of all human relations.”¹⁵³ Montesquieu’s example is hospitality, which is rare in commercial countries because hotels are more profitable than hosting guests.¹⁵⁴ His premier example of how commerce can destroy our humanity is the Spanish, whose commerce extended despotism to the New World. As Rahe has noticed, Spanish commerce’s ill effects concerned Montesquieu even 20 years before the publication of the *Laws*.¹⁵⁵ While it is usually true “that everywhere there is commerce, there are gentle mores,” Spain is an exception to this “almost general rule.”¹⁵⁶ Because commerce makes the Spanish believe that the “prodigious” “quantity of gold and silver” is real wealth, commerce seduced them. The Spanish desired to obtain it, which led them to treat people inhumanely.¹⁵⁷ They used commerce to enlarge their despotic empire. The American colonies were “in a kind of dependence of which there are very few examples among the ancient colonies.”¹⁵⁸ Because of commerce, the Spanish destroyed others by slavery, and they destroyed themselves by vice.

The second way in which commerce can advance despotism concerns the proper ranking of goods. As noted above, commerce can encourage human beings to love wealth more than security, so that they forget their nature as liberty-seeking beings, which the first natural law describes. The love for

¹⁴⁹ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XX.2.338–39.

¹⁵⁰ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XXV.12.489.

¹⁵¹ Montesquieu, *Laws*, I.3.9.

¹⁵² Montesquieu, *Laws*, XX.2.339; Pangle, *Liberalism*, 209.

¹⁵³ Albert Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 80.

¹⁵⁴ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XX.2.339.

¹⁵⁵ Rahe, *Logic of Liberty*, 171–72.

¹⁵⁶ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XX.1.338.

¹⁵⁷ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XXI.22.393–94.

¹⁵⁸ Montesquieu, *Laws*, XXI.21.391.

material comfort prepares them for despotism's sole consolation: "In despotic governments ... one decides to act only in anticipation of the comforts of life, the prince who gives rewards has only silver to give."¹⁵⁹ While Montesquieu might view comfort to be a natural desire, it is unnatural for human beings to want comfort at liberty's expense, which commerce encourages. As Krause remarks, commerce "can cause individuals to prefer their profits, or their comforts, to their liberties ... In a commercial society, where the motive of material interest predominates, subjects may be gratified into submission by a despot who successfully supplies their needs even while denying their liberties."¹⁶⁰

Conclusion

Prejudices are central to Montesquieu's political project. He seeks to destroy them because they support despotisms and twist human nature. But to avoid employing immoderate, tyrannical remedies that contravene the general spirit, he also uses existing, salutary prejudices to help liberty take root. Because the human being is flexible and society makes her lose sight of her nature, even the best political solutions conceal who she is. This strategy is consistent with moderation, the principle that guides Montesquieu's political thought and project. This article contributes to the literature by identifying the salutary prejudices that he uses to support liberty and showing how his use of prejudices coheres with a moderate view of human reason.

Acknowledgements. I thank Dr Ruth Abbey and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments, which have improved this article. I also thank Nathaniel Gilmore for his comments and Beckett Rueda for his thoughts.

¹⁵⁹ Montesquieu, *Laws*, V.18.68.

¹⁶⁰ Krause, "Despotism," 244.