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Montesquieu (and Machiavelli) on Cruelty

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Montesquieu's *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness* [*Grandeur*] *of the Romans and Their Decline* [*Décadence*] is probably the least read, least studied, and least written about of his three major works. Although it is not entirely clear why this work has been relegated to the doldrums of his corpus, it has been suggested that it might be on account of its peculiar character: neither a towering elucubration of political philosophy (like *The Spirit of the Laws*) nor a widely popular epistolary novel (like *Persian Letters*), it seems to fall outside the realms of what modern or contemporary political science is most interested in or accustomed to, and the book should thus be considered and read as a simple work of history (whatever that might mean or imply).[1] Montesquieu's contemporaries and immediate followers certainly did not think so. In his *Éloge de Montesquieu*, d'Alembert emphasized the philosophic and even esoteric dimensions of the book: "[I]n letting much to be seen, he left even more to be thought, and he could have titled his book: *Roman History, for the Use of Statesmen and Philosophers*."[2] Or again, Alexis de Tocqueville claimed that "Montesquieu's history of Rome [was] the best example of how 'philosophical history' should be written," and there is little doubt that it influenced all his writings, especially *The Old Regime and the Revolution*.[3] And finally, no less a figure than Edward Gibbon

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studied and was inspired by *Considerations*, and few would argue that his masterpiece was devoid of political and philosophical reflections.[4]

But we do not need to turn to d'Alembert, Tocqueville, and Gibbon to see the centrality of *Considerations* in Montesquieu's corpus as a whole—we can simply turn to Montesquieu himself. In an oft-quoted line from *The Spirit of the Laws* (bk. 11, chap. 13), Montesquieu categorically affirms that "One can never leave the Romans," and the number of references to Roman history and learning in that book is a testament to this fact. Therefore, why would political scientists not be more interested in this book? Even if Montesquieu had never written the foregoing line, and even if *Considerations* is thought to be a work of history pure and simple, why would political scientists not want to study a history of Rome by one of the greatest political philosophers of the Enlightenment era and beyond? Indeed, one could make the argument, based on the aforementioned observations, that *Considerations* is a prolegomenon to *The Spirit of the Laws*, and that only by studying the former would we be in a position to understand or to appreciate fully the latter.[5]

When we begin to immerse ourselves in *Considerations*, we begin to see its indebtedness to the works of Niccolò Machiavelli (which, of course, is of eminent concern for political scientists). How to pinpoint and to assess this influence accurately has been variously described by contemporary scholars. David Lowenthal, for example, claims that *Considerations* "bears a deep inner kinship" to Machiavelli's *Discourses*, a kinship that reveals more clearly than any other of Montesquieu's works the "Machiavellian foundations of his thought."[6] Richard Myers sees an even stronger relationship between the works of these two authors, maintaining that "Montesquieu uses Rome above all as a vehicle for engaging in a discussion with . . . Machiavelli."[7] And finally, Mark Hulliung goes further still and suggests that *Considerations* is where Montesquieu wages an uncompromising and full-scale assault against Machiavelli and Machiavellianism.[8] Other sources could be cited on the relationship between these two philosophers; but

whatever characterization is used, it seems evident that the Baron de La Brède and the Florentine diplomat are going to duke it out in *Considerations*, and the battlefield is nothing less than the entirety of Roman history.[9]

Given that Montesquieu critically reflected on Machiavelli's political thought before writing *Considerations*, we would expect Montesquieu to comment in some way on his understanding of cruelty.[10] That such an expectation is fully justified can be seen by considering the following two ideas. In the first place, Machiavelli is notorious for speaking frankly and vividly about the political utility of cruelty, with his distinction in *The Prince* between well-used and badly-used cruelties (*PR* VIII: 37–38) and with his description of the employment and then assassination of Remirro de Orca ("a cruel and ready man") in the Romagna (*PR* VII: 29–30).[11] In the second place, Montesquieu is credited with trying to introduce a certain sense of humanity into politics, that he is a writer who is "passionate in his hatred of cruelty—it is Montesquieu's strongest and perhaps his only passion."[12] Thus, we would expect that a careful examination of *Considerations* would reveal some teaching on the subject of cruelty, since it is in this work that Montesquieu seems to confront most directly that political philosopher who advocated so unreservedly the political advantages of well-used cruelty. In fact, this expectation is fully confirmed if we are allowed to use as evidence what any "enlightened" human being would have done in the eighteenth century in order to learn exactly what cruelty is—namely, to look up the meaning of the word in Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*. In doing so, what we discover is that Louis de Jaucourt's article on *cruauté* is based largely on examples taken from Montesquieu's *Considerations*: in fact, so much does Jaucourt's discussion of cruelty rely on *Considerations* that he repeatedly paraphrases and quotes various passages from this work to make his point. It would not be stretching the truth to say that if Jaucourt were an undergraduate student in a political philosophy course and submitted his essay through turnitin.com, he would more than likely have been accused of plagiarism![13] Montesquieu, therefore, might rightly be considered as *the* Enlightenment

theoretician of cruelty in the same or a similar way that Machiavelli is often considered its Renaissance exemplar, and the best place to begin such a comparative investigation and study is *Considerations*. Accordingly, this essay seeks to lay bare Montesquieu's new understanding of cruelty, and to show both its indebtedness to and departure from Machiavelli's original teaching. If *Considerations* is rightly to be considered a prolegomenon to *The Spirit of the Laws*, then it is imperative to unravel and to reveal this new teaching on cruelty, for failure to do so would risk overlooking or misunderstanding what many scholars agree is a key dimension or aspect of Montesquieu's overall political project (as most fully articulated in *The Spirit of the Laws*)—namely, the introduction and promotion of a new spirit or ethic of humanity, tranquillity, security, and liberty. This essay, one hopes, might go a small way in helping to reinvigorate this neglected classic among scholars, students, and the learned public, and to demonstrate why "One can never leave the Romans."

This essay is divided into four sections. In Part I, we examine Montesquieu's initial descriptions of cruelty—from the early Republic to the early Empire—discovering that security and liberty (or the lack thereof) are essential ingredients in determining whether a violent action is categorized as cruel or not. In Part II, we return to Machiavelli's original understanding in order to see whether, or to what extent, his emphasis on security and well-being are the same as Montesquieu's security and liberty. In Part III, we attempt to concretize more fully their divergent viewpoints by looking at the example of Septimius Severus, an emperor whose activities in ascending to the throne and maintaining the Empire are described quite differently by both philosophers. And finally, in Part IV, we turn to the final examples of cruelty in the middle and late Empire in *Considerations*. Here we see that although Montesquieu and Machiavelli may have diverged in their characterization and appraisal of cruelty, they both share a common ground in seeing that the intrusive entrance of Christianity into politics introduces a new and perhaps unique brand of cruelty that both thinkers roundly criticize. It must be stressed at the outset, however, that the primary focus of this essay is on Montesquieu:

whereas much has been written on Machiavelli's understanding of cruelty, very little has been on Montesquieu's, especially from the perspective of *Considerations*.

With these introductory remarks in mind, let us now turn to *Considerations* directly, tracing Montesquieu's use of the word *cruelty* to discern the similarities and differences between the various passages and contexts in which it occurs.

I: Cruelty and Violence, Security and Liberty

Montesquieu first uses the word *cruelty* in Chapter V, where he describes Philip of Macedon as a "cruel tyrant" (*CN* V: 94/59), and then where he argues that one of the reasons why Egypt did not pose a formidable military threat to Rome was because of the "cruelty of its kings" (*CN* V: 98/63). Although Montesquieu does not elaborate on the precise reason(s) why he believed the Egyptian kings were cruel, he does point the reader in a footnote to the writings of Polybius to see "the injustices and cruelties by which Philip discredited himself" (*CN* V: 94n.b/59n5). Now Polybius speaks about a great many of Philip's actions that were cruel and unjust, from his desecration of the colonnades and other sacred objects at Thermus during the Aetolian war (Polybius V: 9–12) to his treachery in Messene (Polybius VII: 10–14; IX: 30). In describing Philip's cruelty, Polybius stresses not only the physically violent character of his actions but their political consequences as well—specifically, that Philip lost the respect and trust of the other Greek cities (Polybius V: 11–12). Montesquieu himself agrees wholeheartedly with Polybius's analysis; for immediately after Montesquieu calls Philip a "cruel tyrant," he indicates that Philip's "bad actions" made him "odious and detestable to all the Greeks," making it impossible for him to rally them together under his leadership in order to confront the impending threat posed by the Romans (*CN* V: 95–97/59–62). Thus, this first example suggests that the consequences of physically violent actions (and not just the violent actions themselves) are an integral part of Montesquieu's understanding of cruelty, or more specifically, that Montesquieu calls cruel those actions that jeopardize (or contribute nothing) to the

security of a state.[14] Interestingly, the first example of cruelty is not Roman but Greek and Egyptian: although Montesquieu will describe in painstaking detail in the next chapter how deceitful, duplicitous, and simply dishonest the Romans were in the conduct of foreign policy—as they more or less enslaved one city after another in pursuit of territorial aggrandizement—he does not label these actions as cruel (perhaps because they led to the expansion of the Republic throughout Italy and beyond, which was the source of both Rome's greatness and its ultimate decline).

That Montesquieu's understanding of cruelty encompasses the means of a specific action as well as the consequences or ends of that action can also be seen in his discussion of Sulla's cruelty at the beginning of Chapter XI. Now Montesquieu does not criticize Sulla for his effort to "remove the cause of the disorders" that plagued Rome; rather, Montesquieu makes a distinction between Sulla's cruelty—those frenzied actions that accompanied his successes—and the beneficial laws with which he attempted to reinvigorate republican liberty (*CN* XI: 123/101). Although it is doubtful that Sulla could single-handedly have breathed new life into the Republic (or what was left of it: cf. *SL* III 3: 252/22), those cruel and frenzied actions that accompanied his attempt to do so doomed his slim chance of success from the very beginning. Montesquieu is very specific here in detailing those actions that undermined his unsuccessful efforts to eliminate the cause of Rome's disorders. In Chapter VIII, Montesquieu had claimed that the "strength of the republic consisted in discipline, austerity of *moeurs*, and the constant observance of certain customs" (*CN* VIII: 114/86). In Chapter XI, Montesquieu shows how Sulla systematically violated each of these principles: first, he ruined military discipline in his expedition to Asia; second, he was the first general to enter Rome with arms; and finally, third, he made his soldiers greedy by giving them the land of other citizens (*CN* XI: 123–24/101–2). And if this was not enough, the introduction of proscriptions made it almost impossible for any citizen to be more dedicated to the Republic than to one of the generals who might at any given moment be contending for the leadership of Rome. Thus, Sulla seems to be described

as cruel, not so much because his effort to lead the Romans back to their former liberty might have involved bloodshed, but because the consequences of his other acts of cruel violence undermined this very effort. In this respect, Montesquieu's understanding of cruelty encompasses violent actions that not only jeopardize the security of a state in foreign affairs but also contribute nothing to (or even undermine) the internal strength of a government (*CN* XI: 124/102).

In turning from Sulla's cruelty to that of Octavius, we are presented with the following difficulty: while it is clear that the cruelty Montesquieu ascribes to the proscriptions of the second triumvirate supports the foregoing understanding of cruelty (*CN* XII: 135n.c/116n7; cf. *SL* XII 18: 447–48/202–4), it is much less clear why Montesquieu says that Octavius's treatment of the Roman people was cruel, if only because Octavius put an end to civil disturbances in Rome while simultaneously keeping foreign enemies at bay (*CN* XIII: 138–39/120–22; cf. XI: 128–29/107–8).[15] To resolve this difficulty, it is necessary to broaden our understanding of cruelty by incorporating into it the importance Montesquieu places on liberty as a political good. According to Montesquieu, liberty is "the right to do all that the laws permit; and if a citizen could do what the laws forbid, he would no longer have liberty, because the others would have this power as well" (*SL* XI 3: 395/155). Liberty depends, therefore, on the "security, or in the opinion that one has of one's security" under the law (*SL* XII 1: 430/187; cf. *SL* XI 6: 397/157). Even though Octavius brought some sort of "peace" and "stability" to Rome, Montesquieu calls him cruel because these "august" achievements came at the price of extirpating freedom and establishing tyranny. Despite keeping all the outward manifestations of the Republic, Octavius's aggregation of power meant that whatever "liberty" the Romans did possess was dependent entirely on his will and not on the institutional arrangements and legal codes that all persons were previously bound to obey. Montesquieu underscores the importance of liberty as a political end (and therefore how cruel a leader is who destroys that liberty) by claiming that no tyranny is more cruel than that which "one exercises under the shadow of the laws and with

the colours of justice" (*CN* XIV: 144/130). In other words, Montesquieu is simply indignant when he witnesses a tyrannical government make a mockery of law and justice, which are the very conditions for the existence of liberty. Thus, when Montesquieu compares the actions of Sulla and Octavius in Chapter XIII, his comparison reveals this ironic conclusion: while Sulla was a much more violent man than Octavius, his actions appear less cruel, since he at least wanted to give back to the Romans their freedom; Octavius, by contrast, is characterized as being both less violent and more cruel, since his schemes "gently conducted [the Romans] to servitude" (*CN* XIII: 140/122–23). Montesquieu's understanding of cruelty, then, is intimately connected with whether or not leaders can achieve the goals of security, on the one hand, and liberty, on the other hand. More generally, we might say that the principle of political autonomy is crucial in Montesquieu's understanding of cruelty, both autonomy from without (from foreign domination) as well as from within (from the arbitrary will of another citizen).

With the foregoing thoughts in mind, we are now in a position to understand Montesquieu's discussion of cruelty in Chapter XV (where the word is used with greater frequency than in any other chapter). He claims that the "appalling tyranny of the emperors came from the general spirit of the Romans," who passed too quickly from being absolute masters of the world to being the servile subjects of their own emperors. Since the very swiftness of this change did not allow them time to soften their *moeurs*, their "fierce humour" remained, the consequences of which were that the "citizens were treated as they themselves treated vanquished enemies, and were governed according to the same plan" (*CN* XV: 147–48/135–36). But if these statements are true—in other words, if Montesquieu has described the rule of the emperors as cruel (cf. *CN* XIII: 139/121–22; XIV: 144/130; XV: 149/137, 152–53/140)—then would it not necessarily follow that the rule of the Romans during the most brilliant period of the Republic was as cruel to foreigners as the rule of the emperors was to themselves?

This question forces us to return to the earlier chapters of *Considerations*, where we discover that before Chapter XI,

Montesquieu does not once describe the Romans as cruel. No mention is made of the infamous rape of the Sabine women (*CN* I: 70/24); Manlius's execution of his son (*CN* II: 77–78/35) and the Roman practice of decimation (*CN* IV: 86/47) are spoken of in almost approbatory terms; Rome's pillaging, ferocious wars, her subjugating other cities and depriving them of their own liberty—not once does Montesquieu describe these actions as cruel! This is certainly not an unintentional mistake on Montesquieu's part; for when Montesquieu speaks about "the spectacle of human things" in summarizing the peculiar history of Rome later in Chapter XV (150/138), he never once says that during the peak of the Republic the Romans were cruel.[16]

What does account for Montesquieu's refusal to call the Romans cruel is the exceedingly high value he places on security and liberty. The Romans may have been ferocious, warlike, and violent, but they were not, in a strict sense, cruel, since it was these very spirited qualities that, when put into the service of the city as a whole, allowed the Romans at least to possess security and liberty (even though they deprived almost every other city and people they encountered and conquered of these same political goods). In contradistinction to comments about the Republic, Montesquieu's criticism of the Empire centers on the fact that the omnipresent use of cruel violence never resulted in any political good beyond the Empire's security from foreign dangers: the rest of the world was still under Roman domination, the Roman people were servile and treated as such, and the only "good" that the emperors possessed was an unlimited license to satisfy their meanest passions. If these observations are correct, they indicate how strikingly anti-utilitarian Montesquieu's understanding of cruelty is—for despite the fact that nearly all the peoples bordering the Mediterranean littoral (and beyond) were under the Roman yoke, the example of a comparatively small number of people maintaining their autonomy is enough for Montesquieu to refrain from calling them cruel.

But let us not get carried away. These statements must be tempered by the fact that Montesquieu hardly displays an unmitigated admiration for the ferocious practices of the Romans: indeed, Montesquieu's discussion of the Republic as a whole suggests that

their ferociousness came very close to eclipsing their achievements. In the first place, Montesquieu remarks that because the Romans "made sport of human nature in the person of their children and their slaves, they could hardly know this virtue which we call humanity" (*CN* XV: 148/136). This is a very severe criticism of the Romans on Montesquieu's part, a firm indication of the exceedingly high price the Romans paid in respect to their own character for security and liberty.[17] And in the second place, while Montesquieu's presentation in Chapter VI of how the Romans subjected all peoples is clearly Machiavellian, Montesquieu's underlying tone throughout appears to be one of strong indignation. That the Romans did not even have the "justice of brigands" (*CN* VI: 106/74); that "a thousand crimes were committed in order to give the Romans all the money of the world" (*CN* VI: 106–7/74); that they often gave a "treaty an arbitrary interpretation" (*CN* VI: 105/73)—remarks such as these cannot help but leave a foul taste in the reader's mouth. Montesquieu may not explicitly take the viewpoint of the victims of Roman aggression in Chapter VI, but his analysis nevertheless reveals that from their point of view the *Pax Romana* was a cruel misnomer (cf. *SL* XI 19: 428–30/184–86).

It is possible to conclude at this point that Montesquieu understands cruelty as a political action that involves physical violence and whose consequences or ends compromise security and/or liberty. In other words, Montesquieu's understanding of cruelty has both a Machiavellian and a liberal element to it: Machiavellian to the extent that Montesquieu does not always call cruel the violence needed to keep a state secure from foreign domination; and liberal to the extent that he generally calls cruel those tyrannical leaders who, while keeping a state secure from enemies abroad, destroy or diminish the liberty of their citizens in the process.

II: Cruelty's Necessity in a Violent World: Security and Well-Being

Having articulated some of the major elements of Montesquieu's new understanding of cruelty, let us return to Machiavelli's original formulation to see in what ways Montesquieu concurs with and

departs from it. What we will discover is that while there is a broad area of agreement between the two philosophers on the necessarily violent and sometimes ferocious actions needed to maintain a healthy and vibrant state, Machiavelli has what might be described as a decidedly more personal direction or focus: while not abandoning the goals of the security and liberty of the political community as a whole, he seems to see these as less important than the individual success and well-being of the founder, prince, or ruler. To sketch in broad outline the lineaments of Machiavelli's understanding of cruelty, it is necessary to turn first to Chapter XV of *The Prince*, where Machiavelli presents a list of eleven pairs of qualities, among them cruelty and mercy.

Machiavelli states that although it would be "a very praiseworthy thing" if a prince could have all the qualities that are reputed to be good without any of the bad ones, "human conditions do not permit it" (*PR* XV: 62). A prince should attempt, therefore, "to avoid the infamy of those vices that would take his state from him," if this is possible; if it is not possible, a prince "should not care about incurring the fame of those vices without which it is difficult to save one's state." Since these remarks apply to all the qualities that Machiavelli mentions, it is clear that he, like Montesquieu, agrees that no comprehensive understanding of cruelty can be separated from the ends or consequences of the particular actions involved. Furthermore, Machiavelli states that a prince must be cautious lest he pursues a policy that, while appearing to be virtuous, leads to his destruction, and conversely, he should not be afraid to pursue a policy that appears to be vicious, if that policy "results in [his] security and well-being" (*PR* XV: 62). This suggests that the praise or blame of a cruel action is entirely dependent on the result of that action or, more generally, that political success or failure—"one's security and well-being"—is the standard whereby qualities such as cruelty are considered "virtuous" or "vicious." Unlike Montesquieu, who almost always conveys a strong sense of indignation whenever he calls a leader cruel, Machiavelli is able to call a leader at one and the same time both cruel *and* virtuous, as he does when describing the "savage cruelty" of Agathocles

(*PR* VIII: 35) and the "inhuman cruelty" of Hannibal (*PR* XVII: 67). Cruelty does not preclude virtue: indeed, the latter might even entail or require the former.[18]

These themes are made more explicit when we turn to Chapter XVII of *The Prince* and review the examples Machiavelli evinces in describing cruelty and mercy. While Cesare Borgia was reputed to be cruel, his very cruelty "restored the Romagna, united it, and reduced it to peace and to faith"; by contrast, the people of Florence, who wished to escape the reputation of being cruel, "allowed Pistoia to be destroyed" (*PR* XVII: 65). Clearly, Machiavelli wants us to see that the reputations of the Florentine people and Cesare Borgia are completely distorted, and that the Florentine people were far more "cruel" by dint of their "mercy" than Borgia was by his swift and violent actions. This is poignantly corroborated when we examine Machiavelli's quotation from Virgil that immediately follows these two examples. Here, Machiavelli reminds us that while Dido understood that cruel actions were necessary to keep her new city secure, her very compassion toward Aeneas proved to be exceedingly cruel inasmuch as it was the cause of her own destruction and ultimately that of the Carthaginians centuries later. Given that the only effective examples of mercy in this chapter are actually acts of cruelty (and vice versa), we can confidently conclude that Machiavelli would agree with the saying "You have to be cruel to be kind" (or better yet, that cruelty is kindness).

Nevertheless, it would be wholly wrong to assume from the foregoing observations that Machiavelli advocates cruelty for its own sake or that any cruel action can promote "security" and "well-being." When Machiavelli discusses Agathocles in Chapter VIII of *The Prince*, he makes his notorious distinction between well-used and badly-used cruelties: the former are those "done at a stroke," from "necessity to secure oneself," and are "not persisted in but are turned to as much utility for the subjects as one can"; by contrast, the latter are those that "rather grow with time than are eliminated" and ultimately jeopardize the prince's (and the people's) security and well-being (*PR* VIII: 37–38). This is not to say that Machiavelli is hesitant or squeamish when it comes to the political

utility of employing violence or even of its description: after making the aforementioned distinction, he seems to refer to cruelty in the next paragraph as mere "offenses" and then as "injuries"; he compares those offenses and injuries with how a prince should dispense benefits; and he then concludes by describing how the recipients of those actions (both good and ill) will "taste" them. It is doubtful that Montesquieu would ever use a culinary metaphor to describe cruelty, however employed. So what is the real difference between Machiavelli and Montesquieu on this issue—is it only over the use of a word, or is it a matter of rhetorical emphasis? Should we refrain from calling an act of physical violence cruel if it achieves a worthwhile political end, or should we blur the distinction between violence and cruelty and concentrate above all on whether the cruelty was well or badly used? In other words, should we *not* call a violent action cruel if it achieves an admirable result (whether for the prince, the people, or both), or should we call that violent action cruel but highlight that it was an instance of well-used cruelty and should therefore be excused (if not praised) for what it achieved or avoided (whether for the prince, the people, or both)? To see what, if any, substantive issue or issues are behind these two different uses of the word *cruelty*, we must determine whether or not the ends toward which Machiavelli praises cruelty well-used—namely, for security and well-being—are synonymous with Montesquieu's understanding of security and liberty. Let us turn first to Machiavelli's understanding of security.

In the opening six chapters of *Discourses*, Machiavelli argues that if someone wanted to "order a republic anew," he would have to ask whether he wanted it to be isolationist (like Sparta and Venice) or expansionistic (like Rome), there being no realistic "middle way" or "mode" between the two. Machiavelli immediately reveals, however, the predicament in which cities like Sparta and Venice find themselves: since they are too weak to support a policy of sustained conquest, they must protect themselves by being situated in "a strong place of such power" that they appear as a troublesome prize to any would-be conqueror as well as by not appearing so "formidable" that they cause their neighbors to fear them (*DS* I 6: 22–23). Although it

is not surprising, given such a predicament, that Machiavelli urges a founder to choose Rome as a model, what Machiavelli's discussion highlights is that the exigencies of foreign policy more or less dictate the requisite internal policy of a state.[19] A state must, like Rome, be able to expand if it hopes to survive in the ever-changing, unpredictable, and zero-sum world of international politics. In fact, the importance of military expansion is accentuated once we remember that the "desire to acquire" is a "very natural and ordinary thing" for human beings (*PR* III: 14) as well as the not unrelated fact that most cities are eventually destroyed by external enemies (*DS* I 1–2: 7–14).

Now although Montesquieu does not gainsay the fundamental importance of foreign affairs, he does question the possibility and necessity of Roman expansionism in order to maintain security. In the first place, Montesquieu reveals throughout *Considerations* that Rome was the result of such a peculiar concatenation of causes that it is doubtful whether the circumstances that gave rise to this city could ever be reproduced again. Moreover, even if a leader should attempt to create a modern Rome, the drastically different moral sentiments of most Europeans make it highly unlikely that the necessary ferociousness that alone could sustain a policy of expansion could be cultivated (*CN* XV: 148/136–37). In the second place, there are several suggestions in *Considerations* that given the great increase in and importance of technology and commerce, it may no longer be necessary for a state to be expansionistic in order to survive. For example, with the invention of gunpowder and the compass, England's modern and technologically sophisticated fleet has given it a level of security that Carthage could never have attained given the relatively primitive state of naval warfare at the time (*CN* IV: 87–89/48–49; *SL* XXI 21: 641–45/390–93). Or again, the reason the Byzantine (or Eastern or Greek) Empire was able to survive for such a long time despite its manifest weaknesses was largely on account of its commercial activities and technology (*CN* XXIII: 203–5/213–15). Indeed, if imperialistic republics such as Rome run a great risk of imploding once they grow too great (*CN* IX: 116–20/91–96), or are corrupted by wealth (*CN* X: 120–22/97–100), or fall too swiftly under tyrannical government

(*CN* XV: 147–48/135–37), then perhaps a state should renounce the possible security (and greatness) that may be attained through expansion for the mediocrity of commercial republics, since at least such states can "subsist a long time in their mediocrity" (*CN* IV: 87/47). What we might say is that Montesquieu here criticizes Machiavelli by updating his teaching on security. Since it might no longer be necessary, or possible, or desirable for a people to be as ferocious as the Romans were in order to maintain security, then modern European governments can potentially practice the virtue of humanity without compromising their security.[20]

A more substantial disagreement between Montesquieu and Machiavelli centers on the latter's understanding of well-being and its relationship to effective leadership. Now Machiavelli's understanding of well-being encompasses at least three things beyond security (broadly speaking): an effective and consistently enforced system of penal justice (*DS* I 24: 59–60; I 45: 93–94); a respected, united, and powerful state, especially in matters pertaining to religion and freedom (*DS* I 12: 36–39; II 2: 129–33); and prosperity, at least to the extent of an ample public treasury (*DS* II 6: 140–42). Moreover, Machiavelli continually stresses the vital importance of leadership in attaining these political goods, above all the kind of leadership from young and ambitious men who shrewdly understand and can prudently carry out all the well-used cruelties necessary to keep themselves in power and the state in a flourishing condition (*DS* I Ded. Epis.: 3–4; I 60: 121–22; II Pref.: 123–25). There is no doubt that Machiavelli emphasizes that such a leader should base his power on the spiritedness of the people—on their capacity for war and their desire for gain—but in doing so a leader should attempt to direct their spiritedness toward securing the political goods associated with well-being (*DS* I 21: 54–55). For Machiavelli, the people are like an enormous body without any head (*DS* I 44: 92): they are relatively strong but essentially confused as to how to attain what they truly want (*DS* I 53: 105–8). In this respect, what the people need most of all are precisely those leaders who can point out to them what is genuinely in their own interest, or in some cases to manipulate them (sometimes cruelly) when they do not see it.

Given this understanding of well-being and the people's inability to attain it themselves, Machiavelli is willing to admit that a tyrant can successfully lead the people to acquire these political goods or, more candidly, that it often takes a tyrannical individual to institute the "new modes and orders" that make possible the pursuit of these goods in the first place. In fact, Machiavelli notes that all states that wish to remain healthy will eventually require the services of tyrannical individuals—those persons who might have to go above the law to extirpate the wicked and licentious habits that become manifest during the existence of any state by reinspiring in the people the original fear and terror they felt toward the government at its inception (*DS* III 1: 209–12). Although Machiavelli seems to prefer republics to tyrannies, it nevertheless remains true that a tyrant who can properly "disguise" his rule can end up benefiting the people to such an extent that they do not wish to change governments (*DS* I 16: 44–47; II 23: 181–84). For Machiavelli, then, there is a potential harmony between the well-being of the people and that of a shrewd tyrant—one who can give the people as much wealth, security, and liberty as is compatible with their nature and circumstances while simultaneously attaining prosperity and power for himself.[21]

Although Montesquieu agrees in general terms with Machiavelli's understanding of well-being, Montesquieu holds a very dim view of the possible beneficial effects of tyranny (or despotism). Montesquieu might be forced to admit that a tyrant can (theoretically at least) secure the well-being of his people, but he would also point out that for Machiavelli a tyrant seeks that well-being only because this is the surest and most secure foundation for his own prosperity and power. In other words, a tyrant is not in any way bound by, nor necessarily acts out of a concern for, the common good of the people as such; instead, a tyrant's deliberations and decisions revolve around how to secure his own good strictly speaking, and these deliberations and the decisions will determine the character of his government and how he ultimately treats the people.[22] For Montesquieu, however, tyranny is for all practical purposes the worst form of government, especially in comparison with moderate republicanism, monarchy, and the new,

emerging commercial liberalism. Montesquieu claims that it is an "eternal experience that every man who has power is led to abuse it" (*SL* XI 4: 395/155), and in this respect all possible means should be taken to prevent the accumulation of power in a single hand. For Montesquieu, one of the greatest problems associated with tyranny is that it jeopardizes and often extirpates the liberty of citizens: as was the case with the Roman decemvirs and the emperors, tyranny almost inevitably destroys the very "soul" of a republic by destroying its spirit of liberty—that same proud spirit of independence the Romans possessed and that made the Republic as a whole so admirable and distinctive (*CN* I: 74/29). While Montesquieu must admit that a significant part of Rome's greatness depended on the leadership of its best citizens, he also emphasizes that this leadership was at its zenith when the Republic maintained its institutions and laws, thereby preventing anyone from accumulating too much power. Indeed, Montesquieu sees that it is precisely this spirit of liberty—this "tranquillity of spirit which comes from the opinion that each one has of his security" (*SL* XI 6: 397/157)—that fundamentally contributes to a citizen's own happiness, and in this respect the degradation of the human soul that occurs under tyranny can hardly in the vast majority of cases outweigh any possible benefits accrued from such an immoderate form of government.[23] Thus, Montesquieu effects a change in the meaning of the word *cruelty* because he did not want to give any positive signification to all the clever frauds and violent practices by which an ambitious man could attain tyrannical power by overthrowing a moderate government. What we can say is that while Montesquieu believed that he could replace (to some extent) the vital necessity of shrewd and sometimes cruel leadership with certain institutional frameworks, he first had to bring about a new understanding of cruelty—an understanding that harshly condemns the usurpation of power and the extirpation of liberty.[24] Once again we see that the teaching on cruelty in *Considerations* should be considered Montesquieu's necessary moral prolegomenon to the new teachings that he will present in *The Spirit of the Laws* on security, liberty, commerce, and the blessings of moderate government.

III: A Tale of Two Severuses

To bring into more critical focus the differences between Montesquieu's and Machiavelli's understanding of cruelty, it is helpful to compare their discussions of Septimius Severus, whom Machiavelli praises for his virtue and cruelty (*PR* XIX: 77–82; cf. *DS* I 10: 32) and whom Montesquieu criticizes for his lack of gentleness (*CN* XVI: 156–61/146–51). By focusing on this singular figure, we can begin to see in ever more concrete terms how and why Montesquieu transforms and redirects Machiavelli's understanding of cruelty away from someone whose immediate deeds and their long-term consequences were much more problematic and deleterious than Machiavelli presented them. Notwithstanding that Severus had rare (and perhaps even admirable) qualities, Montesquieu strongly indicates that we need to look elsewhere for proper models of emulation.

Machiavelli begins his discussion with a detailed description of how Severus became emperor. Severus's rise to power is a stellar example of how to use cruelty prudently or, more generally, of how to be "a very fierce lion and a very astute fox." First, Severus used the murder of Pertinax as an excuse to kill Julianus, playing on what little sense of right and wrong the army had. Second, Severus did not disclose his intentions to others but acted swiftly and secretly in marching to Rome. Third, Severus allied himself initially with Albinus, who, because he had not proclaimed himself emperor as Niger had, could be presumed to be more gullible and less ambitious than Niger. And finally, after Severus defeated Niger and was co-emperor with Albinus, Severus immediately proceeded to concoct some lie about Albinus in front of the Senate, giving himself a justification for traveling to France to dispose of his last obstacle to absolute dominance. Thus, Severus's rise to (or usurpation of) power provides a kind of road map to young and ambitious leaders as to how to use guile and cruelty to eliminate political competitors or adversaries.

Severus was no less Machiavellian once he had gained power, but he quickly and shrewdly discerned what cruel measures he had to take to remain emperor—namely, to keep the people "astonished and stupefied" and the army "reverent and satisfied" (*PR* XIX: 78).

The words *stupefied* and *satisfied* are terms Machiavelli had used previously in describing the reaction of the people in the Romagna to Cesare Borgia's violent execution of his minister, Remirro de Orco (*PR* VII: 30). Machiavelli elaborates later on in this same chapter just what these two words might mean when he says that Cesare Borgia's actions demonstrated how well he knew how "to make himself loved and feared by the people, and followed and revered by the soldiers" (*PR* VII: 32). It seems, therefore, that Machiavelli equates the people's stupefaction with their fear of similar violent actions happening to them and the people's satisfaction with their love of Cesare Borgia for punishing de Orco for the cruelties he committed during the pacification of the Romagna. Now because Severus had to contend with a cruel and avaricious army as well as a disgruntled people, he merely split the differences accordingly, keeping the people stupefied and in fear while satisfying the avarice of the all-powerful army. Consequently, the soldiers revered (or loved) Severus because he allowed them to glut their avarice on the people, while the people themselves were kept in such a state of astonishment (or perpetual fear) that they had no opportunity to translate their hatred of Severus into some sort of open rebellion against him (*PR* XIX: 78–79). Thus, for Machiavelli Severus is an exemplary model of a new prince not only because he knew how to rise to power but also because he knew how to remain in power once he got there. Indeed, the very fact that Severus was able to rule so securely under such circumstances makes his entire reign seem much less cruel than those of many of the other emperors Machiavelli describes in this chapter, emperors whose violent actions appear unnecessary and ineffective by comparison.[25] In this respect, Severus might be regarded as the most impressive of all the ten emperors Machiavelli discusses—even more so than Marcus Aurelius, the only other emperor who did not come to an ignominious and premature end. But the success (or survival) of Marcus seems to have had less to do with his innate qualities and more with a fortuitous combination of circumstances—namely, that he was considered to have acquired the throne through hereditary right, that he was regarded as virtuous and a lover of justice, and that he

kept to the old ways. To put it frankly, Marcus was incredibly lucky, and it is doubtful he would have survived if the circumstances were even remotely different (the fate of Pertinax and Alexander, who displayed similar qualities, testifies to that). Severus, by contrast, would have come to the throne regardless of when he was born.

Like Machiavelli, Montesquieu recognizes that there was something distinctive about Severus. Montesquieu not only admits that Severus had "great qualities" (*CN* XVI: 156/146) but also never calls Severus cruel, however much he might intimate this characteristic of him in this chapter. However, Montesquieu's presentation differs from Machiavelli's in several ways, perhaps the most striking of which is that nowhere in Montesquieu's account does he alert the reader to any of the well-used cruelties by which Severus became emperor. Although he is no doubt aware of how Severus came to power (aspects of his character that so impressed Machiavelli), Montesquieu acknowledges this achievement in the briefest possible of terms: "Severus defeated Niger and Albinus" (*CN* XVI: 156/146). Montesquieu's silence here lends support to our previous observation that nowhere in *Considerations* does Montesquieu speak in a positive manner concerning the calculated and ruthless actions by which tyrants come to hold power: he either reserves judgment on such actions or denounces them as cruel.

Furthermore, Montesquieu takes issue with Machiavelli as to the extent to which Severus can be considered a successful founder of sorts. Montesquieu first indicates that Severus continued the practice of proscription, the net effect of which was that many of Niger's soldiers went over to the Parthians, turning into aggressors a people who had previously been content to defend themselves (*CN* XVI: 157/147). In addition, the great treasures Severus amassed from these proscriptions had a deleterious effect on his son, Antoninus Caracalla, who mistook the accidental, unnatural, and flimsy power these treasures actually represented for the real thing itself (*CN* XVI: 158–59/149). And finally, by relaxing military discipline and by letting the army gorge itself on the wealth of the citizens, Severus effectively sentenced his son to death; for the very source of the army's wealth was exhausted while their avarice remained, and the

only way to control the army was to attempt to reintroduce military discipline, a policy that by this time only resulted in the death of the emperor who dared to try it (*CN* XVI: 161/151). In this respect, Montesquieu criticizes Severus's capacity as a founder by using Machiavelli's own teaching on liberality (*PR* XVI: 62–65). Because Severus exhausted the wealth of the people, he made it virtually impossible for his son to rule securely (although Caracalla could probably never have done so on his own given the magnitude and scope of his cruelty and other vices [*CN* XVI: 158/149]).

Lastly, Montesquieu also criticizes Severus because he lacked "gentleness, this first virtue of princes" (*CN* XVI: 156/146). Although it is difficult to understand precisely what Montesquieu means here by gentleness, two possibilities suggest themselves. By comparing Severus to Hadrian in this chapter, Montesquieu forces us to recall that Hadrian's greatness consisted in his being able both to "abandon the conquests of Trajan and to set the bounds of the empire at the Euphrates" (*CN* XV: 154/142) as well as to reestablish military discipline (*CN* XVI: 161/151). Now Montesquieu does not say if Hadrian's achievements were dependent on either the booty that the army accumulated during Trajan's Parthian campaigns or the military discipline that such a campaign would have required. Whichever of the two possibilities it was, the more general point can still be made that Severus should have attempted to discipline and to enrich the soldiers through a foreign war rather than allowing them to prey recklessly on the people. If this is at all the gentleness of which Montesquieu is speaking, then it is clear that such a notion has an eminently Machiavellian character: although it is doubtful that Severus could have reestablished the old Republic, he could have given his own people some respite from the horrors they were suffering at the hands of the soldiers by keeping the troops employed abroad.

The other possibility that Montesquieu might have in mind concerning the "gentleness" of princes is indicated by examining the long paragraph that immediately follows (*CN* XVI: 156/146–47), where Montesquieu states that a prince should in no way be the executor or judge of the laws. In *The Spirit of the Laws*,

Montesquieu remarks that in "our monarchies, all felicity consists in the opinion that the people have of the gentleness of the government" (*SL* XII 25: 454/209), and an integral part of this gentleness consists in the monarch divesting himself of the capacity to dispense penal justice. No monarch can carry out this function and attempt to preserve the appearance of moderate government, for the subjects quickly feel themselves at the mercy of the monarch's will (*SL* XI 6: 397/157; XI 7: 408/166–67; XI 11: 411/169–70). Thus, Severus's lack of gentleness—that he was so extremely "jealous" of his own authority—made it virtually impossible for him to establish any sort of more moderate and gentle form of government by divesting himself of this most "odious" part of authority (*CN* XVI: 156/147). Again, we see that Montesquieu's understanding of gentleness (and his criticism of cruelty) reinforces the importance of liberty as a political end: human dignity, tranquillity of soul, and freedom from fear require moderate governments where princes are willing to delegate the execution of penal justice to others. Therefore, given all Montesquieu's criticisms of Severus, the reader of this section of *Considerations* cannot help but be left with this question: How can Severus be praised for his cruelty or be considered as a positive model of any sort, since his very cruelty wreaked havoc on the people, spelled doom for Caracalla, and further contributed to the continuing immoderate exercise of power by the emperors? Montesquieu seems intent on radically downplaying Machiavelli's seeming infatuation with the means and methods (or, one might say, modes and orders) of Severus: Montesquieu recognizes but does not at all embrace him as a modern exemplar.[26]

IV: The Pernicious Cruelty of Christianity Politically

While Montesquieu and Machiavelli may disagree on the relative greatness of Severus, they share a broad common ground when it comes to the cruelty of Christianity. Because Christianity stresses doctrinal orthodoxy or uniformity over strictly political considerations, it is not able (or even willing) to cultivate or to instill those qualities of character that provide the foundation for security,

liberty, and well-being. This part makes no pretense to claiming that these are Montesquieu's and Machiavelli's final and fullest thoughts on the subject of the relation between religion and politics; instead, it wishes to highlight that both thinkers concur that the intrusion of Christianity in the middle and late Empire introduced a debilitating weakness politically, and that this, in turn, led to a unique brand of cruelty that both of them deplore. It seems that Montesquieu's rhetorical strategy here at the end of *Considerations* is to emphasize this problematic characteristic of Christianity (and thus underscore its Machiavellian foundations), thereby educating future leaders about the dangers when religious concerns eclipse political ones as the sole or overriding goal.[27]

Near the beginning of Chapter XVIII, Montesquieu calls cruel the war that the Alemanni waged against Valentinian's Empire. At first glance, it seems that Montesquieu calls this war cruel because the Alemanni waged it for no reason other than to avenge the dishonor they believed Valentinian had caused them by decreasing the "presents" they had customarily received. An alternative interpretation is suggested, however, when we consider the entire context in which this example is given—namely, that the war was cruel because it was brought about by the Empire's ultimately unsuccessful attempt to attain security through appeasing its warlike neighbors. Montesquieu is ruthlessly critical of the policy of appeasement: because appeasement only puts the seller of peace in a "better condition to force it to be bought again," it compromises a state's security, giving manifest proofs of its weakness while simultaneously making its unfriendly neighbors that much richer and stronger (*CN* XVIII: 171/167).

Machiavelli could hardly agree more. In general, Machiavelli sees any policy that attempts to make gains or to forestall evils with money rather than arms as weak and ultimately self-defeating. Like Montesquieu, Machiavelli urges princes to take up arms in a losing cause rather than to attempt appeasement, since enemies will only become that much more greedy once they see how cowardly their adversaries are. But Machiavelli not only condemns these policies—he also quietly reveals how uniquely Christian they are.

For example, when Machiavelli argues why it is impossible to avoid war by making concessions to an enemy, he prefaces his entire discussion by indicating what an ineffective political weapon "humility" is against "proud," "insolent," and "arrogant" leaders and states (*DS* II 14: 156–57). It is not difficult to recall that Machiavelli had previously claimed that "humility, abjectness, and contempt of things human" was one of the greatest goods according to the Christian religion (*DS* II 2: 131–33). Or again, when Machiavelli concludes an argument on the political effectiveness of virtue and arms over money and wealth, he points out how much "present republics" rely on the latter rather than the former, and he expresses the hope that some "lover of antiquity" will soon arrive to rule Fortune such that "it does not have cause to show at every turning of the sun how much it can do" (*DS* II 30: 199–202). For Machiavelli, Christians and Christian states are naturally inclined toward the policy of appeasement, for it is the only "safe" and "merciful" method to attain security without putting their own bodies in jeopardy.

Montesquieu conceives of the relationship between appeasement and Christianity in a slightly different manner. If we examine the chapter that follows Montesquieu's discussion of the "New Maxims Adopted by the Romans," we are struck by the fact that although the chapter heading indicates that it will begin with a discussion of Attila's greatness, what we find instead is an unannounced and somewhat lengthy discussion of whether or not Christianity was responsible for the decline of the Empire. Given that this discussion of Christianity in no way correlates with the three subjects that Montesquieu announces he will discuss in Chapter XIX ("Attila's Greatness," "Cause of the Settlement of the Barbarians," and "Reasons Why the Western Empire Was the First to Fall"), it seems that this initial discussion of Christianity belongs more appropriately to the preceding chapter, the subject of which was the new maxims the Romans adopted, among them being the policy of appeasement. In other words, by stating in the title of Chapter XIX that this chapter would begin with a discussion of Attila, Montesquieu suggests that his discussion of Christianity is actually a continuation of the previous chapter, and that the new

maxims the Romans adopted were really the political maxims of Christianity (and thus were not really new at all, so to speak).[28]

Yet even if the foregoing interpretation is not entirely correct, there are plenty of other suggestions in *Considerations* that the spirit of the policy of appeasement is particularly appealing to the Christian religion. Montesquieu notes how feeble and fainthearted Christian soldiers generally were, as when he takes "among a thousand examples" the tears Philippicus shed before a battle at the thought of the "great number of people who were going to be killed" (*CN* XXII: 196/203). Still, while the lachrymose Philippicus was at least willing to fight a battle, Christian princes such as Andronicus Palaeologus tended to imagine that God would take care of military matters Himself (*CN* XXII: 199/206). The politics of Christianity in military matters relating to foreign affairs seems to be epitomized in Constantine's effort to eradicate the gladiatorial contests. At first glance this seems to be a very humane gesture on his part, but the end result was that this act of humanity only enervated the soldiers and made them less fit for war: the only things that remained of "their old spectacles," according to Montesquieu, were those that "weakened their spirit and served as an enticement to sensual pleasure" (*CN* 168n.c/164n11).[29] It is important to recall that in one of the earliest chapters of *Considerations*, Montesquieu affirms that these contests were there from the beginning: "Before the soldiers left for the army, they were shown a gladiatorial combat," which "accustomed [them] to seeing blood and wounds" (*CN* II 79 and n.b/36 and n13).[30] Thus, Christianity can be considered cruel in foreign affairs precisely because it fails to instill and to foster those harsh and violent measures that alone can preserve the autonomy of a state; and even if certain Christian leaders might have been willing to brave a battle now and then, Christian soldiers in general lacked that spirited ferocity necessary to be victorious. The few impressive military successes recorded during the Byzantine Empire were attributable largely to generals such as Julian and Belisarius, generals who displayed the spirit of the consuls of the Republic much more than they did the spirit of Christianity.[31] This is not to suggest

in any way that Montesquieu approves of these sanguinary combats, as his remarks in Chapter XV (148/136–37) amply demonstrate; instead, he simply uncovers with brutal frankness one of the reasons that contributed to Rome's success in all matters martial. Perhaps a commercial republic might be able to solve this dilemma of ferocity and security, for Rome spurned commerce and the arts from the outset (*CN* I: 72/27).[32]

But it is not just in international relations that Machiavelli and Montesquieu see the cruelty of Christian politics. For Machiavelli, Christians are in fact two human beings at once: one part is inextricably tied to the physical world, and the other part longs for a spiritual life after death. Of course, as the soul is infinitely more important than the body, Christians must inevitably act in this world in such a way that they prepare themselves for the world beyond. What this means politically is that Christians must frown on any type of activity that celebrates the body or other worldly actions. Thus, Christians cannot invest politics with any significant importance because political activity (at least the vigorous political activity of the ancients) is itself concerned almost exclusively with worldly rewards such as honor, freedom, glory, and victory. In this respect, Christian citizens are but half-citizens whose attachment to the country is tepid at best, and Christian leaders inevitably reinforce this prejudice in the hearts of the citizens by discouraging them from giving any serious attention to political life. Christians would neither be aware of nor concerned with the disgraceful and harmful political practices that Machiavelli sees in the world around him, a world in which weakness, corruption, and disunity abound (*DS* I 12: 36–39; *DS* II 2: 129–33).

While many of Machiavelli's ideas are evinced in *Considerations*—to say nothing of other examples, his scathing remarks about monks and other religious and political figures in Chapter XXII demonstrate this and much more—Montesquieu's analysis and criticism of Christianity centers on its refusal to recognize some code of law as the final arbiter of political disputes, and thus it cannot provide the fundamental and foundational conditions for the existence of political liberty and moderate government. For Montesquieu, this

problem is the result of an insuperable tension within Christianity itself: for although the importance of dogma for the salvation of the soul compels most Christian leaders to force all their citizens to profess the same religious opinion(s), these same leaders cannot come to any kind of satisfactory agreement as to what those dogmatic opinions should be.

The deleterious political effects of this tension are well exemplified in the cruel government of Justinian (*CN* XX: 188/190). In the first place, Justinian's attempt to reduce all people to the same religious opinion severely weakened his own state by eliminating from it productive citizens, forcing all those who took seriously their religious principles to flee or to fight. Not only were whole nations destroyed and many provinces left uncultivated, but the long-term effect of this persecution was that Palestine eventually "became deserted," paving the way for the Arabs to conquer it many years later (*CN* XX: 189/191). Thus, Christianity's propensity to force all citizens to believe the same dogma inevitably results in some significant group of people being deprived of the security and protection of their government; for from the Christian government's point of view, citizens who profess a different system of religious beliefs have automatically divested themselves of their citizenship. Indeed, such citizens have become internal enemies of the state (*CN* XXI: 192/197). In the second place, Montesquieu indicates that because of the very nature of religious controversy, there is no possibility of ever coming to some type of authoritative agreement on matters of dogma (*CN* XXII: 199–201/207–9). Christians are rarely content to leave well enough alone but are, like Justinian and so many others, constantly fomenting dissent (*CN* XXII: 201–3/209–10). Since there always exists the possibility that the reigning dogma will change or that a new dogma will suddenly gain acceptance, no citizen is ultimately ever guaranteed any type of security in a Christian state. Citizens who had one day been safe because of their beliefs can suddenly find themselves the object of persecution the next day (*CN* 183/185–86). And finally, third, because of the intensity and importance of these disputes for Christians, their leaders in general have very little

sense of the political exigencies required to maintain a stable and autonomous government. As Montesquieu indicates, either Christians tend to place a much greater importance on issues that have very little to do with politics per se (as was the case with Justinian's obsessive concern with the *blues* and the *greens*) or they tend to treat lightly political issues of the greatest magnitude (as when the Empire regarded and punished religious crimes much more harshly than crimes against the state) (*CN* XX: 187–88/189–90; XXI: 192/197). All these problems and tensions indicate that from Montesquieu's point of view, Christianity cannot achieve the type of internal stability and security necessary for its citizens to live in freedom under some sort of moderate government. The rule of law is impossible to maintain under these conditions, given that an ever-changing *religious* dogma is the final arbiter of *political* disputes. In summation, then, we can say that Christianity seems to have misunderstood completely the role that vigor and violence play in political life; for while Christians are wolfish toward those persons who hold blasphemous views, they are often sheepish toward foreign enemies. For both Montesquieu and Machiavelli, therefore, Christianity is very cruel politically, since it is both unable to guarantee the security of its citizens from foreign dangers and unwilling to allow its citizens to live at liberty under the rule of law at home.[33]

V: Enlightenment Cruelty and Its Renaissance Roots

To use the words *Enlightenment* and *cruelty* in the same phrase or sentence seems like a contradiction in terms, for the Enlightenment is often imagined to embody the complete repudiation of violence and the like. Many of us often think that the Enlightenment eschewed all forms of violence (political or otherwise) or, more accurately, that all forms of physical coercion and violence were examples of cruelty and thus an implicit or explicit rejection of Machiavellianism. Montesquieu reveals that this is not at all the case and that not all kinds of coercion and violence are labeled as cruel in *Considerations*. Thus, Montesquieu accepts and adopts some of Machiavelli's teachings on cruelty while rejecting and

criticizing others; and although he tries to introduce a greater sense of humanity into political life and practice, he never entirely abandons the Renaissance foundations (as exemplified in Machiavelli's works) when it comes to the sometimes nasty means one must employ in politics. Montesquieu is no softy. His adaptation of Machiavelli's teachings on force and violence is thus a transformation or reformulation of those teachings—teachings that are perhaps no longer suited for Montesquieu's own particular times and circumstances. Montesquieu wishes to temper or to moderate the kind of cruelty Machiavelli advocated (sometimes so unabashedly): the times that may have required Machiavellian cruelty no longer persist (or no longer need persist), and a new trajectory in political goals and ideals can render it less necessary in its unfiltered or pure form. Indeed, Machiavelli's understanding and brand of cruelty may have in certain cases caused more harm than good.

Montesquieu's alteration or updating of Machiavelli is both rhetorical and substantive. On the one hand, Montesquieu gives no positive rhetorical signification to the use of cruelty: we never see Montesquieu, unlike Machiavelli, calling a prince both virtuous and cruel in one and the same breath. This difference is made most manifest in their respective descriptions of Severus: while Montesquieu does not hide Severus's rare qualities in attaining the Empire and the means he used to secure it, he does not relish it, and he thus abandons the rather effusive praise Machiavelli bestows on him. One might say that Montesquieu does not believe you need to encourage princes to be ruthless when the times and circumstances demand it: prudent princes will figure that out on their own, and imprudent princes will not be deterred by rhetoric that calls for restraint. On the other hand, Montesquieu adds a substantively new dimension when it comes to understanding the cruelty of an action: the security and liberty of individuals and the political community as a whole must always be considered, and not just the security and well-being of the prince. Montesquieu's new trajectory is not incompatible with Machiavelli's, but it does add an additional layer of concern that was somewhat absent from Machiavelli's account. The discussion of Christianity that follows

reveals a much broader area of agreement in both rhetoric and substance: both decry Christianity's foreign policy when it comes to appeasement, and both see the debilitating effects domestically when political concerns become subservient to religious dogma. Montesquieu seems intent on showing this common ground in *Considerations*; in *The Spirit of the Laws*, his differences with Machiavelli on the salutary political effects of Christianity will be decidedly more pronounced. But before these benefits can be realized fully, baleful religious disputes must cease to override political exigencies and concerns, and this is what the decay and fall of the late Empire poignantly demonstrates. At all events, if we are going to credit Montesquieu and the Enlightenment with introducing a new ethic of humanity into politics—including moderation, liberty and security, tranquility of soul, and the goals and practices of liberal republicanism—then we must see how he understood cruelty; and to do this, we must see to what extent he relied on, changed, or rejected those Machiavellian and Renaissance foundations.

Notes

1. Richard Myers, "Montesquieu on the Causes of Roman Greatness," *History of Political Thought* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 37; and Michael Anton, "Montesquieu's *Considerations*: A Case Study in the Cycle of Regimes," *Interpretation* 46, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 163–68. It should be stressed that both scholars reject the idea that *Considerations* is a mere work of history, and they both note the dearth of scholarship on it.
2. Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Oeuvres de d'Alembert*, vol. 3 (Paris/London: Martin Bossange et Co./A. Belin, 1821), 449.
3. David W. Carrithers, "Montesquieu and Tocqueville as Philosophical Historians: Liberty, Determinism, and the Prospects for Freedom," in *Montesquieu and His Legacy*, ed. Rebecca E. Kingston (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008), 149–77.
4. Edward Gibbon, *An Essay on the Study of Literature. Written Originally in French* (London: T. Becket and P. A. De Hondt, 1764), 100–114, and *Memoirs of My Life*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1966), 78.
5. See, e.g., Roger B. Oake, "Montesquieu's Analysis of Roman History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 16, no. 1 (January 1955): 58. The most

exhaustive and definitive account of the compositional history of *Considerations* to date is provided by Paul A. Rahe, "The Book That Never Was: Montesquieu's *Considerations on the Romans* in Historical Context," *History of Political Thought* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 43–89. Nathaniel K. Gilmore, *Montesquieu and the Spirit of Rome*, Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2022), 20–21, helpfully reminds us that after *Considerations* was first published in 1734, it was republished (with some "minor" alterations) in 1748, the same year he published *The Spirt of the Laws*. Gilmore persuasively argues, therefore, that these two books should be seen as "two parts of a single whole," or again, that the two books are "partners."

6. David Lowenthal, introduction to his translation of Montesquieu's *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 1, 19.
7. Richard M. Myers, "The Case for Commercial Liberalism in Montesquieu's *Greatness and Decline of the Romans*" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1986), 16.
8. Mark Hulliung, *Montesquieu and the Old Regime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 140–72.
9. For a more exclusive and exhaustive treatment of this theme, see E. Levi-Malvano, *Montesquieu and Machiavelli*, trans. Anthony J. Pansini (Kopperl, TX: Greenvale Press, 1991), originally published in 1912. It should be stressed, however, that *Considerations* makes no mention of Machiavelli by name, although it seems he is always lurking in the background.
10. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from and references to Montesquieu will be from volume 2 of Montesquieu, *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols., ed. Roger Caillois (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Éditions Gallimard, 1949 and 1951). All translations from the French are my own, although I have generally followed and profited by Lowenthal's translation of *Considerations* (cited in note 6) and by that of Anne M. Cohler, Basia C. Miller, and Harold S. Stone, trans. and eds., Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Translations from and references to Machiavelli are from *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), and *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Hereafter the following system of abbreviations is used: *Considerations* = *CN*, *The Spirit of the Laws* = *SL*, *The Prince* = *PR*,

and *Discourses* = *DS*. In-text citations to Montesquieu and Machiavelli indicate the book and/or chapter number followed by the page number; additionally, in the case of page references to Montesquieu, the first will be to the French original, the second to the appropriate English translation (e.g., *CN* II: 75/33).

11. Among the many, many sources that could be cited on this point, see esp. Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 9–14.
12. A. J. Grant, "Montesquieu," in *The Social & Political Ideas of Some Great French Thinkers of the Age of Reason*, ed. F. J. C. Hearnshaw (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), 119. See also Judith N. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984), 7–15, 37–38.
13. E.g., Jaucourt states that Caligula was a "[s]ophist in his barbarity" (cf. *CN* XV: 149/137); that the Romans "hardly knew that virtue which we call *humanity*" (cf. *CN* XV: 148/136); and finally, that Marcus Aurelius and Trajan are emperors worthy "to honour human nature & represent the divine" (cf. *CN* XV: 153/141). See Louis de Jaucourt, "*Cruauté*," in vol. 1, *Compact Edition of the "Encyclopédie"* (Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press, 1969), 517–19. On Jaucourt's life and times, and his indefatigable efforts on behalf of the *Encyclopédie* (he wrote some 17,288 articles!), see *Encyclopedic Liberty: Political Articles in the Dictionary of Diderot and D'Alembert*, trans. Henry C. Clark and Christine Dunn Henderson, ed. Henry C. Clark (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2016), xxxiii–xxxv.
14. In the same way that Philip's cruel actions jeopardized the security of his kingdom—and of Greece as a whole—we can suggest that at least part of the reason why Montesquieu calls the Egyptian kings cruel is because their violent actions (among other things) rendered them so "odious" to their subjects that they were "powerless" to defend themselves abroad (*CN* V: 98–99/63–64).
15. Indeed, the proscriptions of the second triumvirate went far beyond what Sulla did in that they required all citizens to "rejoice" in them at the cost of their lives! No wonder Montesquieu calls these cruel actions "insane" (*CN* XII: 135n.c/116n7).
16. It is interesting to note that the first time Montesquieu uses the word *cruelty* to describe the Romans (namely, Sulla and Marius) is the same moment when an individual Roman name appears in the title of a chapter. It is as if Montesquieu is saying that the beginning of Roman cruelty is precisely at that moment when citizens began to look more to their own individual interests rather than to those of the city—in other

words, when the ferocious character of the Romans was directed against their own political community as a whole (cf. *CN* I: 73/27–28).

17. Indeed, that price was so high that the only modern equivalent to which Montesquieu could compare it was the cruel practices of the colonial powers on native inhabitants. Whatever the status of "natural gentleness and justice" is in Montesquieu's thought as a whole, it seems that the Romans had little or none of it (*CN* XV: 148/136). On these paragraphs and pages, see Clifford Orwin, "Montesquieu's *Humanité* and Rousseau's *Pitié*," in *Montesquieu and His Legacy*, ed. Rebecca E. Kingston (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008), 142–43.
18. See Clifford Orwin, "Machiavelli's Unchristian Charity," *American Political Science Review* 72, no. 4 (December 1978): 1217–28. This article continues to remain as one of the most illuminating and comprehensive accounts of Machiavelli's understanding of cruelty.
19. See Thomas L. Pangle, "The Moral Basis of National Security: Four Historical Perspectives," in *Historical Dimensions of National Security Problems*, ed. Klaus Knorr (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1976), 332–33.
20. David Lowenthal, "The Design of Montesquieu's Considerations," *Interpretation* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1970): 168, concludes his article along these lines.
21. It is perhaps for these reasons that while Machiavelli sometimes harshly decries tyrants and tyrannies (*DS* I 10: 31–33; II 2: 129–33), he also purposely blurs the distinction between tyrants, princes, kings, and leaders of republics, whether elected or not. In fact, he often goes so far as to give detailed information and outright praise for those ambitious individuals who successfully overthrow governments and rise to power (*DS* I 40–41: 85–90; III 6: 218–35; III 8: 237–39). For Machiavelli's general assessment of the relationship between republics, principalities, and tyrannies, see the helpful observations by Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 25–26, 67–68, 79–80, 127, 167–68, 267–78.
22. See J. H. Hexter, *The Vision of Politics on the Eve of the Reformation: More, Machiavelli, and Seyssel* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 166, 191–92; and David E. Ingersoll, "The Constant Prince: Private Interests and Public Goals in Machiavelli," *The Western Political Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (December 1968): 588–96.
23. An anonymous reviewer made the very illuminating suggestion that the difference between Machiavelli and Montesquieu is that the former speaks about cruelty "without soul" whereas the latter does so "with soul." Although the reviewer was not certain whether this was a proper

or adequate characterization, it does capture poetically (at the very least) a key insight and distinction between the two philosophers—namely, that Montesquieu almost always considers how cruelty "affects community and individual dignity" broadly construed. Certainly Machiavelli stresses that Borgia's cruelty restored the Romagna whereas the Florentines' mercy destroyed Pistoia; but elsewhere he is somewhat more ambiguous or ambivalent as to how or whether such cruel actions are directed primarily to the good of others. In his description of well-used cruelty, e.g., the first characteristic ("done at a stroke") refers solely to the nature of the action itself; the second and central characteristic (the "necessity to secure oneself") refers exclusively to the motivation(s) and reward(s) the person inflicting the cruelty receives; and the third and final characteristic (that they are "not persisted in but are turned to as much utility for the subjects as one can") seems to refer to the potential benefits the community as a whole receives. But a more exact reading of this final phrase indicates that the utilitarian benefits the subjects might enjoy are limited by the extent to which they are consistent or compatible with the benefits the *one* who administers the cruelty receives. In other words, the third characteristic reverts back to the second or central one, or more precisely, that any benefits the subjects receive from these actions (if any at all) are a mere by-product of the ruler's paramount consideration of and for their own security and well-being. This idea is poignantly corroborated when we look at what might be called the highest example of founding new modes and orders. Machiavelli makes clear that potential founders are "forced" to introduce "new orders and modes" so as "to found *their* state and *their* security," and not necessarily for the sake of others: while the founding of a new state may improve the lives of the subjects, this seems at best an incidental consideration of the founder—a way (perhaps) to mask the founder's real or ultimate (selfish) intention (*PR* VI: 23). It should go without saying that whether (or to what extent) Machiavelli or Montesquieu believed in the existence of the human soul—pagan, Christian, or otherwise—is a wholly different question.

24. Cf. Thomas L. Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism*: *A Commentary on "The Spirit of the Laws"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 70–71, 136–37.
25. It is interesting that Machiavelli uses the word *cruelty* more often in Chapter XIX of *The Prince* than in any other chapter of the book (even more so than in Chapter XVII, whose subject matter is cruelty). As mentioned above, Montesquieu also uses the word most frequently in his

discussion of the emperors (*CN* XV). Of course, this could simply be a coincidence, as the emperors were exceedingly cruel in the estimation of both philosophers. But it may also be another indication of how carefully Montesquieu read Machiavelli in respect of this theme, and that he is deliberately challenging us to reconsider Machiavelli's appraisal of cruelty.

26. It is worth noting that Gibbon decidedly sides with Montesquieu's overall appraisal of Severus. In the final paragraph of chapter 5 of *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon concludes that "The contemporaries of Severus, in the enjoyment of the peace and glory of his reign, forgave the cruelties by which it had been introduced. Posterity, who experienced the fatal effect of his maxims and example, justly considered him as the principal author of the decline of the Roman empire." Gibbon also remarks that Severus "exercised, without disguise, the whole legislative as well as the executive power," that he was considered "freed from the restraint of civil laws," and that he "might dispose of the empire as of his private patrimony." Intermediate powers (e.g., the Senate) simply ceased to exist except by way of an ever-fading memory.
27. For a synoptic overview of some of the themes discussed in this part, see Andrea Radasanu, "Montesquieu's Machiavellian Account of Civil Religion," in *Civil Religion in Modern Political Philosophy: Machiavelli to Tocqueville*, ed. Steven Frankel and Martin D. Yaffe (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020), 114–30.
28. Richard Myers, "Christianity and Politics in Montesquieu's *Greatness and Decline of the Romans*," *Interpretation* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1989–90): 224, comes to very much the same conclusion, and his article as a whole contains a number of perceptive insights. The status or nature of Christianity is also a recurrent theme in Lowenthal, "Introduction," 13–17, and "The Design of Montesquieu's Considerations," 151–54, 156, 161–68.
29. In the words of Judith N. Shklar, *Montesquieu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 61, "Christianity did not even make the later Romans less cruel. By forbidding the gladiatorial games Constantine had not made the people any gentler, but had only dampened their courage without improving their morals."
30. Machiavelli comes to the same conclusion but from a different trajectory when he compares ancient (Roman) sacrifices with contemporary (Christian) ones. The ferociousness of the Romans "can be inferred from many of their institutions, beginning from the magnificence of their sacrifices as against the humility of ours, where there is some pomp more

delicate than magnificent but no ferocious or vigorous action. Neither pomp nor magnificence of ceremony was lacking there, but the action of the sacrifice, full of blood and ferocity, was added, with a multitude of animals being killed there. This sight, being terrible, rendered men similar to itself" (*DS* II 2: 131).

31. In fact, Douglas Kries, "The Displacement of Christian Historiography in Montesquieu's Book on the Romans," in *Piety and Humanity: Essays on Religion and Early Modern Political Philosophy*, ed. Douglas Kries (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 233–58, argues that Montesquieu wants us to see that the reputations of Julian and Constantine are completely inverted, and that Julian should be called "the Great" and Constantine "the Apostate" because of the latter's abandonment of the old, pagan ways. In this respect, Montesquieu's *Considerations*—much like Machiavelli's *Discourses* before him and Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* afterward—is an attempt to rewrite the history of the Empire in a secular or de-Christianized fashion. Therefore, Montesquieu tends to dismiss or to silence the ecclesiastical historian Eusebius (who believed Constantine's conversion and reign demonstrated divine providence) and to elevate the non-Christian historian Ammianus Marcellinus (who saw Julian as a proto-philosopher king of sorts). Kries argues that Montesquieu does something similar when discussing Belisarius, who comes off just as favorably as Julian does when the former is compared with Justinian, and the latter with Constantine. Myers, "Christianity and Politics," 227–28, largely concurs in these assessments and suggests that Montesquieu very discreetly implies that Constantine's so-called conversion to Christianity was really that of a vain, self-serving entrepreneur in matters of religion and politics. The only reason we do not see it more clearly is that Constantine and his followers got to write the accepted history of the Empire.
32. It should be noted that the aforementioned remarks cannot be Montesquieu's or Machiavelli's final conclusions about appeasement: both were too well versed in history not to see that appeasement had been practiced from time immemorial, from the ancient pagans to modern Christians. Indeed, as Montesquieu himself points out, even the Romans practiced a quasi-form of it: when faced with two enemies at once, they made peace with the weakest and went to war against the strongest (*CN* VI: 100/68). It would seem that Montesquieu's rhetorical strategy here is to indicate that Christianity has a sort of preternatural inclination to appeasement: Christian princes see appeasement as a *preferred policy* rather than as an *ugly necessity*. Christianity may not

be the only reason why princes choose a policy of appeasement over defiance and war, but it does loom large. Machiavelli is a bit more strident on this point and argues that princes should avoid being at the mercy of anyone; but if they must, then they should declare in favor of one competing power over another, and thereafter hope for the best (*PR* XXI: 88–91). Neutrality or appeasement is the worst policy option for those who could do otherwise.

33. Once again, to emphasize, this cannot be considered Montesquieu's final appraisal of Christianity and its politics. As Vickie B. Sullivan, *Montesquieu and the Despotic Ideas of Europe: An Interpretation of "The Spirit of the Laws"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), rightly argues, Montesquieu found that Christianity had actually reduced cruelty in political life in ways that simply could not be ignored. Montesquieu credits Christianity for "eradicating slavery in Europe, for producing a gentler right of war from that of the ancients, for curbing the bloodthirstiness of Christian rulers, and for making women a vital part of Christian communities, and hence of society more generally" (85). While there were still numerous despotic ideas and practices embedded within Christianity that needed to be eradicated, it had led in large measure to the "pacification of human beings," and the tempering of the human soul and some of its worst proclivities (78; cf. 45ff.). Montesquieu's reticence (or even silence) on these points in *Considerations* is probably attributable to his overall rhetorical strategy: he wants to be unequivocal in his denunciation of the implacable enforcement of doctrinal disputes politically. Christianity may have fostered significant improvements in the promotion of humanity (and thus the reduction of cruelty), but this old habit as exhibited in the middle and late Empire had to go. Not surprisingly, Machiavelli is more strident in his assessment. He believed that Christianity had made peoples and leaders weak and effeminate in practice, as well as divided in their loyalties and aspirations theoretically (or spiritually: see esp. *DS* II 2). A return to founding principles and practices (including cruelty) was therefore an ever-present necessity. On these ideas and issues, see also Keegan Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism and the Problem of Universal Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 175–204.