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IV.2 On education in monarchies

- The Spirit of Law - Book IV. That laws of education must relate to the principles of the government -

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IV.2 On education in monarchies

It is not in the public houses where children are taught that monarchies impart their principal education ; it is when a person enters the world that education in some sense begins. That is where the school of what is called *honor* is found, that universal master who must guide us wherever we go.

That is where we see and we always hear three things : *that in virtues we must maintain a certain nobility, in morality a certain candor, and in manners a certain politeness.*

The virtues we are shown are always less what we owe to others than what we owe to ourselves ; they are not so much what attracts us to our fellow citizens as what distinguishes us from them.

Human actions there are not judged as good, but as admirable ; not as just, but as great ; not as reasonable, but as extraordinary.

Honor, whenever it can find something noble in them, is either the judge that legitimizes them or the sophist that justifies them.

It allows gallantry when it is joined with the idea of heartfelt sentiment, or to the notion of conquest : and this is the true reason why morality is never as pure in monarchies as in republican governments.

It allows deception when it is combined with the idea of grandeur of spirit or grandeur of causes, as in politics, the fine points of which do not offend it.

It prohibits adulation only when it is separated from the idea of a great fortune, and is joined only with the awareness of its own servility.

With respect to morals, I have said that the education of monarchies ought to incorporate a certain candor. Thus they want some truth in our speech. But is that for love for truth ? Not at all. They want it because a man who is accustomed to uttering truth seems to be bold and free. Indeed, such a man seems to depend only on facts, and not on the manner in which someone else receives them.

That is why, as much as they condone this sort of candor, they equally scorn the candor of commoners, the only objective of which is truth and simplicity.

In short, education in monarchies requires a certain politeness of manners. People made for each other's company are also made to please each other ; and a man who did not observe the proprieties, offending everyone in his company, would so devalue himself that he would become incapable of doing anything good.

But it is not in so pure a source that politeness customarily originates. It comes from the desire to distinguish oneself. It is out of pride that we are civil : we feel flattered to possess manners that show that we are not common, and that we have not associated with the sort of people who have always been fled.

In monarchies, politeness is naturalized at court. An exceedingly tall man makes everyone else short. Hence the consideration we owe to everybody, from which arises the politeness that flatters those who are polite as much as it does those with respect to whom they are polite, because it signifies belonging to the court, or being worthy of it.

IV.2 On education in monarchies

The air of the court consists of leaving aside one's own grandeur for a borrowed one which flatters a courtier more than does his own. It confers a certain lofty modesty which spreads afar, but of which the pride fades gradually in proportion to one's distance from the source of that grandeur.

At court is found a delicacy of taste in all things which comes from continual consumption of the trappings of a great fortune, the variety and above all the lassitude of pleasures, from the multiplicity and even the profusion of extravagances, which when they are agreeable are always well received there.

It is on all these things that education bears to form what is called the gentleman, who has all the qualities and all the virtues that are desired in this government.

Honor, being a part of everything, enters into all modes of thinking and all ways of feeling, and even guides the principles.

This peculiar honor makes virtues into only what it wants and as it wants them ; it imposes its own rules on everything that is prescribed to us, extends or circumscribes our duties at its pleasure, whether their source lies in religion, in politics, or in morality.

There is nothing in monarchy which the laws, religion, and honor so prescribe as obedience to the prince's desires : but this honor tells us that the prince must never prescribe an act that dishonors us, because it would render us unable to serve him.

Crillon refused Henri III's entreaty to assassinate the Duc de Guise, but he offered to to duel him. After St. Bartholomew's Day, after Charles IX wrote to all the governors to have the Huguenots slaughtered, Viscount d'Orthe, who was the commander in Bayonne, wrote to the king : "Sire, among the inhabitants and the men of war I have found none but good citizens, brave soldiers, and not a single hangman : therefore they and I entreat Your Majesty to use our hands and our lives for things we can do." [1] Their great and generous courage regarded treachery as something impossible.

There is nothing which honor more prescribes to the nobility than to serve the prince in war. That is indeed the distinguished profession, because its risks, its triumphs, and even its misfortunes lead to greatness. But while imposing this law, honor wants to be its judge ; and if it feels offended, it requires or allows a man to retire to his home.

It would have us indifferently aspire to positions or refuse them : that freedom it holds even above fortune.

Honor thus has its supreme rules, and education is obliged to conform to them. The principle ones are, first, that we are indeed allowed to attach great importance to our fortune, but absolutely forbidden to attach any to our lives.

The second is that once we have been placed in a rank, we must do or allow nothing that could reveal that we esteem ourselves below even that rank.

The third, that the things which honor forbids are more strictly forbidden when the laws as well prohibit them, and that the things it requires are more firmly required when the laws do not call for them.

[1] See d'Aubigné's *History*.