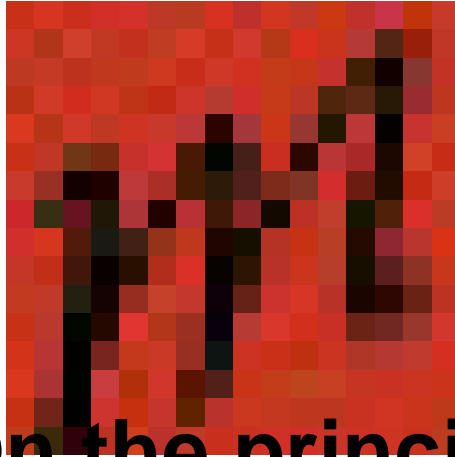


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# III.4 On the principle of aristocracy

- The Spirit of Law - Book III. On the principles of the three governments -

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### III.4 On the principle of aristocracy

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As there must be virtue in a popular government, it must also be present in the aristocratic one. It is true that it is not so absolutely requisite.

The common people, who are in relation to nobles what subjects are in relation to the monarch, are contained by their laws. They therefore have less need of virtue than the people of a democracy. But how will the nobles be contained ? Those who must enforce the laws against their fellow magistrates will immediately sense that they are acting against themselves ; there must therefore, by the nature of the constitution, be virtue in this body.

Aristocratic government has in itself a certain strength which democracy does not have. The nobles constitute a body within it which, by its prerogative and for its particular interest, represses the people ; in this respect, it is enough that there be laws for them to be carried out.

But as easy as it is for this body to repress the others, it is as hard for it to repress itself. [1] Such is the nature of this constitution that it seems to place the same people under the authority of the laws, and to exempt them.

Now such a body can repress itself in only two ways : either by great virtue, which causes the nobles to find themselves in some sense equal with their people, which can make for a great republic ; or by a lesser virtue, which is a certain moderation that makes the nobles at least equal to each other, which assures their preservation.

Moderation is therefore the soul of these governments. I mean one that is founded on virtue, not the kind that comes from cowardice and indolence of spirit.

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[1] Public crimes will be subject to punishment there, because that is everyone's business ; individual crimes will not be punished, because it is everyone's business not to punish them.