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III.10 The difference between obedience under moderated governments and under despotic governments

- The Spirit of Law - Book III. On the principles of the three governments -
Date de mise en ligne : lundi 20 août 2018

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III.10 The difference between obedience under moderated governments and under despotic government

In despotic states, the nature of the government requires extreme obedience, and the will of the prince, once known, must have its effect as infallibly as one billiard ball striking another.

There are no attenuations, modifications, accommodations, equivalent substitutions, negotiations, remonstrances, nothing equal or better to propose : man is a creature who obeys a creature who wills.

There one can no more express his fears over a future event than he can blame his failures on the whim of fortune : the lot of men, as of beasts, is instinct, obedience, and punishment.

It serves no purpose to appeal to natural feelings, to respect for a father, to affection for one's children and wives, to the laws of honor, to one's state of health : the order has been given, and that is enough.

In Persia, when the king has condemned someone, the matter can no longer be mentioned to him, nor can mercy be sought. If he was drunk or out of his senses, the order must all the same be carried out [1] : otherwise he would be contradicting himself, and the law cannot contradict itself. Such has from all time been their manner of thinking ; since the order which Ahasuerus gave to exterminate the Jews could not be revoked, it was decided to give them permission to defend themselves. [2]

There is, however, one thing to which one can sometimes appeal against the will of the prince, and that is religion. [3] You will abandon your father, and even kill him, if the prince orders you to do so ; but you will not drink wine if he wills it and orders you to. The laws of religion are of a higher precept, because they are imposed on the prince as they are on his subjects. But the same does not hold for natural law : the prince is assumed to be no longer a man.

In moderated monarchical states, authority is limited by its driving force, which is to say honor, which reigns like a monarch over the prince and the people. No one would presume to invoke before him the laws of religion ; a courtier would feel ridiculous. It is the laws of honor that will be constantly invoked. As a result there are necessary modifications in obedience : honor is naturally subject to peculiarities, and obedience will follow all of them.

Although the manner of obeying is different under these two governments, power is nevertheless the same. In whatever direction the monarch turns, he tips and upsets the balance, and is obeyed. The whole difference is that in a monarchy the prince possesses knowledge, and the ministers are infinitely more able and experienced than in the despotic state.

[1] See Chardin [VI, 18-19].

[2] [See chapter 8 of the book of Esther.]

[3] *Ibid.*, [i.e., see Chardin.