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XV.1 On civil slavery

- The Spirit of Law - Book XV. How the laws of civil slavery relate to the nature of the climate -

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XV.1 On civil slavery

Slavery, properly speaking, is the institution of a right that makes one man so beholden to another man that that man is the absolute master of his life and property. It is not good by its nature ; it is useful neither to the master nor to the slave : to the slave, because he can do nothing out of virtue ; to the master, because he contracts all sorts of bad habits with his slaves, because he accustoms himself little by little to failing in all the moral virtues, and because he becomes proud, impetuous, mean, contentious, sensuous, and cruel.

In despotic countries which are already under political slavery, civil slavery is more tolerable than elsewhere. Everyone must be content enough to have his subsistence and his life. Thus the condition of the slave is scarcely more heavy than the condition of the subject.

But in the monarchical government, where it is supremely important not to crush or demean humankind, there must be no slave. In democracy, where everyone is equal, and in aristocracy, where the laws must attempt to make everyone as equal as the nature of the government can allow, slaves are contrary to the spirit of the constitution ; they serve only to give citizens an authority and a luxury they ought not to have.