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XX.1 On commerce

- The Spirit of Law - Book XX. On laws in their relationship with commerce, considered in its nature and its distinctions -

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The subjects which follow ought to be treated more extensively, but the nature of this book does not allow for that. I would like to float on a tranquil river, but am carried away by a torrent.

Commerce cures one of destructive prejudices, and it is almost a general rule that wherever people live peaceably there is commerce, and that everywhere there is commerce, people live peaceably.

We should therefore not be surprised if our behavior is less savage than it once was. Because of commerce, familiarity with the ways of all nations has spread everywhere ; we have compared them to each other, and from this much good has resulted.

One could say that the laws of commerce improve behavior for the same reason that those same laws degrade behavior. Commerce corrupts pure morality [1] : that was the subject of Plato's objections ; it polishes and tames barbaric behavior, as we see every day.

[1] Cæsar says of the Gauls that the proximity and trade of Marseille has spoiled them so that they who formerly had always defeated the Germans had become inferior to them (*Gallic Wars*, book VI).