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# Thomas L. Pangle, The Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity in Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws

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Thomas L. Pangle, *The Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity in Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws*. Chicago : The University of Chicago Press (2010, 193 pages).

Thomas Pangle's *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism*, published nearly forty years ago, was a powerful, important contribution to scholarship on Montesquieu's *Of the Spirit of the Laws*. In it, Pangle argued that Montesquieu was, ultimately, an advocate of the liberal, commercial republicanism which he saw in England. However, this work had a self-acknowledged flaw : Pangle "explicated Montesquieu's political theory, but did so without plumbing theological argumentation" (p. 10). To address this flaw, Pangle has written *The Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity in Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws* - a "sequel and supplement to" his first work - in which he seeks to get at the "foundational level" of Montesquieu's political philosophy. In doing so, Pangle not only has provided a charged reading of *The Spirit of the Laws* ; he has sought to reinterpret the fundamental development of liberal modernity.

In his new work, Pangle advances his previous thesis, that Montesquieu is ultimately an advocate of liberal, commercial republicanism, by contrasting this new "religion" with Montesquieu's treatment of other religions, especially revealed religions, and above all Christianity. Pangle works to show that Montesquieu judged Christianity, and other revealed religions, to be despotic. Thus, while scholars generally find Montesquieu to support religious toleration, Pangle's interpretation leads us to the opposite conclusion, that society should not tolerate revealed religion, but instead should attack it carefully and quietly. After forsaking Christianity, Montesquieu's reader must choose between three alternative "civil" religions : classical republicanism, monarchy, and liberal, commercial republicanism. Pangle contends that Montesquieu deems the latter the best regime, though not without consequence.

In the introduction, Pangle suggests that our way of life is "under heavy assault by illiberal and theocratic forces" (p. 2-3), and that to combat this assault we must return to Montesquieu, who provided much of the basis for our society. According to Pangle, *Of the Spirit of the Laws* is "the most ambitious expression of the Enlightenment political philosophizing that lays the principled basis for our liberal republican civilization. At the deepest level, that basis is theological - and, by the same token, antitheological" (1). Pangle is particularly interested in the antitheological agenda. Montesquieu thought that the "vast extension of Enlightenment science claims to show, at least in principle, the strictly natural causes and character of all that has been true and good (as well as bad) in all the diverse historical forms of existence" (5). "The first and most obvious implication" of this, according to Pangle, "is that suprarational revelation is superfluous as a source of explanatory hypotheses or normative guidance for humanity's earthly existence." Thus, for Montesquieu our footing needs to be on a strictly rationalized and secularized ground (6). However, Pangle argues, because of the bombastic nature of Montesquieu's claim, and the precarious historical situation in which he wrote, "this manifold strategy for grounding rationalism is not made explicit by Montesquieu" (6). Pangle takes it as his task to explain this strategy.

In Chapter One, Pangle argues that Montesquieu's "point of departure" is immediately and vehemently anti-religious. Pangle contends that the very first chapter of *The Spirit of the Laws* "makes loudly and even shockingly clear...that nature's divinity as he [Montesquieu] conceives it is far from being the Creator Who is believed to speak through the Scriptures" (18). In the second chapter, Montesquieu continues by indicating "that humans are by nature completely unmoved by any religious experience and are ignorant of, undirected toward, any god, whether natural or revealed" (20). Instead of being directed towards God, humans are directed to interact with each other in society, which quickly erupts into a state of war. To overcome this precarious situation, Montesquieu proposes "a new normative and empirical political science" (24-25) which is "cautiously reformist, while globally ambitious" (26).

One widely accepted goal of this new political science is combating despotism. Indeed, while scholars disagree about Montesquieu's positive agenda, all take his work as a strong criticism of despotism. In Chapter Two, Pangle locks his

eyes on what he sees as the most important, and most ominous, aspect of despotism for Montesquieu : its religious nature. According to Pangle, the discussion quickly turns in this direction when Montesquieu "gives, within the space of a few lines [in II, 4], two very different accounts of the nature of despotism : the explicit account, spotlighting the institution of the 'vizier,' standing in for a self-secluded prince, takes the place that was first, and more plausibly, assigned to religion, or to quasi-religious custom" (31). This leads Pangle to suggest the following : "Could he mean that these two - the vizierate, substituting for a prince absconditus ; and religion's role in despotism - are somehow interchangeable ?" Yes, Pangle emphatically concludes, as Montesquieu's "sole specific historical example of the model 'vizier' system" is "the papacy" (id.). To further his point, Pangle looks to III, 10, where Montesquieu suggests that religion can combat the will of the despot.

Normally, scholars interpret Montesquieu as suggesting that religion can help moderate despots by providing a higher authority to which they must answer. Pangle turns this interpretation on its head. He notes that in III, 10 we see that a despot cannot force people to drink wine, for example, if their religion forbids it. In this Pangle finds strictly anti-religious implications : "To humans who live as the subjects of despotism, the will of God comes to sight as a kind of higher despotic will, superimposed on the human despot, and thus constraining - even while, precisely reflecting - the nature and the principle of the regime" (34). Therefore, revealed religion can only make a society more despotic, not less. In the course of the rest of the chapter, Pangle looks at Montesquieu's anti-religious treatment of the Bible (which Montesquieu "is certainly not reading...on its own terms" [39]) as well as Christianity and Islam.

After Montesquieu dispenses with Christianity as despotic, Pangle spends the next two chapters examining the three alternative regime types in *Of the Spirit of the Laws* which could replace revealed religion : a classical republic, a monarchy, or a liberal, commercial republic. Pangle interprets Montesquieu's argument as having three fundamental steps. First, he suggests that Montesquieu wants to disenchant his monarchic readers with monarchy as a regime type, particularly by drawing them to the apparent glory of classical republics. Second, Pangle finds that Montesquieu proceeds to detail grave problems with classical republicanism. Finally, disillusioned with the other options, the reader embraces liberal, commercial republicanism as the best regime.

To make this argument, in Chapter Three Pangle examines republics and monarchies. He writes that Montesquieu "no longer views the virtue of the classical republic from the perspective of the high classical standard - of 'the best regime simply,' in light of whose flourishing life of the mind" all other regimes "appear severely inadequate as responses to the deepest longings of the human as rational animal." Instead, Montesquieu's classical republicanism is, according to Pangle, "subpolitical and subintellectual rather than suprapolitical and intellectual" (53). It is established on a purely civil religion which embraces political virtue, not high-minded moral virtue. Still, it seems impressive because of its calls for love of the homeland, and for the greatness it seems to embody. Its grandeur causes his monarchic reader to sever his allegiance to the regime under which they live. In fact, one of Montesquieu's goal, as per Pangle, is to get the monarchic reader of *The Spirit of the Laws* to drink "Doctor Montesquieu's antidote to Christian or biblical moralism with its pious censure of monarchic honor" (69).

Pangle argues, in Chapter Four, that the reader first will become disenchanted with honor by becoming "enamored of virtuous" republicanism, particularly its democratic form, and impressed "with the purely civil character of its religiosity" (71). Yet problems with classical republicanism arise. It requires "ceaseless mutual surveillance" (72), and is inhumane, as Greco-Roman republicanism was built in part on the backs of slaves (76). Having been exposed to the grave problems of both regime types, the reader must now seek a better regime, which arrives with the emergence of "the free but morally lax English constitution and commercial way of life," what Pangle calls the "modern liberal religion" (71). While Pangle suggests that the English system is Montesquieu's model, "the specific English institutions can and ought to be applied rarely, and then only with substantial modifications, to other nations" (87-88). Rather, "what should be encouraged and sought out are at most roughly analogous institutional mechanisms and practices, rooted in and thus suited to each nation's peculiar historical spirit" (88).

To become fully dominant, liberal republicanism needs its "engine of religious liberation", commerce, which Pangle examines in Chapter Five (99). It is here that Pangle's analysis is most penetrating and astute. While many have pointed to the praise Montesquieu heaps on commerce, Pangle's discussion is especially rich. The spirit of commerce provides great benefits and is "fundamentally opposed, not only to insecurity, but also to both the austere civic virtue of republican antiquity and to religious self-transcendence or otherworldliness" (100). The benefits commerce provides combat both civic republicanism and revealed religion, to such an extent that Montesquieu wants to "make the belief in and experience of supra- and contrarational divine consolations and commandments steadily evaporate" (108).

Up to this point, Pangle has offered a careful, yet controversial, interpretation of this influential Enlightenment thinker. Having done so, in the Conclusion he undertakes to criticize Montesquieu "at the foundational level" with the well-worn Straussian approach [1]. of posing the ancients versus the moderns, and then unquestionably favoring the former (130). Pangle argues that the Enlightenment has not been successful in achieving its goals, and that instead, Enlightenment rationalism suffers from a "manifest spiritual deficit" that should drive us back to classical rationalism, rooted in Socratic political philosophy (131). The human spirit cannot truly become "basically satisfied by the security, prosperity, engrossing activity, and mutual 'self-esteem' brought about through liberal constitutionalism and 'commerce'" (131). For Pangle, Montesquieu's approach is also inadequate for addressing the problems of contemporary society. For example : "In Montesquieu's scheme of things, it is simply not supposed to be possible that despots" like Lenin, Mao, and Robespierre "are inspired to unprecedented atrocities by responding to the moral call of great philosophers of modernity" (132). Naïvely, "Montesquieu's teaching promises that with the spread of commerce and science, the virtue of humanity does and will slowly, yet almost inevitably, take the place of harsh inhumanity" (132). To truly solve our modern problems, we must return to Socratic political philosophy, whose meaning Montesquieu "does not appear to have appreciated" (134). For Pangle, it apparently is not enough that Montesquieu thinks philosophers should "take responsibility for the fate of humanity, for guiding the course of world history" (145). Instead, they and we must embrace moral virtue, classical philosophy, and ultimately "greatness of soul" (141). Pangle's final indictment comes when he suggests that Montesquieu himself is aware of his inadequacies, and was perfectly aware "of the comic figure he knows he would cut before an Aristotle, a Plato, a More, or even a Machiavelli - and before those who appreciate what these men really were and were about," presumably those like Pangle (145). Knowing that he cannot take men to the "final peak" of human existence, Montesquieu wishes his readers well in finding "the full meaning and meaningfulness of the philosophic way of life" (146).

While impressive, Pangle's book is not without its problems. After such a stimulating analysis, Pangle disappointingly retreats to the traditional Straussian interpretation of the history of political thought - the ancients were simply better than the moderns - and goes not one step further. The moderns lowered the bar. We, instead, need a higher bar. Pangle sells Montesquieu short. Above all, Montesquieu valued liberty and human dignity. Why are these insufficient, lower values, given that he embraced them under borderline despotic monarchical rule, in a time of many forms of slavery and oppression ? Montesquieu was supremely interested in establishing good laws, good mores, personal security, freedom, prosperity, and the conditions in which man can flourish. This is, apparently, wholly insufficient for Pangle. It is not clear, moreover, what exactly Pangle prefers as an alternative to Montesquieu's liberal, commercial republicanism, which Pangle might also label despotic because it suffocates the yearning of our soul. Are we to return to ancient Athens ? On what terms, exactly ? Besides, doesn't Montesquieu's liberalism make and leave room precisely for the kind of "philosophy" in which Pangle wants to engage.

Perhaps the most curious aspect of Pangle's treatment of religion in *Of the Spirit of the Laws* is that while Montesquieu dedicated Part V to religion, Pangle only deals with it for 7 out of 143 pages. While he rightly mines Part I for religious references, why neglect Part V, where Montesquieu directly discusses religion ? This was a failing of his first book, too, and he does not remedy it here. If he had examined Part V, Pangle could have addressed other important issues such as religious toleration.

## **Thomas L. Pangle, The Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity in Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws**

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Generally, Pangle interprets Montesquieu as being overly anti-religious. There can be no doubt that Montesquieu was critical of certain aspects of religion, and of the Catholic Church. However, it is important to remember, first, that he did attribute certain goods to religion. Second, according to Montesquieu, religion is simply a necessity in many states, and is an ingrained part of their "esprit". This need not be a bad thing.

Overall, Pangle's work is a must read for Montesquieu scholars, and for those who want to explore further the relation between religion, on the one hand, and liberty and commerce on the other. By stating his case so strongly, Pangle has given us much to consider on all of these fronts.

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[1] See especially Leo Strauss. 1999. *Natural Right and History*. University of Chicago : Chicago, and Leo Strauss. 1988. *What is Political Philosophy ?* University of Chicago : Chicago