Baron Montesquieu was one of the most important political thinkers of the 18th century. Montesquieu used his novel *The Persian Letters* to put forth his ideas about good government and to make fun of the royal reign in France. In this novel, Persian travelers journey through France commenting on the customs there. In the following excerpt, the fictional character Usbeck writes to his friend Mirza back in Persia. He tells Mirza a legend in order to show what happens when people get rid of government.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Drawing Conclusions**

What is Montesquieu’s attitude about a society without government?

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**from Letter XI—Usbek to Mirza, at Ispahan**

In Arabia there once lived a small tribe called the Trogloodytes, descendants of those ancient Trogloodytes who, if we can believe the historians, more resembled beasts than men. But the people of whom I speak were not that deformed; they were not shaggy like bears, nor did they hiss, and they had two eyes. However, they were so brutal and ferocious that there was no principle of equity or justice among them.

They had a king of foreign origin who, hoping to correct the brutality of their nature, treated them harshly; but they conspired against him, killed him, and exterminated the entire royal family.

Having struck the blow, they assembled to choose a government, and after much dissent they elected magistrates. No sooner had they been elected, however, than they became intolerable, and they too were massacred.

Freed from this new yoke, the people now consulted only their own savage nature. All of them agreed that they would no longer obey anyone at all; each was to attend only to his personal interests, and to consider none other.

This unanimous resolution was extremely pleasing to all. Each said: “Why should I kill myself working for people who don’t matter to me? I will think only of myself. I will be happy; what is it to me if the others are happy or not? I will satisfy all my needs, and after that, I won’t care if the other Trogloodytes are miserable.”

When the month for sowing came, each said: “I will cultivate only as much of my fields as is needed to furnish me with grain for my sustenance; a greater quantity would be useless, and I am not going to trouble myself for nothing.”

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1. **Ispahan**: (also Isfahan) a city in Iran; the former capital of Persia
2. **Trogloodytes**: savage cave dwellers of ancient legend

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The land of this little realm was not all alike; some was high and arid, and in the lowlands some was watered by many streams. The first year was very dry, so that land in the high places was completely unproductive, while that which could be irrigated was very fertile. Thus the mountain people almost all perished of hunger, because their merciless neighbors refused to share their harvest.

The next year was very wet, and the high places were extraordinarily productive, while the lowlands were flooded. Again, half of the people cried famine, but they found the others to be as heartless as they themselves had been.

One of the chief men had a very beautiful wife; his neighbor fell in love with her and carried her off. This occasioned a great quarrel, and after many insults and blows they agreed to abide by the decision of a Troglodyte who had had some distinction under the earlier republic. They went to him and asked that he hear their arguments. “What is it to me,” the man said, “whether this woman is yours, or yours? I have my field to cultivate; I am not going to waste my time in settling your differences and doing your business while I neglect my own. I ask you to leave me alone and not bother me any longer with your quarrels.” Thereupon he left them, and went to work his land. The ravisher, who was the stronger man, swore to die rather than return the woman; and the other, wounded by his neighbor’s injustice and the hardness of the judge, was returning home in despair, when he saw in his path a young and pretty woman returning from the well. No longer having a wife, he was attracted to her, and the more so when he discovered that she was the wife of the man he had hoped to employ as a judge, and who had been so insensitive to his misery. He seized her, and carried her off to his house.

Two of his neighbors banded together, chased him from his house, and occupied his fields. Between them they made a compact to defend each other from anyone who in turn might seek to overthrow them, and, indeed, they managed to stay there for several months. But one man, tired of sharing what he could have for himself, killed the other and became sole master of the field. His rule did not last long: two other Troglodytes attacked him, and, too weak to defend himself, he was slaughtered.

Yet another Troglodyte, almost naked, saw some wool for sale and asked its price. The merchant said to himself, “At market price I could expect from this wool only enough money to buy two measures of grain; but I will sell it for four times that, so I can get eight measures.” The other needed the wool, and paid the price. “I am pleased at this,” said the merchant; “now I can buy some grain.”

“What was that?” the buyer replied. “You need grain? I have some to sell, but the price may astonish you; you know grain is extremely expensive now, for famine reigns everywhere. But give me back my money, and I will give you one measure—but not one bit more, even if you were dying of hunger.”

Meanwhile a dreadful disease was ravaging the country. A skillful physician came from a nearby country, and dispensed medicine so effectively that all those in his care were cured. When the disease had died out, he went to those he had
treated and requested his fee. But he met with refusals everywhere, and returned to his own country, worn out by the rigors of a long journey. Shortly afterward, he learned that the same disease had sprung up again and was afflicting the ungrateful land even more than before. This time they did not wait for him to come to them but came to him themselves. “Begone,” he told them. “Unjust men, your souls contain a poison more fatal than that which you want cured. You do not deserve a place on the earth, because you have no humanity, no sense of the rules of justice. I believe I would offend the gods who are punishing you, if I opposed their just anger.”

from Letter XII—Usbek to Mirza, at Ispahan

You have seen, my dear Mirza, how the Troglodytes perished by their wickedness and became victims of their own injustice. Only two families in the entire nation escaped its ruin. For there were in this country two remarkable men, who were humane, just, and lovers of virtue. As much united by their upright hearts as by the corruption all about them, they regarded the general desolation with a pity that became a new bond between them. They labored together for their mutual benefit; their only differences were those that spring from sweet and tender friendship; and in a remote part of the country, apart from compatriots unworthy of their presence, they led a happy and tranquil life. The earth, cultivated by such virtuous hands, seemed to fructify spontaneously.

They loved their wives, and were beloved by them. Their entire attention was directed to educating their children in the ways of virtue; the miseries of their fellow countrymen were constantly represented to them and held up as the sorriest of examples. Above all, they were taught that individual interest is always bound to the common interest, that to try to separate them was to invite ruin, that virtue is not something costly to achieve or painful to exercise, and that justice for others is a blessing for ourselves.

They soon had the consolation of virtuous fathers, seeing their children develop in their image. The young race grew before their eyes and increased through happy marriages; the community grew, but the bond of union remained, and virtue, far from dispersing in the crowd, was instead strengthened by new examples.

Who could describe the happiness of these Troglodytes? So just a people could not fail to gain the gods’ favor. From the moment they first learned of the gods, they learned also to fear them, and religion softened manners that nature had left hard.

They instituted feasts in honor of the gods. Boys and young girls adorned with flowers paid them homage with dancing and the harmonies of rustic music; festival banquets followed at once, joyful yet frugal. In such assemblies untutored nature spoke. There young people learned to exchange their hearts, and blushing virgins were surprised into confessions soon to be ratified by their fathers; there tender mothers delighted to predict sweet and faithful unions to come.

When they prayed in the temple for favor from the gods, it was not their own wealth and abundance they sought—for such wishes were unworthy of these

3. virtue: general moral excellence

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happy Troglodytes, who knew only how to request good for their fellows. They went to the altars only to seek health for their parents, unity among their brethren, love from their wives, and affection and obedience from their children. Girls came to submit the tender sacrifice of their hearts, asking no other blessing than the power to make a Troglodyte happy.

In the evening, when the flocks had left the meadows and the weary oxen returned with the plow, they gathered together at a modest supper, where they sang of the wickedness and the miseries of the early Troglodytes, of the revival of virtue in the new people, and of their happiness. They celebrated the grandeur of the gods, their unfailing aid to men who implore it, and their inevitable vengeance on those who do not fear them. They next described the delights of a simple rural life, and the joys of an existence graced with innocence. Then they gave themselves up to a sleep which care and grief never disturbed.

Nature supplied their desires as well as their needs. Cupidity⁴ was alien to this happy land, and when they gave presents to each other, he who presented the gift always believed himself the favored one. All the Troglodytes considered themselves members of a single family; their flocks always mingled, and the only trouble they spared themselves was that of separating them.


⁴. cupidity: greed for wealth
THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER
Using the example of the Troglodytes, Montesquieu showed that society would break down without government. People would become greedy and selfish. Society would soon fall apart because of the uncontrolled, competing self-interests.