



The European Legacy

Toward New Paradigms

ISSN: 1084-8770 (Print) 1470-1316 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cele20>

“Working at the Same Time to Animate and to Restrain”: Tocqueville on the Problem of Authority

Robert A. Ballingall

To cite this article: Robert A. Ballingall (2019) “Working at the Same Time to Animate and to Restrain”: Tocqueville on the Problem of Authority, *The European Legacy*, 24:7-8, 738-754, DOI: [10.1080/10848770.2019.1641310](https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2019.1641310)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2019.1641310>



Published online: 25 Jul 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 17



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



“Working at the Same Time to Animate and to Restrain”: Tocqueville on the Problem of Authority

Robert A. Ballingall

Department of Political Science, University of Maine, 229 North Stevens Hall, Orono, ME 04469, USA

ABSTRACT

Alexis de Tocqueville is often seen as a champion of personal liberty and human greatness in the face of the conformism and mediocrity of the democratic social state. In this light, his vision of “soft despotism” anticipates familiar reservations about state managerialism and political apathy. Yet this picture risks eclipsing one of Tocqueville’s most pregnant ambiguities. Though deeply concerned by threats to liberty posed by modern mass society, Tocqueville is alive to the special need such societies have of authority, particularly moral authority, and hence of restraints to liberty itself. The freedom to decide how best to lead one’s life must become self-destructive, he contends, without a corresponding inclination to look outside oneself for prudent leadership and counsel. This article elucidates the reasoning behind this paradoxical position. I argue that beneath the need of authority Tocqueville detects an enduring human problem, though one that takes a unique and even insuperable form under modern egalitarianism. I suggest that dwelling on this problem promises to enrich debates about the cynical nativism now menacing liberal democracies. Its origins are to be found less in economic upheaval and communication technology run amok than in the decay of civil religion and civic virtue, a trend that runs very much with the grain of democratic society and whose progress may be irrevocable.

KEYWORDS

Tocqueville; authority; liberty; individualism; pride; humility

You must pardon me a little because of the sadness, I could almost say the despair in view of what is happening, that is felt by a man who is as convinced as I that the true greatness of man lies only in the harmony of the liberal sentiment and the religious sentiment, working at the same time to animate and to restrain souls.

—Tocqueville to Claude-François de Corcelle, 17 September 1853

To understand the populist nativism in whose violent currents liberal democracy threatens to founder, reflective persons are well advised to consult the French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville.¹ Everyone sees that the new populism derives its force from a deeply-felt, cynical indignation whose flames unscrupulous demagogues are only too happy to fan. But whereas most observers find the germs of this passion in economic disruption, new communication technology, and persistent racism, Tocqueville’s analysis spurs us to look for a deeper cause. Tocqueville sees that democracy itself—understood less as a form of government than type of regime or “social state”—has a powerful tendency to isolate its constituent members.²

Its intransigent love of equality inclines the type democratic man to think seldomly of others and frequently of himself.³ He disavows the example of his ancestors just as he neglects the interests of his heirs. He believes he owes nothing to anyone; he expects nothing from anyone. When he looks at his contemporaries, he sees as in a mirror. His experience would confirm his opinion: none is deserving of devotion and fidelity; all are fundamentally equal and alike. What impresses is not so much any one person as the mass of similar people, before whom he is prone to feelings of profound impotence. “Withdrawn and apart,” he denies himself the means of effecting his own designs, or even of meeting his basic needs; the habit and art of association he is all too prone to neglect. In its stead, and of necessity, democratic man calls in the state cum administrator, “an immense tutelary power” whose aid can only intensify his isolation and weakness.⁴ Can we be surprised if, in reaction to its blunders and paternalism, he should become resentful and indignant? However much the hand might feed, won’t he welcome promises to be avenged against it, if only to acquit himself of responsibility for his own need of its aid?

Tocqueville’s image of this “soft despotism” is well known, as are the means of forestalling it that he claims to discern in Jacksonian America. “The Americans have combated the individualism to which equality gives birth with freedom,” he famously observes, “and they have defeated it” (2.2.4). They have vanquished, at least for a time, the democratic propensity towards isolation. This they have done, Tocqueville suggests, because they have been more or less alive to the connection between free association and human dignity. His Americans find themselves in a virtuous circle wherein habits of association augment the vigor of the individual. Each perceives that he would be master of his fate only with others’ cooperation, associating in numbers small enough that each might have a hand in bringing the rest together and in directing their activity. The success each reaps in doing so then amplifies his feelings of self-mastery, while those same feelings strengthen his expectations of further association. Tocqueville’s Americans thus thwart the enervating helplessness so threatening to democratic society. In order to combat the same sentiment and the resentment that it spawns, might today’s Americans learn from their ancestors’ success, or at least from Tocqueville’s presentation of that success? If Tocqueville’s account of democracy’s disorders is sound, then his report of democracy’s redeemers may be needful.

Before we can answer such questions, however, we need to get clearer about the nature of the remedy, if a remedy it is that Tocqueville supplies. Even as more attention than ever is devoted to Tocqueville’s political thought, the full subtlety of his intellectual project remains elusive. This is especially true of the relationship in his work between authority and liberty. Interpreters rightly dwell on his insight that human dignity is more aligned under democratic conditions with freedom than equality, and they rightly trace a rhetoric in his writings that would inoculate his readers against equality’s unfortunate corollaries. These scholars duly emphasize the ingenuities that Tocqueville furnishes for enlarging democrats’ vigor and pride.⁵ But these readings do not fully account for the complex role that Tocqueville assigns in these cases to authority, for authority presupposes not so much pride as humility, a readiness to recognize in others good qualities that are less present in oneself.⁶ Authority implies a title to rule, and it is the absence of rule, or the appearance of its absence, that makes mass democracy so threatening (1.1.5).⁷ It dominates democratic man precisely in his individualistic conceit, in his refusal to feel the need of leadership. The scourge of modern egalitarianism, then, is less the reduction of democratic man to timidity than the inclination

of democratic man to complacency. His self-disgust and weakness belie arrogance. They are more effect than cause.

Similarly, Tocqueville's antidotes to individualism would buttress proud self-mastery in democratic man, but only on a foundation of humility. The democrat is reduced to helplessness from vanity; he is led to confidence from modesty. It is from modesty that he might see his need of "fixed ideas," ready-made beliefs furnished not by the fickle mass but stable tradition. It is the absence of such ideas that is the root of democratic diffidence on Tocqueville's account. Without them, he claims, the mind soon loses and exhausts itself, finding the repose it needs where it ought least to stop. When it might have consented to receive foundational beliefs on which a certain independence can be built, it is compelled instead to accept poor substitutes that only make plain its own weakness. Excessive confidence in the capacity for intellectual liberty and moral autonomy withers the hope on which those very goods depend. That is why the true friends of democracy would harmonize man's "liberal sentiment," his proud sense that he might seek the truth by himself, with his "religious sentiment," his openness to authority "in the matter of religion."⁸ If these friends would "animate" the democratic soul beneficially, then they must work to suitably "restrain" it as well.

Tocqueville often seems hopeful in his own right about the prospects of this psychological reconciliation, at least under American democracy. But we should be wary of mistaking salutary rhetoric for considered judgment. In writing *Democracy in America*, he has both practical and philosophical purposes. He speaks to men of action no less than lovers of truth. If the former are to play constructive roles in modern society, neither preying on the people's despondency nor becoming despondent themselves, then by Tocqueville's lights they must learn the means of sustaining human dignity under democratic conditions.⁹ Above all, they must have confidence in the efficacy of those means. The success of Tocqueville's practical purpose depends on cultivating such confidence in practical readers. But nothing Tocqueville writes obliges him to share in that confidence himself. Indeed, he furnishes reasons for thinking it misplaced, philosophically speaking.¹⁰ From philosophy's perspective, Tocqueville's remedies to democratic dangers are akin to the alternate histories of science fiction: they describe not so much the likely future that awaits democratic society as what democracy *would* have to do were it to avoid its own characteristic excess. If Tocqueville's thought speaks to our current crisis, it may be less as a source of cures than as a roadmap to decline. It foresees the cynical indignation crippling our politics even as it conceives the means we might have used to allay it.

Authority and the Human Soul

Tocqueville is perhaps best known for the argument that democracy is troublingly insensitive to human freedom, "the source of all moral greatness" (*DA* Intro., 11). Its immoderate love of equality easily overwhelms the longing for liberty. Nevertheless, attentive readers have long observed an ambiguity in the formulation of this claim, even if they have not always dwelled on its full significance. Tocqueville sees that liberty is entangled with equality; they are at once each other's cause and effect. Equality of conditions inclines democrats to prioritize their individual reason, but intellectual autonomy arouses in its own right a desire for equal status (2.1.1). Because of this intermingling, egalitarianism can

become pernicious not only from overwhelming the longing for liberty. It can also do harm from amplifying an excessive or misplaced attachment to liberty itself, the very good that would otherwise keep equality from self-destruction. Individual freedom is at once scourge and savior. The key to untangling this paradox, I submit, lies in Tocqueville's treatment of authority—the voluntary submission to others' leadership, whether practical, moral, or intellectual. Both equality and liberty naturally harbor a disinclination to authority. They cease to threaten, he argues, only when that aversion is subdued.

Tocqueville first broaches this theme in the introduction to *Democracy*, in a passage dealing with how modern society risks abasing the human soul (Intro., 8–9). Here, as he will do so often, Tocqueville illuminates democratic modernity by contrasting it with the aristocratic past. We might have expected him to discuss in this vein the need to preserve under equality of conditions the pride and agency characteristic of aristocratic nobility. But depraved souls lack these sentiments by definition. Appealing to them as needful is like urging health on the sick. What is required is rather a diagnosis of the malady's cause, and Tocqueville's diagnosis is instructive. Aristocracy countenanced inequality and misery, he tells us, but did not abase souls. The people, though consigned to “work, coarseness, and ignorance,” held in their hearts “energetic passions, generous sentiments, profound beliefs, and savage virtues.” This was possible because feudal serfs freely accepted their subordination, believing it “an effect of the immutable order of nature.” However erroneous this belief may have been, and Tocqueville gives every indication that it was indeed a sham, it had what proved a great advantage—it kept the people from “obedience to a power they regard[ed] as usurped and oppressive.” For, he explains, “it is not the use of power or the habit of obedience that depraves men, but the use of power that they consider illegitimate” (Intro., 8). Only without authority does power deprave; involuntary obedience implies weakness and servility. Power that at least dons the vestments of dignity and honor, that makes itself loved if also feared, is power that can be obeyed freely and therefore proudly, even if its attractiveness is founded on fictions.

Tocqueville will go on to argue that political liberty and equality of conditions are more just than aristocratic hierarchy and mystification. But he will also convey the risks of realizing democratic justice by means of disenchantment, as he does here in the introduction. He allows that democracy, properly instructed, might harmonize authority with enlightenment. The manner in which he describes such harmony, however, invites questions of critical readers.

I conceive a society . . . in which the authority of government is respected as necessary, not divine, and the love one would bear for a head of state would not be a passion, but a reasoned and tranquil sentiment. . . . The people, instructed in their true interests, would understand that to profit from society's benefits, one must submit to its burdens. (Intro., 9)

Authority can persist under democracy, if only the people perceive their personal interests to align with the public good and the commands of law. The trouble, of course, is that the interests of the individual do not always or even usually cohere with public purposes, to say nothing of state demands.¹¹ Indeed, one suspects precisely enlightened citizens of perceiving these cases all too clearly. If that's right, then won't authority extend only so far, even or especially under well-instructed democracy? Seeing as law

compels obedience regardless of voluntary compliance, won't especially these democrats feel themselves obeying an illegitimate and oppressive power?

In the introduction to *Democracy*, Tocqueville leaves his readers to ask these questions for themselves. He makes his reservations about democracy's impact on authority explicit only with the example of his native France. Once again, however, he provokes us to wonder about his quixotic formulation.

We, leaving the social state of our forebears, throwing their institutions, their ideas, and their mores pell-mell behind us—what have we gained in its place? The prestige of royal power has vanished without being replaced by the majesty of the laws; in our day the people scorn authority, but they fear it, and fear extracts more from them than was formerly given out of respect and love. ... The poor man has kept most of the prejudices of his fathers without their beliefs; their ignorance without their virtues; he has taken the doctrine of interest as the rule of his actions without knowing the science of it, and his selfishness is as lacking in enlightenment as was formerly his devotion. (Intro., 9–10)

On this assessment, post-revolutionary France has suffered all the costs of a democratic social state without realizing any of the benefits. Would-be statesmen, imagining they might reverse the march of equality, have refused democracy the leadership it needs; they have neglected to instruct the people in the “science” of self-interest. France is duly afflicted with the full spiritual impact of involuntary obedience. Scorning authority, its citizens obey from fear—and are reduced in their own eyes accordingly. But if “enlightened” citizens prioritize a clear-eyed view of their own interests, as we might expect them to do, then how could sage leadership have forestalled their humiliation? If such leadership has the goal of instructing the people in where their interests truly lie, won't the people recognize—on Tocqueville's own premises—the extent to which their personal good does not align with the common? Does enlightenment not therefore deprave the soul? Or does Tocqueville intend a novel idea, one that retains something of feudal devotion even as it disenchants the world? Attending more closely to the relationship in *Democracy* between enlightenment and authority suggests that indeed he does.

Enlightenment and Hostility to Rule

Democracy's first volume extols enlightenment's effect on authority without expanding on Tocqueville's curious usage. It associates the concept with the idea of rights, for example, by means of which “each could show himself independent without arrogance and submissive without baseness” (1.2.6). But it hardly mentions the novelty of this vocabulary, how it refers to an enlightenment that accords with voluntary submission, that demystifies the world but without exposing or exposing fully the tension between private interest and public good.¹² Only volume two speaks of enlightenment in a familiar register, and even then without explicitly using the term. Tocqueville reserves the adulatory word for the inventive idea he would have us esteem.

He begins, though, with a damning accusation. Americans' enlightenment may well have the merits that he has praised, but now we learn that those virtues are imperiled by the extent to which that enlightenment is both more and less conventional than Tocqueville has intimated. It is more conventional in that each American, “in most of the operations of the mind ... calls only on the individual effort of his own reason ... taking the rule of [his] judgment only from [himself]” (2.1.1).¹³ Like the enlightened

European, he would repudiate the very idea of authority, the very notion that he might receive his beliefs “ready-made.” Enlightenment is of a piece with radical liberty of the intellect, despite what Tocqueville has led us to believe. Ironically, however, and unlike its conventional meaning, American enlightenment belies external dependency. “I think there is no country in the civilized world where they are less occupied with philosophy than the United States,” Tocqueville tells us. Though pretending to “a certain philosophic method,” his Americans are uniquely oblivious to the philosophic origins whence that method came. “America is therefore the one country in the world where the precepts of Descartes are least studied and best followed.”¹⁴ Americans are followers despite themselves. They practice the opposite of what they intend.

Clearly it is not through pseudo-Cartesianism that Tocqueville’s Americans earn his praise. Somehow, enlightenment leads them to accept an authority that is dignifying, as it does in the case of political rights, even as it threatens to undermine that very acceptance. These Americans harbor the desire conventionally associated with enlightenment to be morally and intellectually autonomous,¹⁵ a desire that threatens to lead them astray. But seeing as it is enlightenment that also preserves them from that self-same threat, as Tocqueville has claimed in volume one, it must be from some other sense of the word that his Americans are saved, one that illuminates (or exaggerates!) an accord between private and public. To grasp how this other enlightenment plays that salvific role, we need to see precisely why enlightenment qua pretended autonomy is so menacing. Given what Tocqueville has prepared us to think in his introduction, we suspect the peril to come from how desired independence occasions involuntary obedience. If rule is as inescapable in the moral and intellectual realms as it is in the political, then outright repudiation of leadership in these domains must deprave the soul too. In either case it leads to humiliation: he who would renounce being ruled altogether only discovers that he would be ruled against his will.

In volume two, Tocqueville makes good this expectation. He examines the origins in democratic man of the desire for radical independence and shows how it must become self-defeating. In the Cartesian philosopher, a similar desire attends the longing for certain knowledge; he would take “the rule of [his] judgment only from [himself]” that he might have absolute confidence in the foundations of his thought (2.1.1).¹⁶ A somewhat different impulse animates Tocqueville’s democrats. “Americans do not read Descartes’s works because their social state leads them away from speculative studies,” he tells us, “and they follow his maxims because this same social state naturally disposes their minds to adopt them” (2.1.1). The ceaseless agitation of modern society, its scorn of tradition, its acquisitive materialism, and above all its equality of conditions lead democratic citizens to ape, but only ape, modern philosophers. Lacking the leisure, tenacity, and inclination required for sustained meditation, they are wanting in “profound combinations of the intellect.” Indeed, Tocqueville writes, “there is nothing less fit for meditation than the interior of a democratic society” (2.1.10). Like philosophers, democrats embark in pursuit of intellectual liberty; “equality develops the desire in each man to judge everything by himself.” But as a rule, they find themselves incapable of bringing that desire to fruition. It originates for them less in some “ardent, haughty, and disinterested love of the true” (2.1.10), than in the social state that they inhabit, in a source apparently outside themselves and even imposed upon them. They look to themselves only because they have nowhere else to turn. They cannot draw their beliefs

from the class to which they belong nor from an individual whom they respect; democracy has swept away the intellectual and moral significance of differences among classes and persons. None display “incontestable signs of greatness and superiority.”¹⁷ But lacking the ingredients called for by authentic liberty of the intellect, egalitarian democrats reach beyond their grasp when they pretend to such liberty themselves. Pursuing it leaves them less free than they might have been had they recognized their enduring need of authority.

For their part, however, modern philosophers overreach themselves too. “There is no philosopher in the world so great that he does not believe a million things on faith in others or does not suppose many more truths than he establishes” (2.1.1).¹⁸ Descartes himself may have claimed “to make use of his method only in certain matters,” but Tocqueville sees that he “had put it in such a way that it applied to all.” His successors duly “derived from the same method general applications that Descartes and his predecessors had not perceived or had refused to uncover.” They submitted to individual reason the whole assortment of customary opinions and accepted doctrines. The “method” of doing so has since “[left] the schools to penetrate society and become the common rule of intelligence” (2.1.1) It has been “vulgarized” in the course of its diffusion, even if the process of dissemination was foreseen and intended by its philosophic founder. Whatever the consequences for the majority, though, the implications for philosophy are dire:

A man who would undertake to examine everything by himself could accord but little time and attention to each thing; this work would keep his mind in a perpetual agitation that would prevent him from penetrating any truth deeply and from settling solidly on any certitude. His intellect would be at the same time feeble and independent. It is therefore necessary that he make a choice among the various objects of human opinions and that he adopt many beliefs without discussing them in order better to fathom a few he has reserved for examination. It is true that every man who receives an opinion on the word of another puts his mind in slavery, but it is a salutary servitude that permits him to make good use of his freedom. (2.1.2)

For Tocqueville, general application of the Cartesian method implies a refusal to accept this necessity. It entails abdication of intellectual responsibility; one can at least choose among authorities even if one cannot repudiate authority altogether. To refuse that choice is either to be oblivious to the true origins of one’s opinions or to feel enslaved by their source if and when one allows oneself to perceive it, seeing as one has not chosen it. Modern philosophy thus invites an abasement of soul akin to that which menaces democratic man, and from a similar cause. Like egalitarian democracy, it conceives “a very high and often much exaggerated idea of human reason” (ibid.), one that paradoxically hobbles reason and invites despondency. No doubt this is among Tocqueville’s reasons for holding up as a paradigm of philosophic eros Blaise Pascal, that critic of rationalism *par excellence* (2.1.10). Only God can examine and judge individually all particular cases without becoming “lost in the midst of the immensity of detail.”¹⁹ The human being who would do so forgets himself and what he is.

Sovereign Dogmas in Authority’s Absence

“One cannot make it so that there are no dogmatic beliefs, that is, opinions men receive on trust without discussing them” (2.1.2). If that is indeed a truth ignored by Cartesian

enlightenment, then what are the opinions that the “enlightened” must of necessity receive? Why those opinions in particular? Does receiving them especially deprave the soul? Tocqueville at any rate holds that judging the world on one’s own not only implies a certain insolence but inspires insolent beliefs. It leads, he says, to the conclusion “that everything in the world is explicable and that nothing exceeds the bounds of intelligence.”²⁰ Since there are many things that do in fact escape our comprehension, whether as individuals or as a species, belief in universal explicability can be sustained only by denying whatever cannot be understood. It is nourished, ironically, by a certain irrationalism. Believing all things to be intelligible begets in turn “an almost invincible distaste for the supernatural,” divine things being unfathomable almost by definition. Similarly, reliance on one’s own witness arouses in the enlightened the desire “to see the object that occupies them very clearly.” They become impatient with and hostile to any “veils placed between them and the truth” (2.1.2). This too erodes the attraction of religious and metaphysical thinking. Finally, seeing as thought and action both require a great many opinions that few have the time or penchant to investigate, Cartesians rely especially on “general ideas”—opinions that [“enclose] a great number of analogous objects under the same form so as to think about them more conveniently” (2.1.3). Believing only what one has personally scrutinized yields beliefs of a very broad and abstract cast. Thinking with and acting on a greater number of more precise beliefs is to accept some beliefs on the authority of external sources.

Tocqueville stresses the pernicious influence of these habits. They betray the same insolent overextension that he is wont to deplore. Indeed, they actively reinforce it. The irrationalism sustaining belief in the transparency of the whole, for example, obscures the possibility that others know or might know what one does not. If the whole is knowable to each, then nothing exists that must escape the comprehension of all. Hostility to religious and metaphysical thinking is especially worrying: the human soul, Tocqueville insists, has irrevocable religious needs:

There is almost no human action ... that does not arise from a very general idea that men have conceived of God, of his relations with the human race, of the nature of their souls, and of their duties toward those like themselves. One cannot keep these ideas from being the common source from which all the rest flow. Men therefore have an immense interest in making very fixed ideas for themselves about God, their souls, their general duties toward their Creator and those like them; for doubt about these first points would deliver all their actions to chance and condemn them to a sort of disorder and impotence. (2.1.5)²¹

Religious ideas are in a sense unavoidable. They necessarily stand at the root of one’s thought and action. But Tocqueville worries that democratic inclinations eclipse these foundations. Democrats are loath to pay them mind and dismiss the importance of the questions they imply. When compelled to summon them in defense of lower order opinions, or to motivate themselves in some great effort, they duly discover their own ignorance and confusion. Yet democratic majorities cannot avail themselves of these discomfiting experiences as spurs to firmer ideas. “Only minds very free of the ordinary preoccupations of life,” Tocqueville insists, “very penetrating, very agile, very practiced can, with the aid of much time and care, break through to these so necessary truths” (2.1.5). For the common man, experience of uncertainty in these matters effects instead a kind of paralysis and exhaustion.

Each becomes accustomed to having only confused and changing notions about matters that most interest those like him and himself; one defends one's opinions badly or abandons them, and as one despairs of being able to resolve by oneself the greatest problems that human destiny presents, one is reduced, like a coward, to not thinking about them at all. Such a state cannot fail to enervate souls; it slackens the springs of the will and prepares citizens for servitude. (2.1.5)

Although his tone is dramatic, Tocqueville's point is quite subtle. Human dignity depends on a certain pride and the hope that attends it. Man would be his own master only if he believes himself worthy of being free, capable of realizing great designs and of serving a serious purpose, if only as a small part of a larger whole. Boldly, he must think big.²² Yet thinking big presupposes feeling small, at least in the matter of religion. To be free and even to think freely is to accept, "without examination," at least some of the religious ideas inescapably implied by our other opinions, a practice that for Tocqueville amounts to observing the natural limits of self-determination. Submitting all opinions to rational appraisal merely leaves us bereft of opinions worth believing or of ideas deserving realization. "General ideas relative to God and human nature are therefore, among all ideas, the ones it is most fitting to shield from the habitual action of individual reason and for which there is most to gain and least to lose in recognizing an authority" (2.1.5).

Another subtlety in Tocqueville's treatment of these points is how he qualifies the inconstancy he detects in the democratic mind. Though wavering from one ill-founded opinion to the next, it betrays a deeper lassitude. Its agitations are confined within a narrow sphere. One might expect a society that really did behold in common a vision of the truth to agree in the ideas it affirmed, and to hold firmly to them. Such is the expectation of modern scientific communities. But on Tocqueville's account, democratic citizens are misled in believing their opinions to rest on strong foundations. When they allow themselves this conceit, it is because they suppose themselves to have arrived at their opinions independently. And they would look to their individual reason only because democracy itself inclines them in that direction; equality of conditions obscures the distinctiveness that might otherwise attach to certain people and ideas. For the same reason, democrats tend to be conformist in their opinions and mores. They agree not because of the consensus commanded by the truth but because they neglect the few who might perceive the truth firsthand. Equality leads them to ignore or reject ideas that they would scarcely conceive themselves. It similarly suggests to them the common stock of ideas that they do end up affirming.

Men equal in rights, in education, in fortune, and to say it all in a word, of similar condition, necessarily have needs, habits, and tastes barely unlike. As they perceive objects under the same aspect, their minds naturally incline toward analogous ideas, and although each of them can diverge from his contemporaries and make his own beliefs for himself, in the end, without knowing it and without wishing it, all meet each other in a certain number of common opinions. (2.3.21)²³

For Tocqueville, there are two worrying consequences of such conformity. First, it contributes directly to the sense of impotence and depravity that afflicts democratic citizens. The common opinions furnished by equality are convincing not because they originate in an authoritative name but owing to the unanimity with which they are held. They are believed less from persuasion than intimidation; who are we to disagree with the great majority, if not the people as a whole? Where opinions are believed on the

authority of a few, however magnificent those few may be, one can at least look away to find reasonable disagreement. But under democracy, what little diversity of opinion exists is obscured by the prevailing Cartesian spirit. Strange ideas seem incredible when those who would espouse them closely resemble ourselves. When all seem alike, why trust any scruples but our own? Since each has need nonetheless of opinions he has not the leisure nor ability to fathom, all are reduced to conforming to the opinion of the greatest number that looms so large before their eyes. The majority “takes charge of furnishing individuals with a host of ready-made opinions, and it thus relieves them of the obligation to form their own” (2.1.2). But democrats do not choose to receive their opinions from any but themselves; they feel oppressed the moment they perceive the true provenance of their ideas. They obey by abasing their souls.

When the man who lives in democratic countries compares himself individually to all those who surround him, he feels with pride that he is the equal of each of them; but when he comes to view the sum of those like him and places himself at the side of this great body, he is immediately overwhelmed by his own insignificance and his weakness. The same equality that makes him independent of each of his fellow citizens in particular leaves him isolated and without defense against the action of the greatest number. The public therefore has a singular power among democratic peoples. . . . It does not persuade [one] of its beliefs, it imposes them and makes them penetrate souls by a sort of immense pressure of the minds of all on the intellect of each. (2.1.2)

Tocqueville identifies a second worrying consequence of democratic conformity in the materialism that it broadcasts. Here it depraves indirectly. We have seen how *Democracy* traces skepticism of supernatural and metaphysical ideas to the pretension to autonomous judgment. Adherence to public opinion, Tocqueville maintains, strengthens that skepticism further. Democracy amplifies the tastes of the majority at the same time as it draws those tastes towards worldly, material concerns. Although human beings have a natural longing to transcend such concerns, Tocqueville avers that most of us become absorbed in them if left to ourselves.²⁴ We revert to them by nature even as we naturally long to forget them. Preoccupation with material well-being leads citizens to neglect the religious opinions at the root of their ideas, as we have noted. But materialism is equally troublesome for how it forecloses certain religious and metaphysical opinions in particular. It undermines adherence to “the dogma of the immortality of the soul.” It challenges the seriousness with which citizens would believe in rights. Above all, it suggests to citizens a mercenary, shortsighted conception of their own interests.

There is no need to tear from such citizens the rights they possess; they themselves willingly allow them to escape. The exercise of their political duties appears to them a distressing contretemps that distracts them from their industry. If it is a question of choosing their representatives, of giving assistance to authority, of treating the common thing in common, they lack the time; they cannot waste their precious time in useless work. . . . These people believe they are following the doctrine of interest, but they have only a coarse idea of it, and to watch better over what they call their affairs, they neglect the principal one, which is to remain masters of themselves. (2.2.14)

Tocqueville accepts that democrats necessarily prioritize their personal happiness. Enlightenment must be allowed to proceed so far among them. What he would not have them abide is the identification of their happiness with isolation from public life and repudiation of the common good. Yet many of the forces acting on democrats’

opinions and desires—and certainly the strongest—incline them in precisely that direction. They would recognize their personal interests in the common, Tocqueville argues, only if they can be attached ardently to certain abstract ideas.²⁵ They must jealously guard rights whose existence is purely “formal”; they must have hope that sacrifices made in this life will find reward in the next. But abstract ideas such as these are those towards which democrats are least attracted. They are moved to reject them by their absorption in material concerns, which is itself inflamed by their pretensions to autonomy and adherence to public opinion. The problem is not so much that democrats will neglect the needs of their neighbors and their country. It is rather that they will experience power as oppressive, whether as vested in political institutions or as insinuated in majoritarian mores. Failing to see the personal happiness they inevitably privilege in the public purposes they must ultimately obey or in the common opinions beyond which they can hardly think, they will be loath to give those purposes and opinions their consent. In a misguided attempt at ruling themselves, they invite unintentionally the rule of others. And without authority, without consent, rule is anathema to human dignity and greatness of soul.

American Stratagems for Preserving Authority

Tocqueville claims to have seen in America “more than America.” His America represents rather “an image of democracy itself, of its penchants, its character, its prejudices, its passions” (Intro., 13). He therefore gives readers the expectation that what is true of American democracy will not be idiosyncratic; it will have some application to the broader democratic genus. It is of some importance, then, that Tocqueville claims to have discovered in America not only the shoals that threaten democratic society but also the means Americans have more or less successfully used to avoid them. These he associates with an inventive view of enlightenment, as we have seen, one that harmonizes the ethical habits of democracy with the authority that moderates those habits’ worst excesses. Given what we have learned of Tocqueville’s understanding of those excesses, we are now in a better position to grasp the nature of the enlightenment that thwarts them.

Modern society may have been founded on the annihilation of hereditary vassalage, but it threatens to consign mankind to a new form of servitude. It risks detaching citizens from the love of individual liberty so necessary to keeping despotism at bay. According to Tocqueville, such love depends on self-respect and personal dignity. Paradoxically, however, it is the democratic desire for liberty, or a certain form of it, that also abrogates self-respect. It all too easily refuses authority to power, however necessary and inevitable power may be. Democracy cannot endow power with authority as aristocracy had done, by appealing to some putatively natural hierarchy and to the intrinsic beauty of putting society ahead of oneself; such appeals are anathema to citizens passionately attached to equality and at least notionally repulsed by mysticism. Nor can democracy rely on the abasement of soul towards which it drifts of its own accord. The humility born of that condition is illusory; it belies a hubris that only places democrats more overwhelmingly into the hands of public opinion and of the beliefs that it reinforces, which are themselves unfriendly to human dignity. How, then, do Tocqueville’s Americans moderate their natural abhorrence of authority? And how reliable are their solutions?

The key to Americans' success in mitigating the problem, Tocqueville tells us, lies in their identification of self-interest with the workings of democratic power and especially with the acceptance of beliefs supportive of self-respect. They do not seek nostalgically to resurrect an aristocratic ethos of self-effacing devotion. They do not repudiate the material well-being towards which they are so compellingly drawn. And they do not disavow the right they claim to submit all opinions to the tribunal of their individual reason. They work rather with the grain of these democratic proclivities even as they turn those proclivities against themselves. In this, they accept the guidance of certain "moralists" and the ethical traditions these latter uphold. But they also permit themselves to be deceived, for the opinions to which they thereby consent hardly harmonize with the beliefs towards which they otherwise incline. Indeed, their very acceptance of such leadership contradicts their pretensions to autonomous judgment.

The most well-known example of this strategy is the practice of association and township government, which Tocqueville likens to a democratic primary school; it overcomes refusals to obey by demonstrating the utility of obedience. But association is merely an application—however important—of a broader stratagem. It illustrates Americans' acceptance of what Tocqueville calls "the doctrine of self-interest well understood (*bien entendu*)," the general theory through which "one perceives that man, in serving those like him [i.e., other citizens of a democracy and even all humanity], serves himself, and that his particular interest is to do good" (2.2.8). And there is something fishy about this doctrine, as we earlier observed. Aren't there cases in which serving the common good is manifestly against one's individual advantage? Does the common good not sometimes require the ultimate sacrifice of certain individuals, to say nothing of myriad lesser abstentions? Tocqueville intimates that he is well enough aware of such cases himself. He declines "to enter here into the details" of reasons ostensibly upholding the doctrine, nor does he elsewhere enter into them. He likewise claims not to believe that the theory "is evident in all its parts" (2.2.8).²⁶ He does, however, recognize its appeal and speaks of those persuaded of it as "enlightened."

The doctrine is appealing, he says, because it is "marvelously accommodating to the weaknesses of men." It does not seek to disabuse them of their natural selfishness nor inspire them with the sublime beauty of self-sacrifice. Rather, it draws their attention to "the points where particular interest happens to meet the general interest and to be confounded with it." Doing so has several advantages. It flatters democratic man in the pride he feels for his individual reason; it is in appeals to the head not the heart that the doctrine speaks. It likewise harnesses the cupidity that use of reason unfetters; rationalism dissolves the poetic instincts that otherwise sustain altruism. Above all, self-interest well understood leaves to democratic man some of the dignity of forgetting himself even as he serves himself; it allows him to sate—unintentionally—a longing he would otherwise ignore.

I think it often happens that [Americans] do not do themselves justice; for one sometimes sees citizens in the United States as elsewhere abandoning themselves to the disinterested and unreflective sparks that are natural to man; but Americans scarcely avow that they yield to movements of this kind; they would rather do honor to their philosophy than to themselves. (2.2.8)

Self-interest well understood turns self-centered rationalism back upon itself. It opens the door to a longing of which egoistic reason seemingly disapproves. It is in this sense

that the doctrine “enlightens.” It uses the superficial pride that otherwise leads democrats to isolate and hence debase themselves to interest democrats in others’ fate and thus exalt themselves. In other words, it creates a surrogate for the modesty that democrats need out of an artful reorientation of their hubris. But this it does without permitting the democrats who use it to grasp the full significance of what they do. Even as the doctrine seduces them with a rhetoric of enlightened egoism, it whets an appetite that their reason hardly sanctions, seeing as the form in which reason abides in their souls is hurried, distracted, and mercenary. Self-interest well understood thus achieves a rational end but by blending reason with irrational means.

Notwithstanding the ingenuities of this doctrine, Tocqueville maintains that it cannot resolve the problem of authority without aid of religion. The dogmas furnished by religion, particularly concerning the immortality of the soul, are the more necessary as democrats become more skeptical and incredulous. Believing them is what equips democrats to find personal advantage in thoughts and actions that transcend material well-being. It is religious ideas that suggest to democrats the self-forgetting that their reason would reprove. But precisely here the problem becomes most acute, for religious ideas are the very ones that skeptical materialists are least wont to adopt. Tocqueville discerns at least two stratagems for getting around the difficulty with which American moralists avail themselves. Yet he also intimates that the long-term reliability of these tactics may be doubtful.

One approach is to make plain to the people the political and even material utility of religious beliefs. Tocqueville does so himself, in his own name, in a chapter entitled “How the Excessive Love of Well-Being Can Be Harmful to Well-Being.” It is owing to the religious sentiment in man, he says there, the capacity for “elevating himself above of the goods of the body and of scorning even life—of which beasts do not have any idea—that he knows how to multiply these same goods to a degree that they cannot conceive of” (2.2.16). Here again the quixotic formula: under the aegis of reason is planted the seed whose fruit reason itself would not affirm. Reason might not assent to “the dogma” of immortality, but it can accept the instrumental usefulness of such beliefs. Believing on instrumental grounds would seem to compromise the effectiveness of faith, especially as faith would inspire preoccupation with non-material concerns,²⁷ but Tocqueville suggests that such beliefs are so gratifying that they act as a Trojan Horse. Once introduced into the soul, however attenuated their initial form, they powerfully draw the soul to commit to them sincerely.

The short space of sixty years will never confine the whole imagination of man; the incomplete joys of this world will never suffice for his heart. Alone among all the beings, man shows a natural disgust for existence and immense desire to exist: he scorns life and fears nothingness. These different instincts constantly drive his soul toward contemplation of another world, and it is religion that guides it there. ... In considering religion from a purely human point of view, one can therefore say that all religions draw from man himself an element of strength that can never fail them, because it depends on one of the constituent principles of human nature. (2.2.9)

Another strategy to burnish the authority of religious beliefs, and certainly the most important in Tocqueville’s estimation, is the judicious isolation of religion from politics.²⁸ In nineteenth-century Europe, Christianity is constantly under attack for failing to observe this tactic. Aligning itself with the forces of reaction, it invites the suspicion and hostility of progressives, of the partisans of liberty and equality whose purpose it

should by rights aid and purify. Tocqueville allows that “there are times when religion can add to the influence that is proper to it” by entering the political arena, uniting with earthly powers, and setting itself up as a state-sanctioned cult. But during the centuries of equality into which the modern world has entered, religion must destroy its authority when sharing the material force of those who govern. Because rule in all its forms is now deeply suspected, authority is best realized surreptitiously, by concealing rule. Religion is therefore best advised to keep away from visible signs of power, especially those that arouse mercurial partisanship. It becomes a “political institution,” paradoxically, by withdrawing from politics. It influences public opinion indirectly through the beliefs that it conveys, but it conveys beliefs because it removes itself from public affairs. This strategy is available because religious beliefs are so psychologically attractive. It is enough for the moralists and priests who peddle them to remove themselves from the suspicion attaching to rule.

As confident as Tocqueville sometimes seems to be in the efficacy of these stratagems, he also furnishes reasons for thinking them insufficient in the long run. Most obviously, he confuses his discussions of remedies with his analysis of democratic afflictions, as though the cures he discovers prove on second thought to be but palliatives. He will in one chapter deign to praise democracy, focusing on its surprising achievements in America, only to blame it harshly in the next, sometimes for failing to realize the very feat he has just extolled. His treatment of self-interest well understood is instructive; the chapters praising Americans for their enlightened reliance on this doctrine are followed by others dwelling on Americans’ failure to overcome sufficiently absorption in material well-being and isolation from public life. It is not so much that Tocqueville takes back what he has praised as that he qualifies the hopes that he has aroused. He leaves the impression that the forces menacing democracy are grave indeed, graver perhaps than he often leads us to suppose. Another way in which Tocqueville casts doubt on the hopes that he nurtures is by appealing to the force of accident in Americans’ success. He certainly trumpets the sagacity that he perceives in American practice, but more quietly he shows how Americans owe that wisdom to circumstances beyond their control. They have, for example, benefited enormously from the Puritan “point of departure.” It was the Puritan pioneers who bequeathed the salutary concordance of “the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom.” Though contemptuous of authority and desirous of innovation in the political world, they practiced a dignified obedience in the moral one, abjuring doubt where it was most pernicious (1.1.2). American remedies to the problem of authority owe enough to such idiosyncrasies that they may not really be gainfully employed elsewhere, despite what *Democracy’s* introduction leads us to expect. And they may be reliant on examples whose own authority is dwindling fast. At any rate, that conjecture would seem confirmed by recent experience in America itself. The forces pushing American citizens to isolate and deprave themselves are proving very formidable indeed.

Notes

1. That Tocqueville should be read as a philosopher is controversial. For the affirmative case, see Manent, “Tocqueville, Political Philosopher,” and Mansfield, “Intimations of Philosophy.” Cf. Lawler, *The Restless Mind*, 89–108.

2. Tocqueville's *état social* is analogous to the classical *politeia* inasmuch as it evokes the "soulcraft" that attends living under a given form of social order. But see Mansfield and Winthrop, "Tocqueville's New Political Science," 98, for the sense in which the concept differs, even reverses, its classical antecedent.
3. Cf. Manent, *Tocqueville*, 53–65.
4. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America (DA)* 2.4.6. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from *DA* are drawn from Mansfield and Winthrop (trans.). Hereafter references to *DA*, with volume, part, and chapter number, are cited in the text.
5. See Herold, "Tocqueville on Religion"; Mansfield, "Tocqueville on Religion and Liberty"; Mansfield and Winthrop, "Introduction," and "Tocqueville's New Political Science"; Rahe, *Soft Despotism*, 183–94; Stauffer, "Modern Moral Situation"; and Tessitore, "Tocqueville's American Thesis," 93–94.
6. But see Hebert, *More than Kings*, 50–53, 93.
7. Manent, *Tocqueville*, xii, 5–6; Mansfield and Winthrop, "Introduction," xlvii.
8. Cf. Toupin and Boesche (trans.), *Selected Letters*, 294–95 with *DA*, 1.1.2; 2.2.5.
9. See esp. *DA*, 2.4.7.
10. See *DA*, 2.4.7, Vol. 2 Notice with 2.1.10, where Tocqueville illustrates philosophic "haughtiness" with the example of Pascal, sworn enemy of human hubris if ever there was one.
11. Cf. *DA*, 1.2.10: "Most of them [the Anglo-Americans] think that the knowledge of one's self-interest well understood is enough to lead man toward the just and the honest. . . . I do not say that all these opinions are correct, but they are American."
12. But see *DA*, 1.1.2: "in America, it is religion that leads to enlightenment; it is the observance of divine laws that guides men to freedom."
13. Cf. *DA*, 2.3.21.
14. N.B. Tocqueville's qualification, not—needless to say—intended as a compliment: "this same method is followed more rigorously and applied more often by the French than by the Americans" *DA*, 2.1.1.
15. See, e.g., Kant, "What is Enlightenment," 54.
16. Cf. Descartes, *Meditations*, 17; and Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 22–27. See also Hebert, "Individualism."
17. This is not to say that a certain inequality fails to persist under democracy. See esp. *DA*, 2.2.20.
18. Cf. *DA*, 2.1.5.
19. Cf. *DA*, 1.1.4: "The people reign over the American political world as does God over the universe."
20. Presumably because democrats are more attached to believing themselves capable of autonomous judgment than they are committed to judging soundly. See *DA*, 2.1.1.
21. Cf. *DA*, 2.2.12. See also Hebert, *More than Kings*, 193–94.
22. Cf. *DA*, 2.2.15.
23. Cf. *DA*, 1.2.7. One might perhaps object to Tocqueville's claim by pointing to the differences of opinion evidenced in democratic partisanship, especially in the United States, whether of Tocqueville's time or our own. Tocqueville in fact anticipates this objection with his distinction between "great parties" and "small parties" (1.2.2). The democratic propensity towards conformity, he allows, is more hostile to the former than the latter. One might equally retort on his behalf by appealing to the difficulty with which one disagrees with the opinions of a democratic party without simply adhering to the opinions of another.
24. On the natural longing to transcend material concerns, see *DA*, 2.2.12.; and on the natural reversion to materialism, see 2.2.10, 15.
25. Interpreters like Mansfield and Winthrop are certainly correct to emphasize Tocqueville's dislike of intellectual abstraction and "general ideas." The point is that the abstract character of such ideas is of the wrong kind. The abstractions that Tocqueville encourages are representations of non-material goods, not heuristics that conceal detail.
26. Cf. *DA*, 2.4.7 with Mansfield, *Tocqueville*, 27–28.

27. For a sustained examination of this problem, see Zuckert, “Not by Preaching” with Lively, *Tocqueville*, 196–97, and Zetterbaum, *Problem of Democracy*, 120–24.
28. See esp. Zuckert, “Not by Preaching” and “Tocqueville’s New Political Science” for fuller treatments of these points.

Notes on contributor

Robert A. Ballingall is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Maine, USA. His research interests lie in classical political philosophy and its fraught relationship to modern—especially liberal democratic—political thought. Previously, he was Postdoctoral Fellow in the Program on Constitutional Government at Harvard University and Allan Bloom Memorial Postdoctoral Fellow for Research in Classical Political Thought at the University of Toronto.

Bibliography

- Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method*. Translated by Richard Kennington. Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2007.
- Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by Donald A. Cress. 3d ed. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993.
- Hebert, L. Joseph Jr. “Individualism and Intellectual Liberty in Tocqueville and Descartes.” *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 2 (2007): 525–37.
- Hebert, L. Joseph Jr. *More Than Kings and Less Than Men: Tocqueville on the Promise and Perils of Democratic Individualism*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012.
- Herold, A. “Tocqueville on Religion, the Enlightenment, and the Democratic Soul.” *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 3 (2015): 523–34.
- Kant, Immanuel. “What is Enlightenment?” In *Kant: Political Writings*. Translated by H. B. Nisbet. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Lawler, Peter Augustine. *The Restless Mind: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Origin and Perpetuation of Human Liberty*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993.
- Lively, Jack. *The Social and Political Thought of Alexis de Tocqueville*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Manent, Pierre. *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*. Translated by J. Waggoner. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996.
- Manent, Pierre. “Tocqueville, Political Philosopher.” Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. In *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, edited by Cheryl B. Welch, 108–20. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Mansfield, Harvey C. “Intimations of Philosophy in Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*.” In *Tocqueville’s Voyages: The Evolution of His Ideas and Their Journey Beyond His Time*, edited by Christine Dunn Henderson, 202–41. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2014.
- Mansfield, Harvey C. *Tocqueville: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Mansfield, Harvey C., and Delba Winthrop, eds. “Editors’ Introduction.” In *Democracy in America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Mansfield, Harvey C., and Delba Winthrop. “Tocqueville’s New Political Science.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, edited by Cheryl B. Welch, 81–107. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Rahe, Paul. *Soft Despotism, Democracy’s Drift: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville and the Modern Prospect*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009.
- Stauffer, Dana J. “Tocqueville on the Modern Moral Situation: Democracy and the Decline of Devotion.” *American Political Science Review* 108, no. 4 (2014): 772–872.
- Tessitore, Aristide. “Tocqueville’s American Thesis and the New Science of Politics.” *American Political Thought* 4, no. 1 (2015): 72–99.

- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. 1835/1840. Translated and edited by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. 2 vols. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*. Translated by James Toupin and Roger Boesche. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
- Zetterbaum, Marvin. *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969.
- Zuckert, Catherine. "Not by Preaching: Tocqueville on the Role of Religion in American Democracy." *Review of Politics* 43 (1981): 264–86.
- Zuckert, Catherine. "Tocqueville's 'New Political Science'." In *Tocqueville's Voyages: The Evolution of His Ideas and Their Journey Beyond His Time*, edited by Christine Dunn Henderson, 142–76. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2014.