

Uncovering the Metaphysics of Democracy:
Individualism, Pantheism, and Nihilism in the Thought of Alexis de Tocqueville

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Abstract: This paper argues that Alexis de Tocqueville's seminal work *Democracy in America* is not only a political and cultural analysis of democracy, but also an inquiry into the metaphysics implicit in democracy itself. Tocqueville articulates what I call the "metaphysics of democracy," a "conception of the whole of Being" held by democratic man that is inherent in democracy. Tocqueville traces how the dogmatic beliefs of democracy shape democratic man and eventually give way to pantheism, which is closely related to Nietzsche's concept of nihilism. In this light, Tocqueville deserves to be read alongside Nietzsche as a serious diagnostician of the metaphysical problems of the democratic age. There are numerous similarities between the pantheistic citizen who welcomes democratic despotism and the spiritually devoid "Last Man" that Nietzsche condemns. This deeper reading of Tocqueville elevates the importance of his work for us in tackling the problem of nihilism.

“It is difficult to be a friend of democracy, but is necessary to be a friend of democracy. Such is the teaching of Tocqueville. It is difficult to be a friend of democracy because the democratic dogma is destructive of the moral contents that constitute the uniqueness of humanity and therefore its grandeur. It is necessary to be a friend of democracy because in this condition alone is it possible to preserve under the democratic dogma, at least by reflection or analogy, and often or sometimes in accord with the virtue of men, the reality of these moral concerns.”

--Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*¹

Introduction

To describe Alexis de Tocqueville merely as an historian, political scientist, or cultural commentator is to do a great disservice to his work. *Democracy in America* is not just a work about rightly established political institutions or the civic habits and morals of a democratic people, nor should it be read as such. It is a work about the deepest nature of democratic societies, democratic man, and the essence of democracy itself. Though Tocqueville does not announce it in his introduction, the most important subject of the book is his uncovering of what this paper terms the “metaphysics of democracy,” an inquest into the nature of democracy itself, its instincts and inner drives, and its conception of the whole of Being. Regardless of the fact that democrats claim to be purely pragmatic, they do have a vision of “God” or the “truth” about the world. Its deepest expression, according to Tocqueville, is pantheism, and it represents the deepest danger for democracy. What Tocqueville meant by pantheism is closely related to what Nietzsche meant by nihilism. Fifty years before Nietzsche, Tocqueville began to analyze the problem of nihilism through an examination of democracy’s dogmas and their effects on the new democratic-type man. Tocqueville’s analysis of individualism and the effects of equality on the essence of man reveals an almost spiritual element to democracy as well. In this light, *Democracy in America* needs to be read with an eye toward discerning and analyzing the new

¹ Manent, Pierre. *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996, pg. 129

metaphysics of democracy, the conception of the whole of Being held by democrats, and its vast and troubling implications for human life. I will argue for such a reading in this paper.

What is the metaphysics of democracy that Tocqueville uncovers? To briefly sketch: Tocqueville begins with the two dogmas of democracy: equality and the idea of the sovereignty of the people. He traces their influence on democratic man, and finds the result to be the emergence of individualism. Next, Tocqueville explores the paradoxical way in which individualism weakens the individual, and the crucial link between individualism undermining the individual and the emergence of the philosophy of pantheism. For Tocqueville, pantheism is the philosophy that will “seduce” the democratic heart and is the thing subconsciously yearned for, a philosophy that prepares men for despotism and a willing surrender of individual liberty to the comfort of seemingly total equality. Indeed, it prepares them and leads them to a negation of their own individuality. Hence, he tells us, “all those who still appreciate the true nature of man’s greatness should combine in the struggle against it [pantheism].”² Like Nietzsche, Tocqueville fears a future in which human beings have become thoroughly passive and spiritless.

The “metaphysics of democracy” is not a term coined by Tocqueville, nor a concept of his creation, but rather is the metaphysics inherent to democracy itself. It is, in a sense, the “inner logic” of democracy that shapes the conception of the whole of Being held by democratic man—often acting on him unconsciously. Tocqueville’s great contribution and achievement was to uncover and articulate the metaphysics, to sketch and trace its development and influence within democracy. Finally, the term “metaphysics of democracy” is my own, not Tocqueville’s, and it is used in this paper less as a strict definition than as a shorthand for the findings of the overarching

² Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. trans. George Lawrence, ed. J.P. Mayer. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006, pg. 452 [hereafter referred to as *DA*],

metaphysical inquiry that lies under the surface of *Democracy in America*, particularly in Volume II.

From Tocqueville's perspective, the metaphysics of democracy does not necessarily describe the current reality of democracy, but describes its inner tendencies and passions, pointing the way to what may unfold in the future if the democratic conception of the whole becomes the dominant one. However, as will be seen later, there is time and space for men to temper the excesses of democracy with good government and the "art of statesmanship," provided that this statesmanship is informed by the science of politics that includes a sober assessment of democracy's inner tendencies. It is precisely for this reason that Tocqueville writes, in order to educate democratic statesman, in the name of a defense of human liberty against individualism and democratic excess.

Section I of this paper describes differing interpretations of Tocqueville as a mere political and cultural commentator—an aristocratic critic, or an advocate for direct democracy—and presents my alternate interpretation of Tocqueville as a diagnostician of nihilism who should be read alongside the likes of Friedrich Nietzsche and others. *Section II* discusses how Tocqueville viewed himself and his writing, how he conceived of political science and metaphysics, and his unique understanding of the relationship between practice and theory. *Section III* addresses the metaphysics of democracy in more detail. It starts with explaining why men need a conception of the whole, continues with a discussion of the dogmas of democracy, and then turns to individualism, pantheism and the negation of the individual. It concludes with a discussion of democratic despotism and deterministic history. *Section IV* explores the most current manifestation of the metaphysics—globalization and the Internet. Then, Tocqueville's articulation of two polar opposite passions that exist in democracy—the despair of general

apathy and the “most desirable” dogma of religion—is described. Finally, the *Conclusion* outlines the relationship between the implications of the metaphysics and Tocquevillean notions of practice and theory. It then posits a way forward based on what Tocqueville intended to impart to democratic statesmen, and proposes what a Tocquevillean political science might look like and what it should mean for us today.

Section I: The Political and the Philosophical Tocqueville

“Philosopher” is not the first title popularly associated with Alexis de Tocqueville. He is more often considered an historian, an innovative political scientist, a sociologist, or a perceptive political and cultural commentator, a man of his times.³ His works are labeled “history” or “political science,” not “philosophy” or “political theory.”⁴ In many ways, Tocqueville himself encourages this interpretation. He articulates no philosophic system, and has harsh words for theorists. Harvey Mansfield points out the awkwardness of bestowing the distinction of “philosopher” on Tocqueville, because he “does not argue with philosophers and rarely refers to them; when he does, it is usually to disparage them.” But while “it may seem paradoxical and presumptuous to call him a philosopher,”⁵ his analysis of democracy should certainly raise his thought to that level.

There is no formal systematic Tocquevillean thought, nor theories that he claims definitively answer the deepest questions. Far from making grand metaphysical statements, Tocqueville’s “thoughts arise from observations of facts rather than appearing in sequence of argument, arranged systematically.”⁶ Indeed, Tocqueville goes out of his way to criticize

³ Hennis, Wilhelm. “Tocqueville’s Perspective.” In *Tocqueville’s Political Science: Classic Essays*, edited by Peter Augustine Lawler. New York: Garland Pub. 1992.

⁴ Mansfield, Harvey. *Tocqueville: A Very Short Introduction*. London: Oxford University Press, 2009. “Introduction: A New Kind of Liberal”; “Tocqueville’s Pride” [hereafter referred to as Mansfield, *SI*]

⁵ Mansfield, *SI* pg. 3

⁶ Mansfield, *SI* pg. 3

philosophers, and thinks that one of their weaknesses is that their systematic accountings of life were wrong precisely because their focus on systemization dramatically obscured reality.⁷

Regardless of the labels one bestows upon Tocqueville, it is my position that he was a serious thinker who grappled with the deepest questions, and should be read today as such. His works are concerned with philosophical questions regarding the nature of man and political life. *Democracy in America* is not just a book about the mechanics of political institutions and civic life, but about the nature of democracy itself and of the essence of democratic man

Tocqueville analyzed democracy from the point of view of a defender of liberty, which for him meant not only to secure well-established political institutions, but also to ensure that the soul and will of man is prepared to exercise such liberty, and that he desires to do so. If the human spirit wanes, the opportunity for liberty is lost.⁸ This concern for the spirit of man led Tocqueville to investigate and articulate what I will refer to in this paper as the “metaphysics of democracy.” Indeed, his practical concern for defending liberty necessitated him asking the metaphysical question. Primarily in Volume II of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville uncovers and articulates the democratic conception of the whole of Being and how it manifests itself and influences all aspects of human life. Fifty years before Nietzsche, Tocqueville—through his discussion of individualism, pantheism, history, and democratic despotism—began to explore the nihilism problem and raise serious questions about the nature of democracy and its prospects for the future. Integrating Tocqueville’s thought into our current thinking when it comes to tackling the problem of nihilism is something that should be strongly considered.

⁷ Lawler, Peter. “Was Tocqueville a Philosopher?” In *Tocqueville’s Political Science: Classic Essays*, edited by Peter Augustine Lawler. New York: Garland Pub. 1992.

⁸ Hennis, “Tocqueville’s Perspective.”

Tocqueville: Aristocrat or Democrat

It will first be helpful to survey the alternative views of Tocqueville that are widely held, as he is not conventionally discussed in the same sentence with the likes of Nietzsche. The popular interpretations of Tocqueville are primarily political: Tocqueville as aristocratic critic of democracy, or Tocqueville as supporter of democracy. How is it that these two seemingly contradictory views could be simultaneously so prevalent? As Mansfield notes, Tocqueville is among an elite group of thinkers held in high esteem and oft quoted by politicians and pundits of all stripes:

Tocqueville's book has acquired the authority of a classic. It is cited with approval by politicians—by all American presidents since Eisenhower—as well as by professors in many fields. Universal accord in its praise suggests that it has something for everyone. But it also suggests that readers tolerate, or perhaps simply overlook, the less welcoming passages that their political and scholarly opponents are citing. It is quite striking that both Left and Right appeal to *Democracy in America* for support of their contrary policies. Tocqueville seems to have achieved the goal, expressed at the end of his Introduction, of standing above the parties of the day. Yet his widespread appeal should not mask the controversial and unsettling character of the work.⁹

Tocqueville's widespread acclaim is deserved, and Mansfield rightly notes that in this sense he achieved his goal of “standing above the parties” by presenting one of the more objective analyses of democracy and America at the time—hence his approval by both the modern Left and Right. But on a deeper level, Mansfield is right that this “authority of a classic” and widespread approval somewhat masks the true “controversial and unsettling character of the work”—the dark implications of the metaphysics of democracy that will be discussed in Section III and IV of this paper. Indeed, it is Tocqueville's widely perceived objectivity and moderation that makes the “unsettling character” of his analysis that much more striking. His calm demeanor is yet another reason that the possible threats of democratic excess and the metaphysical

⁹ Mansfield, Harvey and Delba Winthrop, Editor's Introduction to *Democracy in America*, by Alexis de Tocqueville, trans. and ed. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, xviii. Paperback ed. Chicago, Ill.: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002. [hereafter referred to as Mansfield *DA*]

questions he raises must be taken even more seriously, and cannot be ignored. Tocqueville is no partisan aiming to either undercut or inflate democracy; rather he is looking the reality of the thing in the face, and urging democratic statesmen and “friends of democracy” to do the same.

A major point of aristocratic criticism is that democracy produces a bourgeois-type man, obsessed with wealth and luxury. The exclusive focus on money and commerce stifles any desire for greatness, art, or high culture. Thus, from this point of view the materialism of the democratic *nouveau riche* is the real enemy. Democracy produces a dull, spiritually defective type of man, a man who chases money like a rat in a cage, and a man who may not even be fully human in the eyes of the cultured aristocrat.¹⁰ In some sections of *Democracy in America*, it is tempting to view Tocqueville’s criticisms in this light, but to do so would be to err. Materialism is not what Tocqueville sees as the main threat of democracy, but a highly visible symptom of the true enemy: individualism.

Tocqueville does criticize excess materialism, warning that it focuses man’s attention on small and petty concerns and can cause him to lose the interest or even the capability to enjoy the “higher things” in life. It may even precipitate a withdrawal from political life.¹¹ But to construe Tocqueville’s critique of materialism as a purely aristocratic line of attack is to misunderstand him. As Tocqueville makes clear, he is not arguing in favor of aristocracy. He recognizes that democracy is the “most just” form of government,¹² and does not attempt a moral defense of the hereditary and blatantly unjust hierarchy of the past. Tocqueville does not simply oppose

¹⁰ Boesche, Roger. “Hedonism and Nihilism: The Predictions of Tocqueville and Nietzsche.” In *Tocqueville’s Political Science: Classic Essays*, edited by Peter Augustine Lawler. New York: Garland Pub. 1992.

¹¹ *DA* II.II. 2,14; II.IV.6

¹² *DA* II.IV.8

materialism or the existence of the bourgeois middle class *per se*, but opposes the deeper feeling of individualism that seems to underpin them.¹³

One need only look to the widespread contemporary appeal of Tocqueville that Mansfield documents to see the other popular view of Tocqueville as a democrat. This viewpoint cites his extensive discussion and praise of civic and political associations, his support for a free press, and his advocacy for decentralized government.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, this interpretation appeals to—and flatters—democrats themselves, and as democracy has solidified its dominance since Tocqueville’s time, this view of his thought has grown in popularity. Unfortunately, to construe Tocqueville’s analysis of democracy in this direction is to view it through a distorted lens as well.

Tocqueville notes the moral ambiguity, and indeed the danger, of associations and a free press. While they can form a great bulwark against individualism, they can also be destabilizing, illiberal, and dangerous,¹⁵ and he criticizes the “tyranny of the majority” for limiting free thought—“I know no country in which, speaking generally, there is less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America.”¹⁶ He goes out of his way to praise the judicial system—the least majoritarian and most aristocratic part of American government—precisely for tempering these negative impulses of democratic majorities.¹⁷ On a deeper level, the nature of the democratic Americans worries him, and he tells us that the spread of democracy has driven him to write this book “under the impulse of a kind of religious dread.”¹⁸

¹³ DA II.II.1-2; Kahan, Alan. *Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001: “Chapter 2: The Spirit of the Majority.”

¹⁴ DA I.II.3-4

¹⁵ DA I.II.3-4

¹⁶ DA pg. 255

¹⁷ DA I.I.8

¹⁸ DA pg. 12

Tocqueville in some sense had a foot in both worlds. While born into the French aristocracy, he did not despise democracy the way some of his aristocratic contemporaries, or later thinkers like Nietzsche, did—though he had his serious reservations.¹⁹ While not a full-fledged democrat, he was a loyal friend of democracy; he recognized democracy as a fact, and felt compelled to use his intellect to improve it.²⁰ Again and again for Tocqueville, the challenge is how to preserve individual liberty from democratic excess. However, doing so requires moving beyond the narrowly political.

An Alternate Interpretation: Tocqueville as Analyst of Nihilism

There is another way of viewing Tocqueville that goes beyond the competing interpretations of him as an aristocrat or a democrat. These popularly held views of Tocqueville are less incorrect as they are partial, as they consider Tocqueville in a political and cultural context only. While there is clearly a heavy political component to Tocqueville's thought, there is a metaphysical element as well, though perhaps less obvious at first. Popular viewpoints of Tocqueville are not inherently wrong, but do not go deep enough in exploring the implications and full range of his thought: His political and cultural thought is devoted to the symptoms of democracy; his thought concerning metaphysics and the democratic opinion of cosmic questions is a search for the underlying causes of political and cultural phenomena that exist within democracy itself. Tocqueville's examination of democracy, beginning with the practical, compels us to ask the greater metaphysical questions in search of answers.

Tocqueville, particularly in Volume II of *Democracy in America*, wrestled with and took seriously the metaphysical questions raised by democracy—in particular, the problem of nihilism that he saw lurking in the process through which individualism weakens the individual and

¹⁹ Mansfield, *DA* Editor's Introduction

²⁰ *DA* Author's Introduction

brings about the philosophy of pantheism. This side of his thought cannot be ignored, and taking it into consideration casts his work in a light of more urgent relevance for us when approaching the nihilism problem. Tocqueville should be viewed as a forerunner to Nietzsche as one of the first thinkers to diagnose the problem of nihilism in democracy. It is for such a metaphysical view of Tocqueville and his work that I will argue in this paper.

Pantheism, Nihilism, Negation: The Tocqueville-Nietzsche Connection

Tocqueville himself does not identify pantheism with nihilism, he does not explicitly warn that democracy has nihilistic tendencies, and in fact, he does not ever use the word “nihilism.” Nevertheless, Tocqueville, while not explicitly using the word “nihilism,” is raising the same problem by a different name in his warning of the danger of pantheism. The most profound similarity between the nihilism that Nietzsche fights against and the pantheism that Tocqueville aims to combat is that both result in the negation of the individual. For both thinkers, the negation of the individual is the most troubling consequence of democracy, and both point to modernity as the proximate cause. There are striking similarities between the citizens who fall under the “democratic despotism” that Tocqueville describes and the “Last Man” that Nietzsche criticizes. Both types of men are softened by an inordinate desire for physical pleasure, petty comfort, and little else. With their lives devoid of meaning, their wills completely enervated, they resemble herd animals chewing their cud more than they do human beings.

In their works, both Tocqueville and Nietzsche start with an examination of the current dominant form of society—democracy—and trace its effects on the mind and heart of man. For Tocqueville, the dogma of democracy—equality—fosters in men the state of individualism and love of general ideas, which leads them to accept pantheism. For Nietzsche, it is equality and Christian “slave morality” that are the cancer of the modern age. Acting on men, they weaken his

will and lead him to nihilism. The disastrous end state that both men envision for democracy is a negation of the individual resulting from pantheism or nihilism, respectively, and the rise of a new despotism that is less a tyranny over the citizenry than a shepherd herding a mass of apolitical and spiritually devoid men who are focused on material comfort and little else. Taking the similar starting point, Tocqueville and Nietzsche follow dual tracks to arrive at the same end state of negation and despotism. Both affirm the counter-intuitive truth that democracy is not incompatible with despotism, and in fact can slide directly into a new kind of despotism that is perhaps not as violent, but is dangerous precisely because it is subtle.

There are, of course, many more important differences between the two. But while Tocqueville was a “friend of democracy” and Nietzsche clearly an avowed enemy, it is striking that each of their respective fears—pantheism and nihilism—derive directly from democracy itself and both end in the negation of the individual. It is this eerily similar end which links their theoretical analyses of democracy and should urge us to turn to both of them—not just Nietzsche—when considering the problem of nihilism and democracy.

Considered in this light, Tocqueville should be read as a forerunner to Nietzsche and his philosophic disciples when it comes to tackling the metaphysical problems of democracy, in particular the problem of nihilism. For us today, Tocqueville’s work needs to be elevated in terms of theoretical importance, especially when his moderation is compared to the radical assertions of Nietzsche; Tocqueville’s unique approach to the nihilism problem may have much to teach us.

Section II: Tocqueville on Theory and Practice

Tocqueville knew well what he was doing when writing *Democracy in America*, and designed the work to be not just of a temporal political character, but of a metaphysical one as

well. To achieve his practical goal, to defend the domain of liberty within the new democratic world, required this exploration of metaphysics. Though Tocqueville does not explicitly announce nor highlight it, *Democracy in America* contains his attempt at a revelation of the “democratic conception of the whole,” which he undertook in an effort to protect liberty from democratic excess. Tocqueville is analyzing democracy on two levels. First, on a practical and political level, he aims to spur men to political action and guard against the very real possibility of tyranny and despotism. Second, on a deeper and more metaphysical level, he seeks and raises the deepest questions about democracy that must be considered to avoid pantheism and nihilism. He inquires into practical, but also theoretical, politics, as he tells us: “Only among barbarians is practice alone recognized in politics.”²¹ The responsible practice of politics, and the preservation of liberty that Tocqueville aims for, requires the recognition of the theoretical dimensions of political, even democratic political, life.

Tocqueville’s Political Science

I will begin by unpacking Tocqueville’s understanding of political science. In April of 1852, Tocqueville was tasked with giving the annual president’s lecture to the *Academie des Sciences Morales et Politiques*. His lecture—entitled “The Art & Science of Politics”—gives a clear account of his own understanding of his craft. In the opinion of Tocqueville scholar J.P. Mayer, “not even Max Weber in his “Politics as a Vocation”—has so closely and so penetratingly examined the essence of politics as theory and its relation to political action.”²² In the speech, Tocqueville first definitively divides the *art* of governing—or what is called “statesmanship”—from the *science* of politics, before going on to say that the latter “lies grounded in the very essence of man, in his interests, his capacities and his instincts, whose

²¹ Tocqueville, Alexis de. “The Art & Science of Politics—An Unpublished Speech” trans. George Lawrence, ed. J.P. Mayer. *Encounter* 36 (1971): 30 [hereafter referred to as *ASP*]

²² *ASP*, quote from Mayer’s introduction to the speech.

direction changes with the times but whose essence is unchanging, imperishable as his species itself.”²³

Two main points should be taken from this declaration. First, Tocqueville’s political science is normative and should be understood as “classical” political science, considered by him to be among the greatest of human sciences, and one that must necessarily deal with values.²⁴ He is also not concerned merely with governing and political institutions—i.e. is not merely concerned with Volume I of *Democracy in America*, which is mostly devoted to analyzing the political life and habits of the democratic Americans—but further aims to inquire into the “very essence of man.”

Second, his assertion that the “essence of man” is “unchanging, imperishable as his species itself” while it is his interests, capabilities and instincts whose “direction changes with the times” must be taken seriously when reading and analyzing *Democracy in America*. Later in the lecture, Tocqueville tells us that the full-range of political science is concerned with “the conduct of societies” which covers “all the ground” from philosophy to law. Many people, he says, are blind to this understanding of political science due to the “sheer immensity of the subject.” However, “if one concentrates attention on this great science...then one does see the various elements that make up the whole picture, and the whole stands out clearly. One comes to see the whole process downwards from the general to the particular, in ordered progression from pure theory to written laws and facts.”²⁵

Tocqueville’s aim is to “arrive at a precise conception of the whole,” as Wilhelm Hennis describes it,²⁶ but specifically the “conception of the whole” as it is seen by the new democratic

²³ *ASP*, quoted in Hennis

²⁴ Hennis, “Tocqueville’s Perspective,” pg. 59-60, 64-66.

²⁵ *ASP*, pg. 28

²⁶ Hennis, “Tocqueville’s Perspective,” pg. 63.

man. Tocqueville will find this democratic conception by undertaking a scientific observation of the unchanging “essence of man” viewed through the lens of the new interests, capabilities, and instincts of democracy. The aim of Tocqueville’s study is that “conception” which “form a sort of intellectual atmosphere breathed by both governors and governed in society, and both unwittingly derive from the principles of their action.”²⁷ This “intellectual atmosphere”—a “conception of the whole”—is the object of Tocqueville’s political science, in this case a “democratic conception of the whole.”

Tocqueville’s Method: The Relationship Between Practice and Theory

Having established that Tocqueville’s understanding of his called-for “new political science for a new world” requires a study of the “conception of the whole” of democracy, the next step is to analyze that conception and what it means for a new type of man—democratic man—in the democratic age. It is that task which Tocqueville turns to most significantly in Volume II as he analyzes the “very essence of man” and his new *democratic* interests, capabilities, and instincts.

As already mentioned, Tocqueville does not undertake a purely metaphysical inquiry in *Democracy in America*, nor does he develop his own metaphysics. His study of such diverse thinkers as Plato and Pascal taught him the folly—and misery—of pure theory and its inability to reconcile with actual human experience. Further, he saw the theoretical philosophies of many of his contemporaries, French radicals and utopian thinkers who valued systematic thought for its own sake, as being misanthropic.²⁸ Tocqueville not being systematic, Mansfield describes his method as such: “Tocqueville’s political science is shown in his depiction of freedom as practiced in America, an actual society, rather than in principles that precede practice.” This

²⁷ ASP, pg. 30

²⁸ Lawler, “Introduction” and “Was Tocqueville a Philosopher?”

practicality and root in experience “fascinates and convinces his readers.”²⁹ Tocqueville’s emphasis on “freedom as practiced” does not preclude him from a metaphysical inquiry, but guides his uncovering of the “democratic conception of the whole” in a more organic way. Beginning with an examination of what democrats profess to believe and how they think and act, he discerns that “conception of the whole” as held by democratic man.

The relationship between practice and theory is seen in Tocqueville’s own life, as he struggled to be both a writer and a politician. An assessment of his short political career shows that he was far more successful and influential as a political theorist than politician, yet he felt compelled—by a sense of pride or duty, or perhaps both—to climb into the political arena.³⁰ But the apparent tension in Tocqueville’s life between political action and political writing is an example of the correct relationship between practice and theory. Tocqueville’s practical politics were always informed and directed by his theoretical undertakings, and his theoretical inquiries were always undertaken with a view toward this practical goal of empowering human liberty in sight. In this stance can be found another of his unique contributions to both political theory and democratic political life. The example of Tocqueville’s life may be that it is difficult or improbable that one person will be able to embody both the theorist and the statesman, but this does not discredit the fundamental relationship. It is because of the importance of this relationship that Tocqueville writes; first and foremost he writes for democratic statesmen.

Section III: Sketching the Metaphysics of *Democracy in America*

Now I will turn to an exploration of the metaphysics of democracy. Tocqueville tells us that the “first duty imposed upon those who now direct society is to educate democracy; to put, if possible, new life into its beliefs; to purify its mores; to control its actions; gradually to substitute

²⁹ Mansfield, *SI*, pg. 4

³⁰ Mansfield, *SI*, “Introduction: A New Kind of Liberal” and “Ch. 6: Tocqueville’s Pride.”

understanding of statecraft for present inexperience and knowledge of its true interests for blind instincts; to adapt government to the needs of time and place; and to modify it as men and circumstances require.”³¹ Taking this as Tocqueville’s aim, I argue that substituting “knowledge of its true intentions for blind instincts” necessitates uncovering the metaphysics of democracy, which then allows one to “adapt government” and “modify it as men and circumstances require.” This is even more important when Tocqueville discovers where the “blind instincts” of democratic men can lead: to a negation of individuality, a stifling of liberty, and toward a new despotism.

In this Section, I will outline the metaphysics of democracy that Tocqueville uncovered and articulated in Volume II of *Democracy in America*. I begin with an explanation of why dogmatic beliefs and a conception of the whole of Being are necessary for man, and why man in fact “cannot do without” them. Due to the limits of human intelligence, it is necessary for all men—even philosophers—to take some things on faith in order to make sense of the world. It is man’s need for dogmas that raises the question of the nature of democracy in the first place. Democrats claim they are pragmatic and unconcerned with metaphysics, but as Tocqueville shows in his analysis of dogmas, this is untrue. All men—consciously or not—have some “conception of the whole,” and democratic man is deceiving himself if he thinks he does not. Tocqueville’s aim is to uncover and articulate this conception.

Next is an articulation of the dogmas specific to democracy, which are equality and the idea of the sovereignty of the people. Equality of conditions, as noted above, is the new and defining factor of democracy that is influencing the hearts and minds of men; it is the starting point from which democratic phenomena derive. The idea of the sovereignty of the people arms

³¹ DA pg. 12

the majority and public opinion—the real “master” of belief in democracies—with almost religious, sacrosanct power.

The level of analysis then focuses on the individual and the ways in which the democratic dogmas foster the state of individualism in democratic man, a state of isolation and weakness that equality fosters in each individual. Democratic man takes pride in his equality and in a delusion thinks it makes him strong; in reality, it causes him to withdraw into a small circle of family and friends, turns his attention to petty affairs, and slowly enervates his will. Following this is a comparison of the state of individualism with individuality, and the danger in confusing the two—the former state being one of isolation and weakness while the latter is a state of strength and distinction. For Tocqueville, individuality is important just as liberty is, and both are necessary for individual greatness. Individualism for Tocqueville is to be combated precisely because it undermines individuality.

Next I turn to the culmination of the democratic metaphysics, the triumph of philosophic pantheism, which is in a sense the most perfect equality. Pantheism washes away all distinction and difference by proclaiming that all is one. From Tocqueville’s perspective, it disastrously negates individuality. The crucial link in the metaphysics is between individualism and pantheism, how the former softens the will of man and prepares his soul to accept the latter. Equality, through individualism, fosters a longing for pantheism in the heart of democratic men. The Section concludes with a discussion of democratic history and democratic despotism, the twin forces that will take control of men once pantheism has seduced their hearts. Each continues the negation of the individual: democratic history preaches determinism; democratic despotism

coddles men like children and “likes to see the citizens enjoy themselves, provided they think of nothing but enjoyment.”³²

The Democratic Conception of the Whole: “Men Cannot Do Without Dogmatic Beliefs”

“Dogmatic beliefs,” Tocqueville begins in Chapter 2 of Part II, “are more or less numerous at different periods. They come into existence in various ways and can change in both form and substance. But it can never happen that there are no dogmatic beliefs, this is to say, opinions which men take on trust without discussion.”³³ Tocqueville brings empirical evidence to bear to support this claim: “It is easy to see that no society could prosper without such beliefs, or rather that there are no societies which manage in that way.” Experience has shown that dogmatic beliefs are necessary for a “body social”—“it is essential that all the minds of the citizens should always be rallied and held together by some leading ideas” from which it follows that each man must sometimes “draw his opinions from the same source,” being “ready to accept some beliefs ready made.”³⁴

The question then turns to contemplating the particular “same source” of those “beliefs ready made” that resides within democracy. Dogmas are usually received from an authority, be it of the philosophical, religious, political, or social kind. In an aristocracy, the hereditary and hierarchical nature of the society transmits dogmas based on social station. Each man learns from the example of his particular class and from the traditions of his ancestors. Of course, such is not the case in democracy: “Men living in such a [democratic] society cannot base their beliefs on the opinions of the class to which they belong, for, one may almost say, there are no more classes, and such as do still exist are composed of such changing elements that they can never, as a body, exercise real power over their members.” Set apart from his class, it follows that in the

³² DA pg. 693

³³ DA pg. 433

³⁴ DA pg. 434

philosophical approach of democratic Americans “each man is narrowly shut up in himself, and from that basis makes the pretension to judge the world.”³⁵

But dogmatic beliefs, according to Tocqueville, are not primarily or simply necessary for establishing a “body social.” Each man, as an individual, needs the foundation of dogmas to live by as well: “Considering each man by himself, dogmatic beliefs seem no less indispensable for living alone than for acting in common with his fellows.” This is due to the circumstantial reality that “life is too short” and “human faculties are too limited” for a single man to “prove for himself all the truths of which he makes use.” Therefore one must “accept as certain a whole heap of facts and opinions” which form “that foundation” upon which one can “build the house of his own thoughts.” The wisest of men are not immune from this dependency, even philosophers: “No philosopher in the world, however great, can help believing a million things on trust from others or assuming the truth of many things besides those he has proved.”³⁶

Tocqueville realizes that this dependency will be offensive to true democrats, who have “the pretension to judge the world” for themselves. But he also acknowledges that this dependency is crucial in order for man to exercise his liberty: “It is true that any man accepting any opinion on trust from another puts his mind in bondage. But it is salutary bondage, which allows him to make good use of freedom.”³⁷ As “salutary bondage” is necessary, Tocqueville’s next step is to take stock of the new “master” and ensure that its power is not used “excessively to impede or hold back the upsurge of independent thought.”³⁸

Who, or more accurately what, is this new master? “Among democratic peoples” the “principal source” of belief is the majority, and the totality of its ideas and beliefs are called

³⁵ *DA* pg. 430

³⁶ *DA* pg. 434

³⁷ *DA* pg. 434

³⁸ *DA* pg. 436

“public opinion.” As will be shown later, due to the forces of equality the dominance of public opinion is remarkably strong: “It is safe to foresee that trust in common opinion will become a sort of religion, with the majority as its prophet.” The moral authority of the majority is so strong, that it may be hard for any sincere democrat to resist its power: “I see clearly two tendencies in equality; one turns each man’s attention to new thoughts, while the other would induce him freely to give up thinking at all...Thus it might happen that, having broken down all the bonds which classes or men formerly imposed on it, the human spirit might bind itself in tight fetters to the general will of the greatest number.”³⁹

The “inadequacy” of human intelligence leads men to consider the general over the specific: “General ideas have this excellent quality, that they permit human minds to pass judgment very quickly on a great number of things,” thus allowing humans to overcome their natural limitations in the interest of living without the paralysis of excessive doubt. For human beings, the resort to general ideas will always be inescapable, although some people tend to make greater use of them than others. It is in the overuse of general ideas that danger lies, and it is democratic men that tend to make the greatest use of general ideas.

Through employing general ideas, man starts to “take hold almost unconsciously of some particular truths” that he perceives as deriving from them, which simply reinforces the tendency to think in terms of general ideas: “the more truths of this kind a man apprehends, the more general ideas he is naturally led to entertain. One cannot see a multitude of particular facts separately without at last discovering the link which connects them. Several individuals lead to the notion of the species, several species to that of the genus. So the use of general ideas and the taste for them will always increase the older a people’s culture is and the wider their

³⁹ DA pg. 436

knowledge.”⁴⁰ The problem engendered is that one begins to see “links” where they do not exist. The propensity and “taste” for general ideas not only facilitates democratic man’s search for beliefs, but then also begins to itself suggest beliefs.

The search for the general in a way becomes a compulsion, “it becomes an ardent and often blind passion of the human spirit to discover common rules for everything, to include a great number of objects under the same formula, and to explain a group of facts by one sole cause.” This occurs because of equality: “the democratic citizen sees nothing but people more or less like himself around him, and so he cannot think about one branch of mankind without widening his view until it includes the whole.” But this misperception leads him to further distort reality: “Truths applicable to himself seem equally applicable, *mutatis mutandis*,⁴¹ to his fellow citizens and to all men.”⁴² The democratic tendency to overuse general ideas results in a philosophic outlook that appears to be similar to the “systematic” approach of the theoretical utopian and radical thinkers whom Tocqueville views as dangerous; excessive belief in general ideas leads man to become disconnected from reality, does harm to the individual and his liberty, and leads to an acceptance of pantheism.⁴³

For reasons both practical and theoretical, democratic man is most susceptible to the overuse of general ideas. Influenced as he is by the illusions of individualism, he needs to make the greatest use of general ideas for expediency’s sake, simply to function. Recognizing no individual authority above him, except for public opinion, and imagining himself in isolation, democratic man is more likely than his aristocratic predecessors to “seek by themselves and in

⁴⁰ DA pg. 437-8

⁴¹ Translation: “that having been changed which had to be changed,” in other words, democratic man ignores differences to see the similarity in all things

⁴² DA pg. 439

⁴³ Lawler, Peter Augustine. *The Restless Mind: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Origin and Perpetuation of Human Liberty*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993: “Ch 2: Pantheism.”

themselves for the only reason for things.”⁴⁴ Due to the limits of human intelligence, this imagined self-reliance necessitates an even greater use of general ideas.

But on a deeper level, democratic man’s individualism and yearning for equality manifests itself as a yearning for unity in his thought and a search for “great causes”: “In ages of equality all men are independent of each other, isolated and weak. One finds no man whose will permanently directs the actions of the crowd. At such times humanity always seems to progress of its own accord. So to explain what happens in the world, one is reduced to looking for certain great causes which, acting in the same fashion on each of our fellow men, lead them all of their own accord to follow one and the same road.”⁴⁵ Democratic man has “curiosity and little leisure” and after a “cursory and casual glance” sees a “common link between certain things.” And why not? Viewing all as equal (and equally weak), why should it not be that “great causes” act on all men? Equality’s disdain for individual distinction and the democratic overuse of general ideas naturally suggests this view.

Finally, the beliefs that follow from the dogma of equality, individualism, and the overuse of general ideas itself suggest the philosophy of pantheism to democratic man. The link between individualism and pantheism is that the former encourages man to seek the latter, it prepares his way for accepting it, and it stirs the passions in his heart that drive him toward it. Pantheism is perfect, universal equality. The danger of pantheism must be guarded against so vigorously because democracy welcomes it so readily: it is both amenable to the practical reality and limitations of the democratic mind and its “taste for easy successes and immediate pleasures,” and it seduces the democratic soul and its deepest longings.

⁴⁴ *DA* pg. 429

⁴⁵ *DA* pg. 439

The Dogmas of Democracy: Equality and the Sovereignty of the People

Having shown that all men—even democratic men—need dogmatic beliefs, the next step in uncovering the metaphysics of democracy is to discern its dogmas. Democracy has two dogmas. First, and most importantly, is the dogma of equality. Second is the dogma of the sovereignty of the people, which manifests itself in public opinion and in the idea of majority rule. Tocqueville makes clear that it is equality that exerts the strongest force on the hearts and minds of democratic men. Indeed, the emergence of “equality of conditions” is what differentiates democracy from aristocracy and all that has historically come before; it is the driving force of democracy, not liberty: “Freedom is found at different times and in different forms...and one finds it elsewhere than in democracies. It cannot therefore be taken as the distinctive characteristic of democratic ages. The particular and predominating fact peculiar to those ages is equality of conditions, and the chief passion which stirs men at such times is the love of this same equality.” Here, Tocqueville exposes the “point of departure” for the metaphysics of democracy, in this “particular and predominating fact” of equality of conditions.

I include the second dogma, the dogma of the sovereignty of the people, to dig further into the matter in order to explore how equality becomes politically manifest. As Tocqueville has told us and made clear, his definition of democracy is rooted in “equality of conditions.” However, he also emphasizes that it is public opinion and the omnipotence of the majority that play a crucial role in the overwhelming influence of democracy on intellectual, moral, and cultural life. Tocqueville says that public opinion is the arbiter of belief in all regimes, but it is the dogma of the sovereignty of the people that arms public opinion with true political power, making its domination even more powerful. The dogma of equality is still the definitive force within democracy, but the dogma of the sovereignty of the people is its political multiplier.

Combined, the two dogmas dominate democracy and exert a powerful influence on democratic man: “Equality puts many ideas into the human mind which would not have come there without it, and it changes almost all the ideas that were there before.”⁴⁶ The same goes for the human heart and habits.

Democratic Man and Individualism

The state that the dogma of equality fosters in man is individualism. In the opening chapters of Part II of Volume II, Tocqueville turns to an exclusive discussion of this most democratic phenomenon. He begins in Chapter 1 by tracing the relationship between individualism and its root cause, the dogma of equality: “The first and loveliest of the passions inspired by equality is, I need not say, love of that equality itself.”⁴⁷ Equality, to use the popular phrase, is the “gift that keeps on giving.” It is a self-reinforcing passion, which helps explain why democrats show “a more ardent and enduring love for equality than for liberty.”

Tocqueville—the partisan for human liberty—is acutely aware of the dark side of this “more ardent and enduring love.” This is a recurring theme in *Democracy in America*: how an excess of that which is seemingly good can lead to a bad outcome; namely, how the excessive love of equality can stifle liberty.

The most perfect form of equality is equality in perfect freedom, but this is an ideal rather than a possible reality. Other forms of equality abound: “there can be established equality in civil society, though there is none in the world of politics...There can even be a sort of equality in the world of politics without any political freedom.” The problem with democrats is that their love of equality can blind them to the distinction between different forms of equality, so that lesser

⁴⁶ DA pg. 452

⁴⁷ DA pg. 503

forms of equality, those that do not value freedom, “are no less cherished”⁴⁸ than those that do.

This passion of democratic men naturally follows from the dogmas of democracy: “equality forms the distinctive characteristic of the age in which they live. This is enough to explain why they prefer it to all the rest.”⁴⁹

In Chapter 2, Tocqueville turns to his specific definition of individualism:

Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself...individualism is based on misguided judgment rather than depraved feeling. It is due more to inadequate understanding than to perversity of heart...individualism at first only dams the spring of public virtues, but in the long run it attacks and destroys all the others too and finally merges in egoism. Individualism is of democratic origin and threatens to grow as conditions get more equal.⁵⁰

Tocqueville illustrates the character of individualism through a number of comparisons to aristocracy. Each man in aristocracy has a “fixed station” with set duties and responsibilities with regard to others, with the result that “people living in an aristocratic age are almost always closely involved with something outside themselves, and they are often inclined to forget about themselves...In democratic ages, on the contrary, the duties of each to all are much clearer but devoted service to any individual rarer. The bonds of human affection are wider but more relaxed.” The dynamism of ever-changing family and class ties leads men to forget tradition and, though it feels like this frees them from societal authority—“Aristocracy links everybody, from peasant to king, in one long chain. Democracy breaks the chain and frees each link”—it also traps them in isolation and sets them adrift—“Such folk [democrats] owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation

⁴⁸ DA pg. 503

⁴⁹ DA pg. 504

⁵⁰ DA pg. 506-7

and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands.”⁵¹ Notice Tocqueville’s use of the word “imagine;” democratic man’s belief in an ability to be both isolationist and in control of “their whole destiny” is suggested to be delusional; this further compounds the danger of his weakened state and makes it harder to combat.

Individualism and Individuality

Tocqueville’s analysis shows that a great error is to be made if one confuses true individuality with individualism. The former is a mark of human liberty and is necessary for greatness. Indeed, to strive to maintain one’s individuality in the face of doubt, hardship and other internal and external forces seems to be a particular kind of greatness that is most in reach of the “restless Americans,” and something that Tocqueville finds quite praiseworthy.⁵²

Individualism, on the other hand—the state of man that results from a belief in the dogmas of democracy—is not the same as individuality, but contains within it the seductive *illusion* of individuality. As Tocqueville has told us, individualism leads men to “imagine” that they are strong isolated beings in control of “their whole destiny,” while simultaneously preparing the soil of the soul for pantheism, softening the will and one’s capacity to exercise liberty. The delusion of individuality blinds democratic men to the dangers of their individualism and the processes through which it undermines individuality.

Individuality is a state of assertiveness and striving; individualism is a passive state, inherent in democratic man, resulting from his belief in the dogmas of democracy. Individualism is easy because it involves no choice, nor struggle, nor use of liberty. For Tocqueville, it is individualism (not religion as Marx famously quipped) that is the true opiate of the democratic masses. It saps democratic man’s ability and desire for liberty, and lulls him to sleep.

⁵¹ DA pg. 507-8

⁵² DA II.II.13

Tocqueville will later argue that religion is actually one of the antidotes that keep democratic man awake. Individualism causes each man—thinking himself no better than the others, nor any other better than him—to fall back on himself alone for truth and opinion about all things. His pride in being inferior or subservient to no man is twisted into a state of weakness, that he can be better than no other. It should now be clear that his pride in equality is based on a delusion.

Recognizing authority in no man and finding no strong authority in himself, democratic man is lost. The dogma of equality and love for it has rendered him this way. Here, the second dogma of democracy—that of the sovereignty of the people—takes control of each individual. The dogma of the sovereignty of the people takes the idea of equality and applies it to intelligence in the political sphere. If all are truly equal, then all are equally intelligent. Therefore, the belief of the majority of the people must be correct. While each individual man does not recognize the superiority of any other individual man, he does recognize the superior authority of an amorphous public opinion—acknowledging and allowing it to shape his beliefs and be the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong. His initial pride in being an individual has paradoxically ended in the partial—and perhaps eventually the full—restriction of his free thought through his acceptance of “the yoke” of the majority. Man has not escaped authority—that is a delusion—only the master has changed.

The dogma of the sovereignty of the people further destroys individuality as an idea in itself. What is “The People” as understood by democratic man? While one may use the verb “are” when describing “The People,” I think that the more appropriate “is” describes the theoretical nature of “The People” as a force. The dogma of the sovereignty of the people denies that an individual can shape public opinion; while all are somehow a part of it, none are singularly powerful enough to influence it. The democratic whole becomes an external force that

shapes and controls man while being incapable of being shaped or controlled by him. It again affirms the idea that the individual is powerless and cannot exercise agency over himself or others.

Individualism is the natural state that equality fosters in democratic man. It is fundamentally a democratic phenomenon. By contrast, individuality is in a certain sense aristocratic. Tocqueville's preference for individuality and human liberty celebrates distinction and individual greatness. Insofar as individuality is defined by difference, distinction, and hopefully excellence, it is anti-egalitarian and anti-democratic. The idea of distinction resists the use of general ideas and offends the notion of equality itself.

Pantheism

The crucial link in the uncovering of the metaphysics of democracy is between the state of democratic man (called individualism) and the philosophy of pantheism. Tocqueville notes that, particularly in Europe during his time, pantheistic ideas were making inroads and appearing ever more frequently in literature and philosophy: "This cannot, I think, be explained as an accident, but it is due to some enduring reasons," the primary one being "equality of conditions." In a short, two page chapter, Tocqueville describes how pantheism will rise, what effects it will have on the world, why it appeals to the democratic mind, and why it is the supreme danger that must be fought against.⁵³ Now I turn to a close reading of that chapter:

Tocqueville first describes the path of pantheism's ascension in a single, concise paragraph. The path, not coincidentally, follows the unfolding of the metaphysics, as I have noted in brackets: "As conditions become more equal [as democracy understood as "equality of conditions" becomes the dominant force in the world], each individual becomes more like his fellows, weaker, and smaller [individualism becomes the new nature of democratic man], and the

⁵³ Unless otherwise noted, in this section all quotations from *Democracy in America* are from II.I.7, pp. 451-2.

habit grows of ceasing to think about the citizens and considering only the people [individual liberty and greatness wither away before tyranny of the majority, public opinion, and the state]. Individuals are forgotten and the species alone counts [finally, pantheism, the most general idea, destroys man's view of his own individuality, weakens his will, and leads to the negation of the individual in democracy].”

What is the resulting frame of mind—the state of almost philosophic or religious longing—that accompanies this disastrous state of affairs? “At such times the human mind seeks to embrace a multitude of different objects at once, and it constantly strives to link up a variety of consequences with a single cause [the most general of all ideas, and one with an almost religious connotation, in the sense of “The Creator”]. “The concept of unity becomes an obsession,” and this results in the democratic mind seeking out the establishment of pantheism, which is “of all the different philosophical systems used to explain the universe...one of those most fitted to seduce the mind in democratic ages.”

The “obsession” for the “concept of unity” first leads man to move beyond the Christian idea that “there is nothing in the world but one creation and one Creator,” because his desire for total equality in unity is “embarrassed by this primary division of things.” The democratic mind then “seeks to expand and simplify his conception by including God and the universe in one great whole.” Pantheism asserts, against what the distinctiveness of human experiences and expressions of human greatness would claim, that “all things material and immaterial, visible and invisible, which the world contains are only to be considered as the several parts of an immense Being who alone remains eternal in the midst of the continual flux and transformation of all that composes Him.” Pantheism claims that individuality is an illusion.

The horror for Tocqueville is not just that “such a system, although it destroys human individuality...will have secret charms for men living under democracies” but that it will seduce them “rather just because it destroys” individuality. As Tocqueville shows throughout Volume II, for “men living under democracies...all their habits of mind prepare them to conceive” pantheism and “put them on their way to adopting it.” Pantheism “naturally attracts their imagination,” which loves and seeks equality more than freedom⁵⁴ and wrongly conceives of each man both in “isolation” and in complete control of his “destiny.” Having captured the imagination and will of democratic man, pantheism “holds it fixed.”

Pantheism’s virtue, for democratic man, is that it is the philosophy of perfect equality; it aims to destroy every and all distinction, hierarchy, and difference—as Peter Lawler asserts, it is “the culmination of the democratic movement in thought” which necessarily includes “skeptical destruction of human order and distinctiveness.”⁵⁵ In the search for unity, democratic man, “when he thinks he has found it...gladly reposes in that belief.” Tocqueville uses two important words here: “thinks” and “reposes.” First, democratic man does not have to actually find unity in all things, and from Tocqueville’s perspective none such unity exists; the illusion alone is enough to sooth the democratic mind. Second, in this belief he “reposes.” The “restless mind” ceases to think; having willed pantheism, it ceases to will.⁵⁶ This state of repose signals the end of man’s exercise of liberty, perhaps even the end of his humanity. It is the “end of history” that Nietzsche refers to; time continues, but nothing happens.

Pantheism is a philosophy so dangerous and hostile to liberty and greatness that Tocqueville urges and hopes that “all who still appreciate the true nature of man’s greatness should combine in the struggle against it.” It saps the will of the individual and denies he can

⁵⁴ *DA* II.II.1

⁵⁵ Lawler, *The Restless Mind*, pg. 35.

⁵⁶ Lawler. *The Restless Mind*, “Chapter 2, Pantheism.”

ever have distinction, leaving him to lazily “repose” in vulgar comforts and “general apathy,” which Tocqueville tells us is the “fruit of individualism”—an apparently poisonous fruit.⁵⁷

The philosophy of pantheism is akin to the extreme forms of theoretical democracy advocated by the French radicals with whom Tocqueville disagreed. The utopians’ fault, in the words of Pierre Manent, is that their desire to “realize the democratic abstraction, which contains nothing human, is to want to realize the unrealizable, and the effort to realize the unrealizable can only be considered the destruction of all that is really human.” Manent further describes this radical desire as containing a fundamental confusion; they say they aim “to strive to subject all aspects of human life” to the democratic dogma of equality, but in reality they subject life “not to a dogma or doctrine...but to a pure Negation.”⁵⁸

The Crucial Link: Individualism and Pantheism

Individualism is endemic to democracy, an inevitable and intractable state. The crucial link in the chain of the metaphysics of democracy is between individualism and pantheism. This at first seems paradoxical. Yet after exploring the inner workings of individualism and the means through which it undermines individuality, the paradox evaporates. It could then appear that individualism is just a way station between equality and pantheism, a transitory state for the individual. For is pantheism not simply the most perfect form of equality conceivable to the human mind, the most general of all ideas? Pantheism removes all distinctions and questions of degree, washes away all secondary powers, and declares that the high and the low in life, and all in between—the brutes and God, men and angels—are one and the same. Structured this way, individualism is the process through which the idea of “equality of conditions” acting on man prepares him or reshapes him for the most “perfect equality” of pantheism.

⁵⁷ DA, Tocqueville’s Notes to Volume Two, Note BB, pg. 735-6.

⁵⁸ Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, pg. 130

It could at this point be protested: But what is so bad about pantheism? Tocqueville himself has already conceded that man loves equality even more than freedom,⁵⁹ that equality gives man pleasure everyday, that democracy is a more “just” form of government in the eyes of the Creator.⁶⁰ If this were true, then wouldn’t pantheism, understood as “perfect equality,” be the most sublime pleasure for man? Why would Tocqueville want to deny man that which is sublime? Wouldn’t pantheism be most just in the eyes of God? Opposing it could at that point be considered heretical.

For Tocqueville, however, this is clearly not true. His stance here is quite consistent with his partisanship for human liberty. Whether or not it is cruel to deny man the sublime pleasure of pantheism (assuming it is sublime at all), it is far more misanthropic to support pantheism because it denies that human beings are distinct—it denies their very “human-ness.” What is heretical is supporting pantheism, not opposing it, precisely because pantheism denies the differences between animals, man, the angels, and God. Tocqueville is very cognizant that the plans of his utopian radical contemporaries seek to deny man’s “human-ness,” even more cognizant than they are of this fact themselves.⁶¹ For Tocqueville, the negation of what it is to be human is far from sublime, it is a disaster, hence his call that “all those who still appreciate the true nature of man’s greatness should combine in the struggle against” pantheism.⁶²

Pantheism denies difference and distinction and thus undermines human liberty and any notions of individual human greatness. Recognizing oneself as human as opposed to animal, as superior to some beings (animals and perhaps some humans) and inferior to others (other humans

⁵⁹ DA II.II.1

⁶⁰ DA II.IV.8

⁶¹ Lawler. *The Restless Mind*. “Chapter 2, Pantheism.”

⁶² DA pg. 452

and God), this perspective seems immensely important to Tocqueville for establishing one's sense of self and individuality.

One sees the more practical and political effects of pantheism in the centralized administration and eventual democratic despotism that Tocqueville warns of. One sees how perfectly pantheism lends itself to the democratic idea of deterministic history and progress. It is not being suggested that pantheism necessarily or directly brings about these effects, but that it is the system that prepares men for them; it is the system that offers the least resistance and the most aid to “democratic history” and “democratic despotism.”

Democratic History

Besides its culmination in the dominance and stagnation of pantheism, the overuse of general ideas and the gradual weakening of the individual through individualism makes itself apparent in the emergence and the growing power of other presumed “great causes”—external forces that deny man's capacity for liberty and seek the individual's negation. The two phenomena that Tocqueville most sternly warns of and attempts to combat are “democratic history” and “democratic despotism.”

Tocqueville addresses history first, at the end of Part I of Volume II in an uncharacteristically biting critique of democratic historians. While in most other areas of democratic life he somewhat ambivalently finds that the dogma of equality has brought about some good and some bad results, when it comes to the teachings of democratic historians Tocqueville's assessment is unequivocally negative. Democratic historians “attribute hardly any influence over the destinies of mankind to individuals, or over the fate of a people to the citizens. But they make great general causes responsible for the smallest particular events.” These proud (the implication is smug) historians promote the idea that the “influence of individuals on the

nation has been lost.” The result is that men are led to believe in history as “a cause so vast that it acts at the same time on millions of men, and so strong that it bends them all together in the same direction,” a cause that “may easily seem irresistible.” The negation of the individual as a force in history culminates in the tragedy that “we are often left with the sight of the world moving without anyone moving it.”

Democratic historians preach a deterministic view of history that “one cannot stand up to.” Tocqueville’s most damning charge is that they “teach next to nothing but how to obey” and follow a “doctrine of fatality.” Just as pantheism soothes the lazy mind and the false pride of democratic men as it lulls them to sleep, and just as nihilism saps the will and negates the individual, democratic history steps in to guide democratic men, to “take possession of the public mind” and assure men that “they could not have happened differently” and were “bound to have followed the path” to the present. By extension, the implication is that the future is pre-determined as well. Man’s lazy pride again is present, as Tocqueville tells us that this view of history is “easier than demonstrating how it might have taken a better road.”

Like the pantheists, democratic historians sway men who already “are all too much inclined to doubts about free will, since each of them feels himself confined on every side by his own weakness,” by his individualism. But following the logic of general ideas, “they will freely admit the strength and independence of men united in a body social.” Tocqueville, partisan for human liberty, anticipates Nietzsche as he urges that it is necessary to counter these doctrines: “we need to raise men’s souls, not to complete their prostration.”⁶³

Democratic Despotism

Tocqueville’s other great fear is that democratic political societies will slowly degrade into a new “soft” or “democratic despotism,” another signal of the waning of human liberty and

⁶³ DA pg. 493-6

individual greatness. Tocqueville's insight that democracy and despotism are not antithetical—that democracy does not necessarily and always coexist with a free and liberal society—is one of his greatest contributions to political science. It is to warnings and considerations of this fear of despotism that Tocqueville turns in the concluding chapters of Part IV of Volume II.

With the gradual progression of individualism and the corresponding weakening of the individual will, Tocqueville fears that the power ceded by the populace will naturally be aggregated and centralized by the government. Each citizen, turned inward and with all his energies focused on a vulgar materialism and love of physical pleasures, may not even notice that the centralized state is slowly strangling the sphere of liberty, and will much less have the strength to combat the state. As always for Tocqueville, the ultimate end to be avoided is the negation of individual liberty.

Tocqueville, besides being one of the first thinkers to recognize that despotism and democracy could go hand in hand, identified a number of factors that made democratic despotism particularly dangerous and deceitful. While past despotism “had immense and unchecked power” that often deprived men “arbitrarily of life or property,” it nevertheless “was violent, but its extent was limited.” Democratic despotism, however, “would probably have a different character. It would be more widespread and milder; it would degrade men rather than torment them.” Tocqueville goes further, and calls the possibility “doubtless” that “in such an age of education and equality...rulers could more easily bring all powers into their own hands” and could “more easily impinge deeper and more habitually into the sphere of private interests than was ever possible in antiquity.” It comes about in this age of equality that considering “the trivial nature of men's passions...the softness of their mores, the extent of their education” and perhaps above all “the restraint which they all show in their indulgences of both vice and virtue”

that despotic rulers will be less “tyrants, but rather schoolmasters.” When one is controlling a nation of men weakened through individualism, classroom discipline is all that is necessary.

Perhaps the greatest danger of this new despotism is that it is so unexpected, and thus unguarded against: “the type of oppression which threatens democracies is different from anything there has ever been in the world before. Our contemporaries will find no prototype of it in their memories.”⁶⁴ While the despotism will be “mild” or “soft,” Tocqueville fears that “it is easier to establish an absolute and despotic government among a people whose social conditions are equal than among any other.”⁶⁵ The fundamental factor in the new equation of tyranny is the enervating state of individualism amongst the citizenry. The “needs of democratic nations” make it “inevitable” that “society there is more active and stronger, and the individual more subordinate and weaker.”⁶⁶

Tocqueville tells the reader that he tries to “imagine under what novel features despotism may appear” in the democratic world. His vision is of “an innumerable multitude of men, alike and equal, constantly circling around in pursuit of the petty and banal pleasures with which they glut their souls.” As should now be obvious, his dreaded vision is of rampant individualism. Democratic man, isolated and focused on material pleasure, withdraws from politics and from his fellow man: “Each one of them, withdrawn from himself, is almost unaware of the fate of the rest.” It is hard for man to even conceptualize a spiritual patriotism and “love of one’s own,” not in the sense of merely one’s family, but in a broader political context: “He exists in and for himself, and though he still may have a family, one can at least say that he has not got a fatherland.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ *DA* pg. 691

⁶⁵ *DA* pg. 695

⁶⁶ *DA* pg. 696

⁶⁷ *DA* pg. 691-2

Like the democratic historical doctrine that denies man's agency, democratic despotism gradually reduces and limits man's ability to exercise liberty and slowly "softens" him: "Thus, it daily makes the exercise of free choice less useful and rarer, restricts the activity of free will within a narrower compass, and little by little robs each citizen of the proper use of his own faculties." Tocqueville explicitly indicts equality as the root cause of this result: "Equality has prepared men for all this, predisposing them to endure it and often even regard it as beneficial."

I think it becomes clear that unlike past despotisms that came to power through force of arms and often violent and outwardly repressive control, the new democratic despotism comes out of something deeper and perhaps more sinister. It is not so much imposed upon a democratic society as it is birthed by such a society. Democratic despotism is only possible once the souls and wills of men are ready to accept it, once they have been weakened by their individualism and yearn for the unity of general ideas and eventually pantheism, the most general and unifying of ideas. Democratic despotism, while it may establish the outward appearances of the negation of the individual, only completes politically what has already occurred in the hearts of men. Though Tocqueville ends his work with this vision of despotism—a tangible, practical fear easily comprehended by democratic man—it is that which comes before which is the real danger.

The intellectual movement of general ideas and the acceptance of the philosophy of pantheism infect the democratic mind. The type of man that equality creates is susceptible to succumbing to these forces destructive to the individual: pantheism and deterministic history, and in the realm of political society, democratic despotism. These forces are not violently imposed, but the citizens "console themselves for being under schoolmasters by thinking that they have chosen them themselves. Each individual lets them put the collar on, for he sees that it

is not a person, or a clan of persons, but society itself which holds the end of the chain.”⁶⁸ They delude themselves, in negating their own individuality, that somehow this is a praiseworthy choice.

However, the beauty of Tocqueville’s presentation is that by turning man’s attention to the fear of new despotism and the loss of liberty—the culmination and not the point of departure of the dangers of equality—he may prevent them from falling prey to it. Instead of attacking democracy theoretically, mounting a fundamental charge against individualism that is likely to fail due to the persuasive power of the democratic dogmas, he attacks the most practical reality of a despotic democratic state, and through stirring men to oppose it, they unwittingly learn how to rule and be ruled as individuals, how to exercise liberty, and ultimately how to resist democratic excess. This is the meaning of the superiority of practice over theory.⁶⁹ One of the great virtues of democratic Americans is that they “learn democracy” by “doing democracy.” Action, asserting oneself in the political sphere, takes an act of courage and contains an element of risk. It is the best antidote for democratic excess, and the best bulwark against the evils that fill Tocqueville with dread.

Section IV: Prospects for the Future

Going Forward: Tocqueville, Globalization, and the Internet

With this in mind, what are the external forces—the new “general ideas” and historical circumstances—that should be of concern to Tocquevillean democrats as we round out the first decade of the 21st century? How are the democratic tendencies toward pantheism becoming manifest today? It seems apparent that the dominant forces of the post-Cold War world are the phenomena of political, economic, and cultural changes collectively referred to as

⁶⁸ DA pg. 693

⁶⁹ Mansfield DA, lxxx-lxxxvi.

“globalization.” Viewed through the lens of Tocqueville, globalization could be the next general step in the spread of “equality of condition,” and thus somewhat of a “raising of the stakes” when considering both the benefits and perils of democracy.

In the face of globalization, individuals and even entire nations are told that they must adapt or go into decline. This world-shaping force is a “fact” that must be dealt with, much like the advance of democracy, but there is still the important question of how to deal with it. Many contemporary thinkers do not give this question enough consideration. It is easy to draw a straight line from the teachings of the early 19th century democratic historians Tocqueville criticizes to the cosmopolitan writers and pundits who champion globalization today. In Tocqueville’s time, democratic historians promoted the idea that the “influence of individuals on the nation has been lost.” Today, would it not be unreasonable to say that the idea that the “influence of nations on the world has been lost” has gained some marginal currency? Globalization is today accepted as “a cause so vast that it acts at the same time on millions of men, and so strong that it bends them all together in the same direction,” a cause that “may easily seem irresistible.” More so than in previous centuries, “we are often left with the sight of the world moving without anyone moving it.”

The force of globalization tends to advocate generality and uniformity over specificity and particularity. When discussing particularity and honor,⁷⁰ Tocqueville imagines a future where “all the peoples of the world should reach a state in which they had all the same interests and needs, and there was no characteristic trait distinguishing one from the other.”⁷¹ Globalization could certainly facilitate all men having the same interests (nature sees to it that they already have many of the same needs). Yet globalization also makes new interests and

⁷⁰ *DA* II.III.18

⁷¹ *DA* II.III.18, pg. 626-7

experiences available to many peoples for the first time. Again we find the same paradox, the general leveling: “less perfection but greater abundance...almost all salient characteristics are obliterated to make room for something average, less high and less low, less brilliant and less dim.” With globalization, one sees an extension of—or perhaps the current vehicle of—the extreme effects of democracy and equality theorized by Tocqueville: “All the ties of race, class, and country are relaxed. The great bond of humanity is drawn tighter.”⁷²

One of the most striking innovations driving the globalized world is the Internet, a technology that will likely exert an ever-greater force on our lives going forward. The world becomes more digital and the “need” for instant communication more passionately felt. There is much to be considered in the nexus between individualism and the Internet. On the one hand, it seems clear that the Internet can help facilitate more civic and political association and a more democratized press, in part through overcoming physical limitations (space, time, or capital requirements, etc.) to establishing them. To the degree that it fosters more political engagement, particularly decentralized political engagement, the Internet should be praised as an instrument of liberty, a beneficial innovation for democrats.

However, the Internet also seems to have the potential to exacerbate the problem of individualism. To the extent that it draws people into themselves—both physically through attachment to their computer screens, and mentally through the “self-selecting” phenomena (users can receive a quite closed and distorted view of the world by choosing only to reinforce pre-existing beliefs) of the Internet experience—it should be opposed. How this should be done is unclear, for it is the same tool that results in both the experience of connecting with others and separating from them. A group email chain can be an effective way to share views with like-minded people and coordinate political or civic action based on those opinions, but members of

⁷² *DA II.IV.8*, pg. 703-4

that group run the risk of becoming closed in and withdrawing from society at large in a way that was never possible before. Again, the problem is not one of any particular technology, but of individualism itself.

Desirable and Undesirable Dogmas

Tocqueville has demonstrated that the metaphysics of democracy clearly has a dark side. The theoretical implications of the metaphysics are daunting and disturbing to Tocqueville. He has told us that all men need dogmatic beliefs, and then has shown us that the dogmas of democracy are potentially disastrous for man. The nihilism problem looms large. While Tocqueville's practical solutions may slow the growth of individualism, they do not solve the theoretical problem. The real question must be asked as to how the metaphysics can be combated metaphysically, in the hearts and souls of man, at the level of dogmas. On one end, the worst passion that could take hold of the democratic heart is apathy, itself a product of individualism. For Tocqueville, this is the real enemy that must be combated. On the other end, the dogma that is most beneficial to democratic man is religion, according to Tocqueville. But with religious faith in the democratic West on the decline, what are the future prospects for democracy?

"The General Apathy"

Tocqueville pinpoints the core feeling of democratic individualism in his final words in *Democracy in America*, not from the text itself, but from his Notes on Volume II. The final note comes at the very end of Part IV Chapter 6 ("What Sort of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear"). In whole, it reads:

One cannot state in any absolute or general way whether the greatest danger at the present time is license or tyranny, anarchy or despotism. Both are equally to be feared, and both could spring from one and the same cause, that is, the *general apathy*, the fruit of individualism. It is because of this apathy that any day the executive power, having mustered a few troops, can commit acts of oppression, and the next day any party that can summon thirty men to the fray can also commit acts of oppression. Neither the one nor

the other can establish anything that will last, those same causes which make success easy making its duration impossible. They rise because nothing resists them and they fall because nothing supports them.

We should therefore direct our efforts, not against anarchy or despotism, but against the apathy which could engender one or the other almost indifferently.⁷³

In this footnote, I believe a central point is again emphasized: that it is not any particular temporal fear that is Tocqueville's real focus (be it anarchy or despotism), but the underlying psychological dynamic of democratic individualism, that "both could spring from one and the same cause." The focus should be on the cause: "the *general apathy*, the fruit of individualism." While the "general apathy" needs to be often combated in practical terms, what is at stake is put into much sharper focus when the theoretical implications of individualism—the centerpiece of democratic metaphysics—is fully understood. Merely guarding against despotism or guarding against anarchy is to misunderstand the scope of the threat to liberty presented by individualism.

The fear is negation and nihilism, that no man or party will be able to "establish anything that will last," that "nothing resists them" and "nothing supports them"—in essence, that nothing matters, that the exercise of liberty is futile and nonsensical. A half-century before Nietzsche, Tocqueville shows us that the greatest fear for democratic man is not despotism, but apathy. Worse, it is a paradoxical type of passion for this apathy that democracy itself tends to breed in democratic man through individualism. Both Tocqueville and Nietzsche want to protect the nobility of man that is so threatened by democracy and its attendants: pantheism or nihilism, democratic despotism, equality or slave morality.

Religion

In Volume II, Part II, Chapter 5, when discussing the dogmas of religion, Tocqueville tells us "that religious dogmas seem the most desirable of all."⁷⁴ This is an important component

⁷³ DA, Tocqueville's Notes to Volume Two, Note BB, pg. 735-6.

⁷⁴ DA pg. 442

that Tocqueville adds to his analysis of dogmas. Tocqueville tells us that religion gives men a “general conception” of something outside of and greater than themselves, in this case, God: “There is hardly any action, however private it may be, which does not result from some very general conception men have of God, of His relations with the human race, of the nature of their soul, and of their duties to the their fellows. Nothing can prevent such ideas from being the common spring from which all else originates.”⁷⁵ Religion forms a relationship between men and this general conception of the whole; it helps explain man to himself though revealing the “nature of their soul,” and adds structure to the relationship men have with other men through “duties toward their fellows.”

Religion gives men the fullest, most complex and comprehensive conception of the whole, and to the extent that the Christian religion is hierarchical and defines duties of man to man, and man to God, it has aristocratic tendencies alongside its preaching of equality of men before God. Most importantly, in its emphasis of the relationship between man and God—a “higher,” non-human power—it is anti-pantheistic.

Religion, in its comprehensiveness, definition of distinction between man, beast, and God, and its acknowledgement of man’s individuality and free will, is the dogma most amenable under Tocqueville’s circumstances to the responsible use of liberty that Tocqueville prizes. These characteristics are not necessarily exclusive to the Christian religion. As Tocqueville notes, any religion that establishes a similar atmosphere for the use of liberty should be valued as the “most desirable of dogmas.” By comparison, it should now be even clearer that pantheism is the most undesirable of dogmas.

Since Tocqueville’s time, religious faith in Western democracies has simultaneously grown more diverse and waned in intensity, weakening religion’s ability to act as meaningful

⁷⁵ *DA* pg. 442-3

foundation for both public and private democratic life. Competing visions of a fully secularized society or a religious-political fundamentalism have gained ground, neither of which Tocqueville finds acceptable.⁷⁶ Though a majority of Americans still attend church, attendance in Europe is plummeting, and faith overall seems to have weakened. Tocqueville's fear that democratic instincts would overwhelm religion may be coming to fruition. If so, then from a Tocquevillean perspective a new metaphysical basis for combating apathy and pantheism must be found.

Conclusion

The theoretical implications of democracy spell potential disaster for the long-term prospects of maintaining liberty within democracy. Protecting liberty is Tocqueville's aim. While his solutions rooted in practice may retard the growth of individualism in democratic man and thereby stave off pantheism, they can never fully eradicate it, as it is an inseparable and inherent state in democracy. Tocqueville's practical struggle against individualism is necessary if one is serious about protecting the potential for human greatness and the exercise of individual liberty—indeed, the struggle is in itself a type of greatness. But is it sufficient? From a theoretical perspective, it appears that the answer could be: “No.” This is certainly the position held by Nietzsche and his disciples. Behind the “general apathy” lurks the greater metaphysical question of the democratic vision of the whole. This is where the real heart of the problem lies. In Volume II, Tocqueville subtly points those who are inclined to look toward the higher questions. Admittedly, the way forward is uncertain, but grasping and embracing this uncertainty is the first step that must be taken by serious men.

It seems to me that Tocqueville was cognizant of the reality that most average, democratized men would not be able to cope with consideration of the full implications of the

⁷⁶ Galston, William. “Tocqueville on Liberalism and Religion.” In *Tocqueville's Political Science: Classic Essays*, edited by Peter Augustine Lawler. New York: Garland Pub. 1992.

metaphysics, and they must instead be distracted by political and commercial life and directed by more enlightened statesmen. Civic and political associations can pull democrats away from the extremes of their individualism, town meetings can teach them the fundamentally aristocratic art of ruling, and religion can temper their materialism and give them a sense of duty. But it is up to a select few to see this metaphysical problem clearly, as Tocqueville does. Without thought of this kind, it is likely that democracy will eventually slide into pantheism and despotism. If nihilism is not faced head on, as Nietzsche calls for, then it is likely to triumph in time.

The Role of the Statesmen in a Democratic Age

Regardless, Tocqueville seems to take a brighter view of democracy's prospects than Nietzsche. He asserts that religion, the democratic family, a strong free press and political and civic associations can indeed combat individualism somewhat and thus reduce the likelihood of the new democratic despotism. Recognizing the injustice of aristocracy, he does not advocate a return to it. Unlike Nietzsche, Tocqueville ambivalently—and in this sense somewhat optimistically as well—views democracy as at a crossroads, where there is still a chance to choose liberty or despotism. Despite the teachings of certain democratic doctrines, Tocqueville still sees space for humans to determine the future of democracy.⁷⁷ Thus, he searches for and proscribes ways by which democratic man can stave off the disaster that is latently lurking in the fabric of democracy. This requires consideration of the metaphysics of democracy.

Ultimately, Tocqueville suggests that the role of democratic statesmen is not to oppose or support any particular trend in politics or otherwise, but to oppose individualism itself. The most valuable thing that these men can do is to encourage their fellows to be great, both through their own example and in the politics they advocate. In the globalized world, where life is more complicated and moving faster than ever before, the condition of individualism—and the internal

⁷⁷ DA Author's Introduction, II.IV.8

democratic “pull” toward the opiate-like comforts of general ideas and pantheism—grows ever more seductive. It is for great statesmen to keep their fellows awake, to encourage them to turn their eyes toward the horizon again, to turn outward and charge forth—whether in business, politics, or the arts.

The closing paragraphs of the entire work focus on the need for this type of thought. Men today, “many of my contemporaries” as Tocqueville says, “think that nations on earth are never their own masters and that they are bound to obey some insuperable and unthinking power. These are false and cowardly doctrines which can only produce feeble men and pusillanimous nations.” While the spreading of democracy may be unpreventable, it still depends on wise democratic men “whether equality is to lead to servitude or freedom, knowledge or barbarism, prosperity or wretchedness.”⁷⁸ While Nietzsche has decided that democracy must end in servitude and wretchedness, the same does not hold for Tocqueville. It is because of this open question, this choice still available to man, that Tocqueville studies democracy in America and writes so extensively about its effects—both grand and minute—on man. He believes both in the power of political theory to beneficially educate man,⁷⁹ and the power of man to still be a determinate force in the world. This he shows in both his theoretical work and his own participation in political life.

It is clear from Tocqueville’s view of politics that what he is advocating is not radicalism. He doesn’t want democratic statesmen to don robes and rally the nation to some spiritual crusade or national project. Unlike Nietzsche, he is not searching for an *Overman* that will set a new standard for humanity. But it is also clear that democratic statesmen must do more than just be good stewards or clerks. While they must be grounded in the practical and the political—the art

⁷⁸ DA pg. 705

⁷⁹ ASP, 28-30

of statesmanship—that art must be informed by the theoretical—the science of politics, an understanding of the metaphysics of democracy. In this meeting of practice and theory is the greatness of democratic politicians, and Tocqueville thinks that seeing the new and emerging democratic world the way he presents it in *Democracy in America* could foster that greatness and mold statesmen who would prudently counter democratic excess and preserve liberty for humanity. Following the failure of 20th century radical political projects from both the Left and Right inspired by both Marx and Nietzsche, Tocqueville’s approach to the metaphysical problem of democracy—an approach that comes from within a broadly defined liberalism—deserves a deeper look. His views on metaphysics, political science, and the proper relationship between practice and theory have much to teach us today. His advocacy of a moderate democracy in the interest of human liberty, while considered insufficient from a Nietzschean perspective, is quite attractive from a contemporary liberal democratic perspective. Tocqueville keeps faith that liberty can be maintained alongside the justice of democracy, and urges his readers to take up the challenge.

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