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Abstract

In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville narrates 19th century American life. He looks at American society, culture, and psychological mannerisms, and extracts from it the habits of everyday life. These become for Tocqueville the dynamic building blocks of democratic life for the Americans. Chief among these principles is the desire for political freedom; Tocqueville knows that this desire to participate for political freedom must rest on solid foundations—namely, the cultivation of community, self-sacrifice, and ultimately a robust conception of the good. This paper has three main goals: First, to show what Tocqueville sees to be, in *Democracy in America*, the function of religion in democracy. I will argue that Tocqueville thinks religion is necessary for a healthy democracy to function properly, which is to say that a healthy democracy works insofar as there is work done to it by religion. To elaborate this claim, I will identify three ways in which religion functions in Tocqueville's analysis: (1) it provides a foundation for political freedom, (2) it gives rise to mores, and (3) it focuses our attention on the good. In painting Tocqueville's picture of political freedom, I will argue that for Tocqueville, political freedom not only can but must form an alliance with religion if the two are to function well. I will then demonstrate how Tocqueville's proposed view of democracy, religion, and freedom have implications for the modern age in issues that arise in a liberal modernity. My thesis hones in on religion's third function in Tocqueville's analysis—namely,

that it focuses our attention on the good. Finally, I will consider how religion does indeed focus us on the good, arguing that political deliberation is not neutral. Rather, we each carry a set of values that help us to arrive at a conception of the good.

Equality as Democracy: Descriptive and Normative

To start, I want to sketch out Tocqueville's vision of equality. Doing so will be important for understanding why Tocqueville thinks a healthy democracy is in need of religion. Tocqueville opens his work by defining what he means by democracy. He describes it as the historical process and development of the "equality of conditions."¹ Simple enough, it seems. But what does equality mean for Tocqueville? For Tocqueville, equality is defined as social, economic, and political mobility. In fact, equality is the erosion of the ancient hereditary power: the aristocracy. Thus, Tocqueville captures two components of equality: (a) a positive one (i.e. mobility) and (b) a negative one (i.e. the erosion of aristocracy). He writes that "conditions are more equal among Christians² in our day than they have ever been in any time or any country in the world..."³

This move toward democracy is brought about by Providence, so it is inevitable. Note that Tocqueville declares that democracy is a "providential fact." It is a trend that began 700 years ago, and that only in his time has come to view as providential in the one country, America, that has adopted it

1 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 3.

2 i.e. those in America.

3 *Ibid.*, 6.

and applied it fully. Listen to how Tocqueville explicates this claim about democracy being predestined:

The gradual development of equality of conditions is therefore a providential fact, and it has the principal characteristics of one: it is universal, it is enduring, each day it escapes human power; all events, like all men, serve its development.⁴

To call it providential means to deny it is human choice or discovery. Here, Tocqueville suggests that Providence has created a condition that has escaped human agency. Tocqueville does not begin with abstract notions of the state of nature—like his liberal contemporaries—but instead begins with history. One may wonder how exactly this equality of conditions manifests itself in reality given the fact that it has been determined by Providence. If it is universal, then this may mean it will occur everywhere inevitably. If it is served by all men, then this could mean that men are positioned in such a way to bring it into existence. These conditional statements raise several questions about the mechanisms and outplaying of democracy. For if democracy is universal, must there be a set formula for bringing it into existence? And if democracy is served by all men, must there be certain conditions that allow it to flourish? Further, does Tocqueville's analysis of democracy in America carry with it a set of claims—maybe these are normative claims—not only about what makes democracy work per se, but what makes a healthy one work? Moreover, if Tocqueville is doing more than merely describing the progress of history, might we be able to unpack his

⁴ Ibid.

views about the way political life ought to be structured? Can we see Tocqueville as suggesting that the move toward democracy is *legitimate*?⁵

To consider this last question, note that Tocqueville thinks that, “[i]t is not the use of power or the habit of obedience that depraves men, but the use of power that they consider illegitimate, and obedience to a power they regard as usurped and oppressive.”⁶ Tocqueville here is making either a sociological or a psychological observation, which are both descriptive. But in addition to making a descriptive claim, is he also making a normative one?

Tocqueville’s analysis in this quote is important for his theory of democracy in at least two respects. In one sense, Tocqueville might be seen as providing a normative view of power—namely that power can corrupt. But this picture is quite complicated, because it seems like Tocqueville is talking about people’s perception of power. He proposes a conception of power that is relational; our perception of it may determine whether or not we think it is legitimate. It is not simply power in itself that ‘depraves men,’ but rather it is a power that men consider ‘illegitimate’ that depraves them. The tone that is conveyed by the word depraved implies a sense of immorality.

One may also read Tocqueville as making a claim about what just political power looks like. Consider the role power plays in Tocqueville’s theory of democracy to see why this is so. What Tocqueville is inserting in his

⁵ It seems important to me to define what I mean by legitimate. Legitimacy refers to the right and acceptance of an authority, in particular political authority. Here, political authority is associated with democracy. I understand Tocqueville as looking at legitimacy in two ways: a normative one (something is legitimate because of some normative criterion, regardless of whether people think it is legitimate) with a Weberian sociological one (something is legitimate insofar as people think it is legitimate). Therefore, something is legitimate only if it is consistent with a given standard and only if people accept it.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

view of power is a component of morality, or that perceptions of it have a moral component. That power, considered illegitimate, can deprave man surely rests upon a notion of what people think power should not do. Hence, the assertion is not merely descriptive. It is also prescriptive. With this in mind, let's expand a little more on how Tocqueville's conception of equality fits in with democracy.

One aspect of Tocqueville's understanding of equality is spelled out quite eloquently on page 52. It reads:

There is in fact a manly and legitimate passion for equality that incites men to want all to be strong and esteemed. This passion tends to elevate the small to the rank of the great; but one also encounters a depraved taste for equality in the human heart that brings to the weak and to want to draw the strong to their level that reduces men to preferring equality in servitude to inequality in freedom ... but nothing can satisfy them without equality, and they would sooner consent to perish than to lose it.⁷

The passion for equality is seen in a two-fold light: both positively and negatively. Notice the distinction that Tocqueville makes between the strong and the weak. The first claim is the positive one; namely that our passion to pursue equality can drive all to want to be strong and esteemed. Another claim, seen in a more negative light, suggests that our passion to pursue equality is dangerous if left untamed. Another claim, which could be called a neutral reading of the passage, would assert that our passion to pursue equality is a natural desire, inherent in the human individual. Note the 'depraved taste for equality' that Tocqueville uses to describe this event. Perhaps Tocqueville would be satisfied with our second reading of the

⁷ Ibid., 52.

passage, since the term 'depraved' carries such a strong and ardent tone with it. Both readings may be consistent with one another, depending on how we do the interpretive work.

Additionally, notice the contrasting diction Tocqueville employs in this passage. The contrast between the strong and the weak parallels the contrast with the small and the great. The words 'elevate' and 'level' suggest an almost hierarchical structure coupled with 'freedom' and 'equality.' The effect that Tocqueville's language has on the reader is to read his claims as dualities, like black and white. Thus, Tocqueville could be issuing us a warning about the love of equality. Communicated as the claim that the desire for equality can lead the ordinary to pursue greatness, this statement may be considered a warning by virtue of the fact that this second drive is considered 'depraved.'⁸ The drive toward equality has two feasible routes, and the way these routes are actualized is contingent upon how the desire for equality is satisfied.

If democracy is the equalizing of conditions, then the drive toward equality can lead in various directions—in this case either to a legitimate and healthy democracy or to a depraved and unhealthy one.

If democracy is not legitimate just because it is a historical, providential fact, then how does Tocqueville think we can ensure that we move to a legitimate form of democracy instead of a depraved one? For Tocqueville, does democracy require a certain type of people to keep it

⁸ Another reading of this passage may call into question what Tocqueville means by his claim that "nothing can satisfy them without equality."

functioning well? Indeed, while democracy is shaped particularly to fit within a certain culture, contextual landscape, it itself is shaped and determined by the people who make it. Thus, this may be why Tocqueville thinks that democracy must be taken care of diligently. He makes this point lucid when he writes:

Thus organized, the social body could have stability, power, and above all, glory. But now ranks are confused; the barriers raised among men are lowered; estates are divided, power is partitioned...⁹

The word 'could' is doing a lot of work in the first sentence. Written in the subjunctive mood, the 'could' here is expressing possibility, as if stability, power, and glory are all desirable variables. The second sentence describes the outcomes that have transpired due to the advent of democracy—all of this to say that there are both positive and negative consequences that have been produced by it. The 'ranks'—are now 'confused'— refer to the social classes that existed under the aristocracy. This is playing itself out as the 'barriers' are lowered. This lowering of barriers is not just evidence of increasingly political equality, but also of social and economic equality, since the divided states indicate an economic system that is becoming more and more mobile. As 'power is partitioned' there is a division and erosion of political, social, and economic power.

Is this outcome something Tocqueville was afraid of? Perhaps, but Tocqueville goes on to present a picture of his ideal society:

I conceive a society, then, which all, regarding the law as their work, would love and submit to without trouble; in which the authority of

⁹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 8.

government is respected as necessary, not divine, and the love would bear for a head of state would not be a passion, but a reasoned and tranquil sentiment. Each having rights and being assured of preserving his rights, a manly confidence and a sort of reciprocal condescension between the classes would be established, as far from haughtiness as from baseness.¹⁰

How does Tocqueville's ideal society, conceptualized as it is above, become a reality? Tocqueville reveals to us how so in the passage itself. All political citizens view themselves as legislators and makers of the law, which is why they do not mind submitting to it. The love for state and society has been reflected upon and thought about deeply. There must be a worldly reverence for authority, which is instructed rather than passionate. Citizens are right-bearers. There must be harmony between classes, which is made stable by 'reciprocal condescension.' In Tocqueville's idealized society, the "social body will not be immobile; but the movements of the social body can be regular and progressive; if one encounters less brilliance than within an aristocracy, one will find less misery, enjoyments will be less extreme and well-being more general; sciences less great and ignorance rarer; sentimentals less energetic and habits milder; one will note more vices and fewer crimes."¹¹

With this thought in mind, let us now move onto the sort of thing that religion is for Tocqueville.

Value of Religion: Truth or Utility?

10 Ibid., 9.

11 Ibid.

A proper understanding of Tocqueville's definition of religion is important for thinking about the way it is supposed to function in his theory of democracy. First, let's explore the importance of religion to a non-depraved democracy.

Consider that for Tocqueville, not all religions are good for democracy. Tocqueville's thinking on this subject seems to suggest that there are certain kinds of religions that will and will not work well with democracy. One way of thinking about this is to say that religion, if it is to work out as conceptualized by Tocqueville, must cohere and harmonize with democracy. In effect, Tocqueville holds that certain religions cannot do this.

In comparing two different religions, Islam and Christianity, Tocqueville writes:

That alone, among a thousand other reasons, is enough to show that the first of these two religions cannot dominate for long in enlightened and democratic times, whereas the second is destined to reign in these centuries as in all the others.¹²

His assertion that Islam cannot be the religion for democracy is developed by looking at Islam's teachings and creeds. By claiming that Islam decrees specific rules and norms about political life, Tocqueville asserts that it cannot mix in well with a theory of democracy that posits freedom as one of its highest priorities. That there exists a conflict between an adherence to Islam and a desire for freedom is evident in the political-orientated doctrine that emanates from it. For if the political realm is to be concerned with freedom, the people who make up that political realm must be free to create

12 Ibid., 420.

and organize their own communities.¹³ Christianity works for Tocqueville because it speaks only “of the general relations of men to God and among themselves.”¹⁴ Christianity is broad enough—it does not prescribe definite articles of dogma concerning political life—to be a viable option. Islam, on the other hand, has “political maxims, civil and criminal laws, and scientific theories.”¹⁵ It does too much for Tocqueville.

Maybe democracy favors simplicity. And maybe this is because democratic peoples prefer systems that are parsimonious; systems that can account for a lot of things and do a lot of work with very little. And maybe a religion like Christianity is such a system. Islam does not distinguish between the political and the religious; it is non-Erastian.

If we take this principle and apply it to our current discussion, then perhaps a religion that does not embrace a certain political order will work for democracy. Tocqueville is not making an epistemic claim about the truthfulness of any particular religion. Rather, bracketing the question of truth, he sees religion in instrumental terms, looking at its utility rather than its validity. In this sense, Tocqueville cares about the use of religion in democracy, not its truth. At the same time that he doesn't think that all religions are instrumentally valuable to democracy, Tocqueville thinks each is nonetheless valuable in some way:

13 This thought is captured later on in the paper. See Function IV: Religion as the Source of Mores and The Good

14 Ibid., 419.

15 Ibid.

Nor is there any [religion] that does not impose on each some duties toward the human species or in common with it, and that does not thus draw him, from time to time, away from contemplation of himself.¹⁶

The turning from inwardness to outwardness is a recurring theme Tocqueville believes to be found in religion. What does it mean to look outward? Looking outward means turning It is not clear that, for Tocqueville, religion is the only tool that can do this—or whether it is the best. But the important point to take away from this discussion is that it is an important function for ensuring a healthy democracy. Now let's move onto the real work religion does in democracy, by exploring its first function.

Function I: Religion as the Mediator between the Political Bond and the Moral Bond

Recall that Tocqueville's analysis of religion in America is multifaceted. What it does for democracy in America is integral. We have so far seen that Tocqueville wants a certain type of religion, but what exactly is it? For one, Tocqueville thinks that religion, or the state of religious faith, is natural to man. He writes, "Disbelief is an accident; faith alone is the permanent state of humanity."¹⁷ In fact, "religion is only a particular form of hope, and it is as natural to the human heart as hope itself."¹⁸ What Tocqueville is trying to say here is that to attempt to throw off religion altogether is folly, because it is special to human nature. Tocqueville may be making a psychological claim—that the hope of immortality found in religion is what man seeks. But can

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 284.

¹⁸ Ibid.

religious hopes find any place in democratic deliberation? The answer will be provided by looking at the relationship between psychology and religion.

Tocqueville considers religion and its place in democracy in the following passage:

Despotism can do without faith, but freedom cannot. Religion is much more necessary in the republic they extol than in the monarchy they attack, and in democratic republics more than all others. How could society fail to perish if, while the political bond is relaxed, the moral bond were not tightened? And what makes a people master of itself if it has not submitted to God?¹⁹

We begin to see why Tocqueville thinks religion is indeed 'necessary' for both freedom and democracy. He starts by contrasting religion in a democracy to religion in a monarchy, and claims that religion is 'more necessary' in a democratic republic than in any other political system. Religion is more necessary for securing the health of a democracy.

The questions that follow Tocqueville's statement are rhetorical and illuminate the dichotomy between the 'political bond' and the 'moral bond.' The equalizing of conditions in America are the driver for the 'relaxing of political bonds.' Such political bonds refer to those that existed under the aristocracy, and could refer to things like authority and hierarchy. In an age where conditions are equalized, Tocqueville thinks that the tight political bonds (i.e. the aristocracy and hierarchy) that were instituted by the aristocracy have become weakened. This would make sense in this context, if we were to read the "monarchy they attack" as referring to the political bond.

¹⁹ Ibid., 282.

Tocqueville's conviction is that "[r]eligion, which, among Americans, never mixes directly in the government of society, should therefore be considered as the first of their political institutions; for if it does not give them the taste for freedom, it singularly facilitates their use of it."²⁰ Granted, one may interpret Tocqueville here as saying that religion is the first political institution because it is that which foundationally grounds freedom. In fact, this is where the moral bonds come into sight: it is religion—the moral bond—that facilitates the American's use of freedom. The word facilitate, as used above, suggests direction and guidance. In other words, religion facilitates—it guides and directs—the use of freedom by telling us how to use it. It may even strengthen the moral bond in doing so.

How exactly does this look like in practice? In a democracy, where the political bonds are loosened, one might say that uncertainty reigns in the political world. Religion, then, tightens the moral bonds by placing the individual's eyes on the certainty of the moral world. Uncertainty, in Tocqueville's estimation, could mean that nothing is supremely guaranteed. Chief among this is the uncertainty about the political world, where distress and worry may be its very building blocks. The certainty of the moral world may remedy these undesirable consequences, because the certainty of the moral world comforts the democratic man. How so? For one, the moral world—with its religious ideology—may state that there exists an afterlife, which could also refer to the idea that the soul is immortal. What should be taken

²⁰ Ibid., 280.

here is that in some way religion places the individuals' eyes toward some firm, unyielding truths that supersede this life, and which thereby guide how freedom is to be played out in political life. It tells man that his actions on this life matter—that they have consequences. The notion that freedom could be misused is perhaps what religion can teach.²¹

If freedom needs religion to facilitate it, what kind of thing is freedom? To understand this question, we must become acquainted with how Tocqueville sees the vices of egoism and individualism, both birthed out by despotism. Here Tocqueville expresses this sentiment:

Despotism, which in its nature is fearful, sees the most certain guarantee of its own duration in the isolation of men, and it ordinarily puts all its care into isolating them. There is no vice of the human heart that agrees with it as much as selfishness...²²

Tocqueville suggests that despotism can give rise to individualism. For Tocqueville, individualism meant not self-assertion but self-withdrawal. It was defined as “a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him and to withdraw to one side with his family and his friends, so that after having thus created a little society for his own use, he willingly abandons society at large to itself.”²³ Despotism sustains itself and thrives off of the ‘isolation of men.’ It isolates men and gives birth to uncontrolled forms of individualism, which turn participants of political life inward. In doing so, it thereby intensifies their isolation and makes care and protection for their self-interest all the

21 For instance, using freedom for satisfying mere pleasure—for utility maximizing— instead of living, in the words of Socrates, “an examined life.”

22 Ibid., 485.

23 Ibid., 482.

more. In fact, it produces disconnection and generates a view of political life that sees society as composed of archipelagos—a scattered bunch of individuals who exist to secure their own piece of land. This in turn, according to Tocqueville, creates an ethos of ‘selfishness,’ where selfishness is a “passionate and exaggerate[d] love of self that brings man to relate everything to himself alone and to prefer himself to everything.”²⁴ It makes man into a self-sufficient being who is wholly independent and self-reliant.

What this does, then, is shatter the social bond, or what can be called the social fabric, and takes away care for the common interest and for the future. It institutes civic apathy, where political life is alienated from its rich dimension of discourse to a vexatious distraction for the scramble for self-interest. The public purpose is displaced by this ethos of self-interest; in fact, Tocqueville worries about an ethos excessive self-interest—i.e., untempered by interest in the common good. Not only does individualism intensify this predicament, but it focuses the citizen exclusively on the here and now. It does so not only because “democracy make[s] each man forget his ancestors, but it [also] hides his descendant from him and separates him from his contemporaries; it constantly lead him back toward himself alone and threatens finally to confine him whole in the solitude of his own heart.”²⁵

Such an occurrence undermines the ability for citizens to sustain civic participation, which is crucial for the maintenance of a healthy democracy. For if civic participation depends on a care for the well-being of others,

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 484.

individuals must learn “self-interest properly understood.” All the same, this formulation of civic participation is closely related to what Tocqueville’s conception of political freedom is all about. The augmentation of individualism breaks peoples ties to one another, to the web of social connections that supported them, and deprives them of the sustenance of political action. The worry that individualism becomes for Tocqueville, then, is that it finds its origin in democracy, and “it threatens to develop as conditions become equal.”²⁶

Here discussion of Tocqueville’s “self-interest properly understood” is apt. Aware of the danger wrought out by the isolation and selfishness of individualism seen above, Tocqueville observed that Americans adopted the idea of “self-interest well understood.” The idea goes something like this: Each individual could further their interest most productively if they were to redirect their view from themselves toward the good of the community, which would inculcate a culture of unity, collaboration, and cooperation. This could be achieved through the disciplinary influence exerted by society on its members—an influence embodied in the mores and in laws and institutions.

Tocqueville details what this would look like in the following short passage:

The doctrine of self-interest well understood does not produce great devotion; but it suggests little sacrifices each day; by itself it cannot make a man virtuous; but it forms a multitude of citizens who are regulated, temperate, moderate, farsighted, masters of themselves; and if it does not lead directly to virtue through will, it brings them near to it insensibly through habits.²⁷

26 Ibid., 483.

27 Ibid., 502.

This practice—of the individual turning himself from inward to outward—is not an easy task. In fact, Tocqueville asserted that it requires “little sacrifices.” Public involvement would remove the mistaken feeling of self-interest—a claim about countering unwanted selfish desires. What this does is create certain type of citizens—citizens who are ‘regulated, temperate, moderate, and farsighted’—which is important for Tocqueville’s theory of democracy. Tocqueville insists that this doctrine must be—perhaps only be—vitalized by religion.

He argues, “If this doctrine of self-interest well understood had only this world in view, it would be far from sufficient; for there are a great number of sacrifices that can find their recompense only in the other world.”²⁸ His assertion that religious belief teaches men that they will be rewarded in the next life is important for giving men the credence to make the sacrifices that are demanded of them now. The religious claim that there awaits rewards and punishments in the afterlife tells men that their sacrifices are worth it. Important as it is for cultivating a philosophy of public-spiritedness, this mechanism additionally gives individuals the assurance that what they do on this side of reality has ramifications for the present and for the future. Religion can even give the self-interested individual a community in attempts to counter the isolation that may be produced with the advent of democracy.

28 Ibid., 504

In sum, Tocqueville suggests that religion works to guide freedom by focusing the individual's attention on the certainty of the moral world. Religion guides freedom not just by focusing the individual on the certainty of the moral world, but also on directing him toward the common good. Let's now move onto religion's second function, which is all about how religion grounds freedom.

Function II: Religion as the Foundation of Freedom

Freedom and religion need not be separated, at least according to Tocqueville. In fact, religion and freedom are conjoined in America at the time he writes. He states:

Among us, I had seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom almost always move in contrary directions. Here I found them united intimately with one another: they reigned together on the same soil.²⁹

Tocqueville here is merely describing their harmonies and co-existence together. He hasn't yet made any claim about any relationship between them. But he continues:

If the human mind undertook to examine and judge individually all the particular cases that strike it, it would soon be lost in the midst of the immensity of detail and would no longer see anything.³⁰

The statement asserted here is that it is not possible for an individual to form all of their beliefs on the basis of their own thinking; for if they did, they would not be able to 'see anything.' The idea conveyed by Tocqueville, in my estimation, is a foundationalist one. Foundationalism postulates that one's beliefs and knowledge are structured in a hierarchical manner,

29 Ibid., 282.

30 Ibid., 411.

whereby those deemed most properly basic are located at the foundation.³¹

These foundational beliefs are taken for granted, which means they cannot be empirically verified, and, as such, are the basis for all other claims to knowledge. What Tocqueville is asserting is that if everyone were to examine and scrutinize every belief they had, knowledge of anything would be impossible. Tocqueville says that

One cannot see a multitude of particular facts separately without finally discovering the common bond that brings them together ... The habit of and taste for general ideas will therefore always be the greater in a people as its enlightenment is more ancient and more manifold.³²

What is this common bond that brings them together? Perhaps this is where religion comes in; it supports those beliefs that cannot be tested empirically, those located at the foundation. Religion itself is not based on any empirical set of claims about the world. Religion could be, but its very nature is the opposite of that of empiricism. The nature of religious belief is just that: belief. Where I think Tocqueville is going here is grounding thought itself in the similar way that religious belief does. Because a big portion of our knowledge rests on unscrutinized foundations, we may say that they rest on religious holdings in the same manner. This formulation is important for civic participation in a democracy, given that collaboration between citizens require that there be communication among each other. In fact, it may be

³¹ Foundationalism is associated with epistemology, which is the philosophical branch concerned with what we know and how we know it. I find that Tocqueville's epistemology greatly influences his political philosophy, and though much can be said here, it would be worthwhile, sometime else, to explore in more detail the relationship between the two.

³² Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 411.

where religion grounds freedom, if we understand freedom to be political freedom.

Another reading of this passage may bring into view the significance of shared beliefs—beliefs that are not ‘examine[d] and judge[d] individually.’ This is where the communication between citizens comes into view. These shared beliefs are deemed integral in Tocqueville’s theory of democracy, because civic participation requires that its citizens have a ‘common language’ they can use to speak to one another. This reading finds support in another passage, where he says:

[F]or without common ideas there is no common action, and without common action men still exist, but a social body does not. Thus in order that there be a society, and all the more, that this society prosper; it is necessary that all the minds of the citizens always be brought and held together by some principal ideas...³³

So what individuals in political life are left to do is accept “as given a host of facts and opinions that he has neither the leisure nor the power to examine and verify by himself, but that the more able have found or the crowd adopts.”³⁴ Tocqueville holds that a society requires that there be ‘some principal ideas’ that hold it together. These principal ideas could be on the topics of morality, right human conduct, obligations, and duties.

But where exactly do these ‘principal ideas’ derive from? Religion, thinks Tocqueville, is the source.

Tocqueville praises how religion offers society a binding, moral ethic. And this is where his foundationalist insight comes into view. When he writes

33 Ibid., 407.

34 Ibid., 408.

that men have inherited a certain ethical code, he maintains his claim that they are 'very fixed ideas.' He states that "[m]en therefore have an immense interest in making very fixed ideas for themselves about God; their souls, their general duties toward their Creator and those like them."³⁵

These 'general duties' must stem from somewhere; for Tocqueville, they find their source in religion (the 'God' mentioned here). Tocqueville notices that the human mind is limited. One individual alone is incapable of generating communal and binding moral precepts using their own intellect. It is because of this fact that he states that certain "[g]eneral ideas relative to God and human nature are, therefore, among all ideas, the ones most fitting to shield from the habitual action of individual reason and for which there is most to gain and least to lose in recognizing authority."³⁶ Derivative from religion, the ability to act in political life demands some order and stability. The weakness of the "habitual action of individual reason" and the strength needed by political participation require that religious affairs not be just private matters, but must also become public matters. In the absence of this work done by religion, citizens may become passive creatures, those types of creatures antithetical to the maintenance of a healthy democracy.

Tocqueville thinks that common beliefs, specifically in relation to morality, are paramount to the wellbeing of a democratic populace. Morality is understood to be something that is concerned with how individuals interact and treat one another in society. A religious edifice is crucial to

35 Ibid., 417.

36 Ibid., 418.

maintain, for tearing it down brings about dire consequences. “When religion is destroyed in a people,” Tocqueville claims, “doubt takes hold of the highest portions of the intellect and half paralyzes all the others.” Because of this, each individual adopts “confused and changing notions about matters that most interest those life him and himself.”³⁷ Tocqueville follows this by asserting a grave statement, that “one is reduced, like a coward, to not thinking about them at all.”³⁸ “Such a state,” Tocqueville finishes, “cannot fail to enervate souls; it slackens the springs of the will and prepares citizens for servitude.”³⁹ Tocqueville seems to be suggesting that religion is necessary for political liberty. As mentioned before, freedom is guided by religion.

Citizens who don’t have the same moral vocabulary can’t speak to one another; they operate in different moral universes. And if they can’t speak to one another, they can’t deliberate on political issues, let alone even understand the moral dictum they employ. Tocqueville’s argument gestures to us that a united or fixed morality is the basis for freedom. Political freedom rests upon a populace’s faith in their ability to direct their own concerns about social, economic, and public matters. This confidence is stirred by a vision that self-government is a capable, obtainable task, which in turn is brought about by common ideas and beliefs. Thus, the authority that is given to a populace by religion structures the very interactions they

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

have in daily life. Should religion stop taking influence in political life, then individuals are weakened, even frightened. Tocqueville writes:

When authority in the matter of religion no longer exists, nor in the matter of politics, men are soon frightened at the aspect of this limitless independence. This perpetual agitation of all things makes them restive and fatigues them. As everything is moving the world of the intellect, they want at least that all be firm and stable in the material order.⁴⁰

What may we infer from Tocqueville's reasoning? One interpretation may claim that what Tocqueville is arguing here is that there exists a natural desire for limits, stability, and order in the human individual. Tocqueville's concern that the 'agitation of all things' frightens men may demonstrate that individuals do not want complete and absolute freedom. What happens when religion is lost and morality is muddled? Can the power to self-govern still be exercised? It may seem like Tocqueville would respond in a negative light, for if these state of affairs did ensue, then men would find it frightening. Should they occur, I think Tocqueville would comment that man would find alternatives.

From the passages looked at so far, it seems very difficult to separate freedom and religion from one other. "As for me," Tocqueville continues, "I doubt that man can ever support a complete religious independence and an entire political freedom at once."⁴¹ He concludes, "I am brought to think that if he has no faith, he must serve, and if he is free, he must believe."⁴² So long as political freedom—freedom to self-govern—exists, a people must continue

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., 419.

42 Ibid.

to forge common values, beliefs, and principles that underlie what can be called the “social fabric.” Remember that Tocqueville is interested in religion’s utility more so than he cares about its doctrinal content. Nevertheless, Tocqueville mentions that, “[r]eligious peoples are therefore naturally strong in precisely the spot where democratic peoples are weak; this makes very visible how important it is that men keep their religion when becoming equal.”⁴³ What is needed in a democracy is the strength given to it by religion when weakness enters via equality. This strength unifies individuals toward a common view of morality, along with bolstering an atmosphere of trust, stability, and order.

There is yet a third function that religion serves for Tocqueville: it directs our political efforts toward some conception of the good. One conception of the good is the idea that political life ought to be focused on communal deliberation; that is to say that politics must be concerned with upholding certain virtues, values, and norms.⁴⁴ In doing so, political life becomes the search for the good. We turn to this point next.

Function III: Religion as the Source of Mores and The Good

Now that we have talked briefly about the relationship between freedom and religion, let’s turn our attention to the relationship between mores and religion. To see how Tocqueville understands religion, one must look to his view of mores. For in democracy in America, he first treats religion

43 Ibid.

44 This conception is usually contrasted with the liberal notion of politics, which asserts that political life ought to be structured in such a way that it allows individuals to pursue their own vision..

as the most important for mores. Mores may help clarify a vision of the good through facilitating how it should be sought. Mores are defined as the whole moral and intellectual state of a people. They are a people's social and cultural conventions and norms. In effect, mores are the manifestations of the overall character of the American people. Mores can find their source in religion, and it is religion that directs and regulates them.⁴⁵ Tocqueville states:

I understand here the expression *moeurs* in the sense the ancients attached to the word *mores*; not only do I apply it to mores properly so-called, which one could call habits of the heart, but to the different notions that men possess, to the various opinions that are current in their midst, and to the sum of ideas which the habits of the mind are formed.⁴⁶

For democracy to work well, Tocqueville asserts that individuals must develop what he coined the 'art of associating.' This 'art of associating' relies on attachments to small communities, which instill forms of recognition that are indispensable to a well-functioning, healthy democracy. They are what cure the undesirable effects that are unleashed by individualism. Tocqueville states:

When citizens are forced to be occupied with public affairs, they are necessarily drawn from the midst of their individual interests, and from time to time, torn away from the sight of themselves.⁴⁷

Occupation with public affairs create certain small communities, which alternatively are called voluntary associations. They were, for Tocqueville, organizations such as the American Temperance Society, whose purpose was

45 Ibid., 278.

46 Ibid., 275.

47 Ibid., 486.

a moral one: to outlaw the sale and consumption of alcohol. This moral component, as demonstrated by the American Temperance Society, need not be focused solely on individualized, private interest.⁴⁸ By focusing attention away from the individual's own sphere, these voluntary associations connect the individual to something much larger than himself. In practice, this looks like what people do in local politics together, collectively, to solve their own problems without reliance from some outside entity. Thus, political freedom uses voluntary associations to foster some notion of what is best for the political community, some conception of the good:

There is nothing, according to me, that deserves more to attract our regard than the intellectual and moral associations of America ... In order that men remain civilized or become so, the art of associating must be developed and perfected among them in the same ratio as equality of conditions increases.⁴⁹

These associations help civilize men, by perfecting the practice of coming together, reflecting, and acting upon an order of politics. Working together counters despotism, in Tocqueville's estimation, and so these associations are "schools of freedom." They help overcome self-interest. In fact, they may even be called the "schoolhouses of democracy."

Under despotism, in contrast, "each of them, withdrawn and apart, is like a stranger to the destiny of all the others: his children and his particular friends form the whole human species for him; as for dwelling with his fellow

⁴⁸ This does not mean that all associations as such need to have a moral component, but they may, as demonstrated here.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 492.

citizens, he is beside them, but he does not see them ... he exists only in himself and for himself alone.”⁵⁰

This dismal description, painted by Tocqueville, is what happens when unregulated self-interest takes hold. Nevertheless, voluntary associations counter narrow self-interest, by redirecting the self toward the community.

The way in which these voluntary associations manifest themselves in political life shed light on how we understand their place in Tocqueville’s theory of democracy. Tocqueville describes their function in the American people in the following way:

... he defends the growing prosperity of his district, his right to direct affairs within it... all things that ordinarily touch men more than the general interests of the country and the glory of the nation.⁵¹

Notice the autonomy that is given to the local inhabitant of a community. The ability to defend, direct, and shape one’s community is a testament to the state of affairs that is brought out by an atmosphere that cultivates civic participation. It resembles the priority to politics concerned with a conception of the good.

Recall that mores, according to Tocqueville, refer to the attitudes, characteristics, customs, and traditions that define a community. A community builds itself on shared understandings and a common narrative on what right and wrong mean, who the people that make it are, what values should they uphold, and for what reasons so. It was in America that Tocqueville saw this vision of a community played out best. He writes:

50 Ibid., 663.

51 Ibid., 153.

The American has always seen before his eyes order and public prosperity linked to one another and marching in the same step; he does not imagine that they can live separately: he therefore has nothing to forget and will not lose...⁵²

That politics must be concerned with public prosperity is driven by a concern to live not ‘separately,’ but together. It fortifies a politic that is built on the good. For the good to be pursued, individuals must believe that there exists a good to be discovered in the first place. That there is something of value, worth, and usefulness in inquiring about, in the words of Aristotle, the nature of the good life is what Tocqueville sees at work in America. Politics ought to be considered as the pursuit of the good, where the conditions to pursue that good are facilitated by religion. The work that religion does here then is to organize how the good is sought. Because we need shared habits and beliefs to inquire about the good, Tocqueville calls religion the first political institution. It is the foundation for such a vision of politics. It gives citizens the same moral vocabulary to talk to one another, and in doing so, “prevents them from conceiving everything and forbids them to dare everything.”⁵³

Tocqueville’s belief that mores and the ability to practice politics about the good derive from religion have numerous implications for how we think about democracy today. This is where we turn last.

Contemporary Thoughts

52 Ibid., 274.

53 Ibid., 280.

Let us recapitulate the train of Tocqueville's thought as understood with respect to religion and democracy. Tocqueville's theory of democracy—how religion and political freedom go hand in hand—paints our reading of American democracy in the present age with a challenge. Ultimately, there exists no ready-to-go solution we can use to correct the dangers unleashed in a democratic world. One danger that Tocqueville signaled to us was that of rampant individualism. Even today, this worry is massified and codified in an economic system that is committed to free competition and enterprise. I wonder: Would this even be a worry for Tocqueville? Perhaps what he encountered in America was of a similar type like the one we see today. He observes:

I did not encounter a citizen in America so poor that he did not cast a glance of hope and longing on the enjoyments of the rich and whose imagination was not seized in advance by the goods that was obstinately refusing him.⁵⁴

What is seen here is the desire for the 'longing on the enjoyments of the rich.' Moreover, Tocqueville holds that the American mind is set on this material life. Is this a testament of human nature, or is it simply something Tocqueville noticed in his time? He analyzes the ways in which American democracy has fetishized material well-being:

When, on the contrary, ranks are confused and privileges destroyed, when patrimonies are divided and enlightenment and freedom are spread, the longing to acquire well-being presents itself to the imagination of the poor man, and the fear of losing it, to the mind of the rich.⁵⁵

54 Ibid., 507.

55 Ibid.

Tocqueville employs the same 'ranks are confused' diction once again, perhaps as a way to emphasize the undesirable consequences brought about by democracy. According to Tocqueville, "what attaches the heart most keenly is not the peaceful possession of a precious object, but the imperfectly satisfied desire to possess it and the incessant fear of losing it."⁵⁶ What Tocqueville's insight may tell us is that the desire for material-well being is driven by possession and fear. How one may extend this reasoning here in the modern age is by examining the economic realities that fortify and intensify these conditions. Maybe this isn't a problem, maybe it is. In any case, it is well worth studying how Tocqueville understood this, and how he would understand this today.

Another application of Tocqueville's theory may be in looking at how the good is to be pursued in an age where the right is prioritized. Given the basic principle that roots Western liberalism, which asserts that the state be neutral to different conceptions of the good, how can a conception of the good be pursued? The liberal state maintains that it must not enforce any particular conception of the good. Instead, it leaves space for all conceptions to compete against one another. It holds that there is value in allowing each person to actualize their conception of the good insofar as they let others do so too. Doesn't this conception of politics sound like a conception of the good itself?

56 Ibid., 506

To illustrate this point further, consider the ways in which our political institutions attempt to be non-biased toward any one conception of the good, but utterly fail in doing so. One example seen recently has been the legalization of same-sex marriage. In legalizing same-sex marriage, the law, in some way, has defined what marriage is.⁵⁷ How, one may be warranted in asking, can this be neutral? Liberalism wants to merely set up the rules for pursuing the good. It wants to do this. But it does not.

Imposing the values of some people on others might be a serious worry, but the answer to that worry is not to allow a state to decide which values can be considered 'neutral.' To presuppose that any value is neutral is to make a normative claim about it. The solution, Tocqueville might remind us, is to deliberate on issues pertaining to the good as central parts of our political lives—that this is what political life is all about. Tocqueville notes that this ability to deliberate stemmed from religion, but must it? We might run into another worry, because conflict is surely expected from those who find their conception of the good in religion and those who do not.

Another question we may raise: Where does religion work today in an age when secularism is mainstream? What a political community is and what it stands for must be a—perhaps the—major concern of a democratic people. Even Tocqueville's assessment of democracy may prompt us toward a care for the social fabric, which at any rate will have to turn us toward religion. It doesn't necessarily need to, but Tocqueville thinks it must. But with the rise

⁵⁷ For surely that is one purpose the law serves: it holds a normative claim about political life.

of secularism—in an age where disbelief certainly reigns in the political world—where can one go?

Tocqueville is quick to remind us that democratic peoples gravitate toward skepticism and rationalism. He writes:

One can foresee that democratic peoples will not readily believe in divine missions, that they will willingly laugh at new prophets, and that they will want to find the principal arbiter of their beliefs within the limit of humanity, not beyond it.⁵⁸

What this statement suggests is the skeptic-minded attitude natural to the democratic man. What democracy does to religion is to render it less important, because democratic men want to lean on their own knowledge. Democrats are not as inclined to place their trust in human authority.

But maybe religion is not necessary for democracy to function. Given the three functions I outlined in this paper, might we think there is something else that can mediate the political and the moral world, ground freedom, and give rise to mores and the good? It seems quite difficult to conceive of something that could—but maybe there is something else that can do religion's work in a democratic community. What could this be?

Conclusion⁵⁹

A politics grounded in the multifarious experiences of its people—lives that are shared with common purpose, obligations and duties considered to be absolutely integral, and with the culture of well-being and mutual understanding—can only be realized once a comprehensive vision of the

58 Ibid., 408.

59 Finally, here is where I synthesize Tocqueville's thought and mine.

good is sought. This view departs from the traditional liberal conception of politics, where the right is prioritized. That the liberal view of politics we all inhabit depends for its sustainability and nourishment upon habits, unchosen obligations, duties, and allegiance: the local community, the weight of religion, and the structure offered by the family. These are only a few of the many factors that the liberal view of politics neglects and fails to consider when building its account.

In his *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville begins with a descriptive account of the American people—their society, culture, and their psychological mannerisms—and extracts from it their mores and their habits of everyday life. These become for Tocqueville the dynamic building blocks of democratic life for the Americans. Chief among these principles is the desire for political freedom, which is to deliberate and to inquire about what is the best way to live. Tocqueville knows that this desire to participate in political life must rest on solid foundations—about the cultivation of community, self-sacrifice, and ultimately freedom. I argued that religion can support that foundation, by identifying its three functions in a healthy democracy. Surely, Tocqueville’s insight here can be applied in the modern age. What Tocqueville offers us, above all, is an analysis about who we are as political beings—namely, that we are fragile political creatures. Indeed, a theory of democracy that takes that into account is what makes it healthy.