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Tocqueville on Doubt and the Demands of Democratic Citizenship

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Abstract

Tocqueville on Doubt and the Demands of Democratic Citizenship

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Tocqueville's view of the relationship of doubt to democracy is an important and underexplored aspect of *Democracy in America*. Illuminating it not only deepens our grasp of his thought, but also adds to broader theoretical debates about political psychology. I deepen our understanding of this theme by elaborating why exactly the democratic social state produces in people the sort of skeptical doubt characteristic of the Cartesian approach to philosophy. I also enumerate what factors in the democratic social state and in human nature set a boundary on the extent to which the exertions of the individual intellect can achieve knowledge. Additionally I draw together different sections of *Democracy in America* to show how democratic people's tendency toward this kind of thinking poses serious risks for self-government if left unmediated. Religion, which Tocqueville holds out as the key to restraining that doubt, has seen its authority wane in the time since he wrote. Nonetheless, I argue that other remarks Tocqueville makes in *Democracy in America* suggest that a robust conception of individual rights can provide a new source of intellectual authority for political and moral debate that is resistant to doubt's corrosive power.

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I. Introduction

The sort of knowledge that provides the firmest foundation for an enduring political order has been a topic of enduring debate in the history of political thought. Some argue that politics functions best through deference to the putative wisdom contained in custom, tradition, and faith. Others counter that reliance on rational first principles arrived at without deference to any authority is best. René Descartes is an important originator of the latter approach. Although Descartes never composed a systematic treatment of political themes, his epistemology of rational first principles arrived at through doubting everything leads quite naturally to a politics of rational first principles arrived at through questioning all received sources of authority.¹ This can be discerned when, at the beginning of his statement of philosophic method, he observes that “there is less perfection in works composed of several portions, and carried out by the hands of various masters, than in those on which one [master] has worked.” Descartes’ inclusion among illustration of this principle of the single prudent legislator who gives laws to a people makes it clear that he is aware of the fact that the principle has political implications.²

Descartes’ advocacy of rules of reason arrived at through the application of relentless skepticism to the beliefs handed down by custom, tradition, and faith would come

¹ Descartes is often understood as counseling political conformity, given that the first rule of the moral code he sets for himself “for the time being” required him to “obey the laws and customs of my country, adhering constantly to the religion to the religion in which by God’s grace I had been instructed since childhood.” Nevertheless, in addition to the provisional nature of this rule, it must also be noted that later in the same paragraph he states that “in the corrupt state of our manners there are few people who desire to say all that they believe.” *Discourse on the Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. David Weissman. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 15-16. For more on Descartes as a political thinker, see Richard Kennington, “Rene Descartes,” in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

² Descartes 8-9.

to be the norm in the political sphere with the spread of the Enlightenment. Some thinkers, though, have questioned the extent to which an intellectual framework built upon thoroughgoing doubt of received opinions can produce healthy politics, and democratic politics specifically. I contend that insight into the relationship between doubt and democratic politics can be found by examining the work of Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville famously opens Volume II of *Democracy in America* with the observation that Americans are Cartesian without having ever read Descartes because they live in accordance with the principle that one ought to “seek on one’s own and in oneself alone the reason for things.”³ Elaborating his broader understanding of the relationship of doubt to democracy, however, requires careful attention to varied and sometimes seemingly disparate sections of his work. Such an inquiry brings to light Tocqueville’s two distinctive contributions to this issue. First, Tocqueville argues that doubt in modern democracy derives not just from the doctrines of philosophers like Descartes, but also arises from the nature of democracy itself. Second, he shows how doubt in democracy generates both positive and negative phenomena—and the latter can be harnessed to mediate the former.

Specifically, consideration of key sections in *Democracy in America* demonstrates Tocqueville’s view that, left unmediated, democratic peoples’ rejection of all sources of knowledge other than the individual intellect eventually inculcates among citizens a pervasive doubt about the possibility of *any* certain knowledge concerning matters of the highest importance. He argues that most individuals lack the ability to transcend such

³Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York, NY: The Library of America, 2004), 483.

doubt.⁴ Furthermore, his comments on this theme reveal that widespread doubt poses three potential risks for the well-being of society. First, it stimulates people to think solely in terms of their material interest, rather than higher individual ends or the well-being of the entire community. Second, it undermines the possibility of meaningful public debate by eroding personal conviction. Third, it weakens people's belief in their own agency—a notion without which self-government cannot function.

These difficulties may seem practically irresolvable given that the doubt that engenders them is itself a consequence of the democratic equality of conditions. However, examination of other passages of *Democracy in America* nonetheless indicates that a means to ameliorating the negative effects of doubt lies in harnessing other tendencies latent within democracy. Notably, doubt itself plays a key role in the emergence of several of these tendencies, which shows that Tocqueville recognizes the salutary as well as the destructive potential of doubt. Specifically, Tocqueville suggests that the notion of individual rights can provide some basis for moral and political conviction in an environment otherwise stripped of authoritative beliefs. The notion of rights also provides a check on the untrammelled pursuit of self-interest. Tocqueville identifies certain aspects of democracy that help render the idea of rights less susceptible than old ideals to the corrosive power of doubt. These include the poetic imagination democracy gives rise to,

⁴ Tocqueville's correspondence reveals his personal experience with this theme. In a letter written near the end of his life, he describes delving into his father's library of French *philosophes* and ancient authors as a teen, an inquiry that he reports left him seized by an "all-embracing doubt." He analogizes the experience to living through an earthquake. Although he notes that "strong passions" turned him away from this despair, he nonetheless acknowledges that these feelings he experienced in his youth periodically take hold of him again (André Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, trans. Lydia Davis with Robert Hemenway (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1998), 61-64).

the compassion democracy engenders, and the tendency toward general ideas that it promotes. Furthermore, citizens' participation in associations offers a corrective to certain limitations of the faith in individual rights. Associations also provide a bulwark against the loss of faith in individual agency that emerges in democratic times.

To recapitulate, Tocqueville's reflections on doubt in democracy provide a worthy object of investigation for three reasons. First, he advances an account of doubt and democracy in which each phenomenon, rather than being wholly distinct, are deeply intertwined. Second, he demonstrates how, despite this interrelation, doubt holds the potential to generate consequences that threaten democracy's foundations. Third, he shows that other aspects of democracy as he understands it, including among them some positive outgrowths of doubt, offer means of countering doubt's centrifugal effects.

Although Tocqueville's work has generated a wealth of scholarship, relatively little of it focuses on his understanding of doubt, or the relationship between doubt and democracy.⁵ Some scholarship that has broached this topic include articles by L. Joseph Hebert,⁶ and Laurence D. Cooper,⁷ as well as Peter Lawler's book *The Restless Mind*.⁸ This essay builds on these authors' work to illuminate an under-examined aspect of Tocqueville's thought. Although not explicitly focused on doubt, Hebert's attempt to

⁵ Also of note is the fact that the two most recent translations of *Democracy in America* contain no index entries for the word "doubt."

⁶ L. Joseph Hebert, Jr., "Individualism and Intellectual Liberty in Tocqueville and Descartes," *The Journal of Politics* 69, no. 2 (May 2007).

⁷ Laurence D. Cooper, "Every Man a Socrates? Tocqueville and the Conceit of Modernity," *American Political Thought* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2012).

⁸ Peter Augustine Lawler, *The Restless Mind: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Origin and Perpetuation of Human Liberty* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1993).

define what Tocqueville understands to be the intellectual habits of Americans lays important groundwork for this present study. His observation that “rational individualism” paradoxically leads to intellectual conformism and the diminishment of meaningful intellectual liberty is an important insight into how Tocqueville understands the connection between the social and intellectual world.⁹ Nonetheless, he leaves the wider political consequences of Americans’ insistence on “seek[ing] on one’s own and in oneself alone the reason for things” largely unexplored. He also devotes little attention to exploring the ways in which, for Tocqueville, distinguishing features of the democratic social state generate and reinforce intellectual doubt. I attempt to unpack these themes in the present inquiry, with the objective of showing why, for Tocqueville, doubt and democracy are inextricably intertwined.

While Hebert focuses primarily on the intellectual habits of Americans as described by Tocqueville, Cooper recognizes that Tocqueville thinks Americans’ tendency toward “Cartesianism” in intellectual matters is influenced by their social state. However, Cooper proceeds to downplay the role of social conditions in producing this mindset.” He poses the question of whether Americans are Cartesian because of Descartes, or whether they have become so for reasons arising from the democratic social state. He states that Tocqueville at first seems to indicate the latter, but then later “suggests that Descartes and other philosophers were in fact behind this revolution in consciousness.”¹⁰ It is true that Tocqueville appears to advance both these accounts. Rushing to declare intellectual forces

⁹ Hebert 525.

¹⁰ Cooper 218.

as determinative of social ones in Tocqueville's analysis, though, obscures the extent to which he reveals the reciprocal influence of each upon the other. Indeed, his work illuminates the complexities of socio-political life, and draws attention to instances in which one can observe "cause and effect engender[ing] one another in an endless circle."¹¹

Lawler's attempt in *The Restless Mind* to illuminate the understating of the human condition that is at the foundation of Tocqueville's concept of liberty contains an extended discussion of Tocqueville's relationship to Pascal. This theme is crucial for grasping Tocqueville's understanding of the limits of human knowledge. I build on Lawler's analysis by connecting the treatment of Pascal to Tocqueville's remarks about doubt and politics.

¹¹ Tocqueville 597.

II. The Origins of Doubt in Democracy

Tocqueville's brief but richly suggestive remarks about certainty and the progress of the human intellect in a passage of Volume I of *Democracy in America* provide a fitting place to begin this inquiry into the sources and effects of doubt in democracy, because this section sheds light on his understanding of the relation between doubt and the democratic social state. Near the conclusion of a discussion of press freedom, Tocqueville refashions a maxim of Pascal's, asserting that "deep convictions are found only at the two ends [of knowledge], and...in the middle lies doubt." He then proceeds to enumerate "three distinct and often successive states of human intelligence." The "deep conviction" of the first state of human intelligence is thoroughly unreflective, and can fall prey to doubt when faced with objections. Indeed, doubt itself constitutes the second state. In the third and final state, a person lays his or her doubts to rest and believes once more. Such an individual "no longer clings to a truth plucked at random from the darkness but stares truth in the face and marches directly toward its light."¹²

While this initial formulation situates the states of intelligence within the minds of individuals, Tocqueville proceeds to map two of these three states onto societies. He indicates that when a free press, and by implication the general free exchange of ideas, encounters people in the state of unreflective conviction, it does not immediately overturn their tendency to believe uncritically, but instead "changes the object of their uncritical belief from one day to the next." Over time, "nearly the whole range of new ideas is

¹² Tocqueville 213.

explored,” and “doubt and universal mistrust” seep in. Tocqueville quickly dashes any hope that an entire people can ascend beyond here. He declares bluntly that most individuals will remain in either credulous conviction or pervasive doubt, while only a few will attain “the reflective, self-assured conviction that grows out of knowledge and emerges from the agitation of doubt itself.”¹³ Furthermore, and most worryingly, Tocqueville asserts that, in centuries of doubt, since social theories are contested one after another, “anyone who once adheres to one of them holds on to it not so much because he is sure that it is good as because he is not sure that anything else is better.” This rendition suggests that, possessing no decisive reason for holding fast to their own views, and doubting that the truth can be known at all, modern democratic individuals are all the less susceptible to the *reasons* offered for contrary views.¹⁴ Tocqueville also posits that, when opinions are endlessly contested, people turn to instinct and material interest as guides instead, “because these are far plainer to see, easier to grasp, and by nature more permanent than opinions.”¹⁵ In other words, by attenuating the convictions of democratic people, doubt makes them both less receptive to persuasion and more inclined to act on the basis of interest and instinct rather than higher ideals.

With this summary statement about the effects of doubt on individuals and society laid out, it is necessary now to step back and examine in greater detail what Tocqueville has to say about the origins and consequences of the popularization of doubt. A good place

¹³ Tocqueville 214.

¹⁴ Hebert 528.

¹⁵ Tocqueville 214.

to begin this task is with a more in-depth investigation of Tocqueville's remarks about the philosophic method of the Americans in the opening chapter of Volume II of *Democracy in America*. This section expands on the previously discussed one by further illuminating what Tocqueville understands to be the intellectual state of people in democracy. Here he declares that, in most activities of the mind, Americans rely principally on the unaided effort of their own individual reason—as previously indicated, they seek on their own and in themselves alone “the reason for things.”¹⁶ He connects this “philosophical method of Americans” with intellectual currents in Europe by noting that “America is one of the countries in which Descartes is studied least but his precepts are respected most.” Indeed, Americans respect Descartes' maxims despite never having read them because their social state “leaves them perfectly disposed to adopt them.”¹⁷ Thus, people in democracy rely on individual reason as the primary source of knowledge *not* through conscious choice but rather because their way of life makes it seem like the only valid path to understanding. What exactly this means requires some elaboration.

By way of explaining the claim that Americans' social state inclines them to accept Descartes' maxims, Tocqueville states that the philosophic impulse to submit an ever-expanding range of beliefs to the scrutiny of each individual could not have been widely adopted until equality became the dominant principle in political laws and social life.¹⁸ Indeed, democracy's elimination of “any incontestable mark of greatness or superiority”

¹⁶ Tocqueville 483.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Tocqueville 485.

forces individuals to rely on their own reason rather than another's intelligence because one's individual reason presents "the most obvious and accessible source of truth" now that traditional sources of authority have been dethroned. Additionally, in Tocqueville's telling, the democratic principle of equality "destroys not just confidence in particular individuals, but also the readiness to believe anyone solely on the basis of his word."¹⁹ It should come as no surprise, then, that Americans, Tocqueville's leading example of a people in the democratic social state, "are always looking for the weak side of any doctrine deemed authoritative."²⁰ In fact, Americans' resourcefulness reinforces this mental habit. Tocqueville observes that Americans see they can overcome "all the petty difficulties of practical life on their own," which leads them to "readily conclude that everything in the world can be explained and that nothing surpasses the limits of intelligence."²¹ Thus, socio-political norms and material facts combine to suggest to people in democracy that the exercise of the individual intellect provides the only reliable path to knowledge.

Though Americans may possess great confidence in the capability of their intellects, Tocqueville nonetheless argues that there are clear limits to this "popular Cartesianism" that democracy engenders. Intriguingly, many of these limits arise from democracy itself. For example, Tocqueville argues in a chapter on the status of science in America that democratic peoples have a tendency to focus themselves on practical applications of reason while almost completely ignoring "the essentially theoretical and

¹⁹ Tocqueville 484.

²⁰ Tocqueville 522.

²¹ Tocqueville 484.

abstract aspects of human knowledge.”²² In his telling, multiple causes account for this. Primary among them is the fact that meditation is necessary for the cultivation of higher sciences, but nothing is less suited to mediation than “the circumstances of democratic society.” This is because in such a society everyone restlessly searches after wealth or power, which leaves little time for calm repose.²³ Tocqueville earlier acknowledges that this very restlessness can impel people in a democratic social state to pursue “the labors of the mind.” He indicates, however, that they will pursue such endeavors not for their perceived intrinsic merit but rather as means to the aforementioned ends of wealth and power, as well as fame.²⁴

Tocqueville clarifies this point by distinguishing between a desire to use knowledge and a “pure desire to know.” In his view, it is this latter drive, the “ardent, proud, disinterested love of what is true” which impels humans to the “abstract sources of truth” from which fundamental ideas are drawn.²⁵ While aristocracy’s fixed inequality of conditions pushes individuals to seek these “abstract sources of truth,” the democratic social state’s fluidity encourages them to pursue only science’s immediate and useful applications.²⁶ The widespread drive toward worldly gain, then, turns people’s attention away from higher realms of thought.

In addition to giving greater emphasis to lower levels of intellectual achievement than higher ones, the democratic social state fosters habits of thinking contrary to those

²² Tocqueville 523.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Tocqueville 521.

²⁵ Tocqueville 525.

²⁶ Tocqueville 527.

requisite for great mental endeavors. This is evident in Tocqueville's declaration that "when everyone is active, there is a general tendency to place too much value on quickness of mind and superficial concepts, and too little on deeper but slower exertions of the intellect."²⁷ Furthermore, according to Tocqueville, one of the distinctive characteristics of democratic centuries is a taste for easy successes and instant gratification—a quality that he makes a point of noting can be found in peoples' intellectual pursuits.²⁸ Somewhat paradoxically, democratic man's curiosity is both insatiable and easily satisfied; he is intent on knowing a lot quickly rather than a few things well. As Tocqueville puts it, "habitual inattention is a major defect of the democratic mind."²⁹ His observation that "the recklessness and turnover of people [in democracy] disturbs and distracts the mind without stimulating or elevating it" reinforces the notion that the democratic social state saps the human intellect of its capacity to focus.³⁰ Thus, both the fluidity of the social world, as well as the widespread propensity to prefer quick rewards in mental endeavors, impedes peoples' ascent to the "abstract sources of truth."

While many of the limitations on the power of the individual intellect to yield knowledge are attributable to the time-bound phenomenon of democracy, others limitations that Tocqueville identifies derive from certain fixed aspects of human nature. In particular, he argues that how easy or hard it is for people to live without working sets an inevitable limit to their intellectual progress, given that such progress requires

²⁷ Tocqueville 524.

²⁸ Tocqueville 498.

²⁹ Tocqueville 718

³⁰ Tocqueville 524.

substantial time and effort. As he puts it, “it is as difficult to conceive of a society in which everyone is highly enlightened as of a state in which every citizen is wealthy; the two difficulties are related.”³¹ Tocqueville reinforces the importance of sustained leisure for the heights of intellectual attainment when he asserts that “only minds truly emancipated from everyday preoccupations...can break through to necessary truths, and then only with a great investment of time and care.”³² In most epochs, the majority of people attain emancipation from “everyday preoccupations” rarely, if at all. This would seem to be especially the case in democracy, given Tocqueville’s suggestion that, in this type of regime, people’s minds are universally preoccupied with bodily needs and comforts.³³

Significantly, the examples of “necessary truths” that Tocqueville argues ordinary people lack the capability to reach include conceptions of God, his relations with humanity, the nature of the soul, and “man’s duties to his fellow man.” People possess an immense interest in developing clear notions about these themes, he argues, because doubt about them would leave all human conduct vulnerable to chance and condemn people to “disorder and impotence.”³⁴ It is for this reason that Tocqueville argues that “general ideas pertaining to God and human nature” are most appropriately shielded from the action of individual reason.”³⁵ This passage clearly indicates that the chief defect of democratic peoples’ reliance on individual reason as a means to knowledge is that most people are unable to

³¹ Tocqueville 226.

³² Tocqueville 501.

³³ Tocqueville 617.

³⁴ Tocqueville 501.

³⁵ Tocqueville 502.

reach the firm convictions about metaphysical and moral matters that they need to live lives.

Thus, to borrow Hebert's formulation, Tocqueville's critique of treating the individual intellect as the primary source of knowledge "rests in part on his view of how difficult it is to philosophize well.³⁶ Specifically, it falsely presupposes that each of us is capable of deciding for himself all that interests us, and even that an individual can "prove to himself all the truths of which he daily avails himself."³⁷ An accomplishment of this degree lies beyond the reach of even the greatest philosophers, who must "adopt many beliefs without discussing them so as to delve more deeply into the small number [they have] singled out for scrutiny."³⁸ Strikingly, in Tocqueville's assessment, even philosophers such as these, who have broken through to "necessary truths," are still "almost always plagued by uncertainties."³⁹

Hebert seizes on the "almost" in this quotation, and argues that for Tocqueville, significant knowledge is possible. One of the passages he cites in support of this is Tocqueville's statement that "in the midst of the apparent diversity of human things, it is not impossible to find a small number of basic facts from which all others derive."⁴⁰ Tocqueville makes this comment, though, in light of the similarity he observes between the political institutions of the Native Americans and those of the early Europeans as described by Tacitus. Thus, the "significant knowledge" hinted at here is knowledge about

³⁶ Hebert 527.

³⁷ Tocqueville 489.

³⁸ Tocqueville 490.

³⁹ Tocqueville 501.

⁴⁰ Tocqueville 379.

the general principles underlying the development of human society. While such insight surely possesses great value, it nonetheless falls short of the sort of knowledge about metaphysical matters that Tocqueville seems to think are of the highest importance for human beings. Indeed, Hebert's claim about Tocqueville's belief in humans' ability to acquire significant knowledge is further belied elsewhere.

Furthermore, in the passage immediately following the one about philosophers being "almost always plagued with uncertainties" that Hebert cites, Tocqueville charges that such thinkers have so far been able to discover "only a small number of *contradictory notions*."⁴¹ This passage prompts us to wonder to what extent Tocqueville thinks humans can grasp enduring, abstract truths at all, and what significance the limitations of the powers of our reason have for politics. In order to begin to answer this question, it is necessary to consider Tocqueville's subtle engagement with Pascal.

⁴¹ Tocqueville 501, emphasis mine.

III. Tocqueville and Pascal on Politics and the Limits of Human Reason

Some clarity on Tocqueville's view about the limits of the human mind, and the political consequences of those limits, can be gained by considering in greater detail his allusion to Pascal that was discussed at the beginning of section II of this paper. As several scholars have noted, Pascal's writings had a major influence on Tocqueville's thought.⁴² In the fragment to which Tocqueville alludes here, Pascal holds that the development of the thought of the human individual is a circle, the end of which is a sort of return to the original condition of ignorance. But this end is not identical to the "natural ignorance" in which "all men find themselves at birth." Rather, it is a "learned ignorance that is conscious of itself."⁴³ While Tocqueville holds that doubt characterizes the middle state of human intellectual development, Pascal posits that vain pretension to knowledge lies between the "natural" and "learned" ignorance that he sees as existing at successive extremes. As Lawler puts it, for Pascal, the mind's development is error or vanity becoming conscious of itself.⁴⁴

This "learned ignorance" that Pascal attributes to the farthest extreme of human knowledge does not appear incompatible with the "deep conviction" that Tocqueville says lies at the same extreme. After all, one could possess a deep, reflection-wrought conviction

⁴² See Luis Diez del Corral, *El pensamiento político de Tocqueville : Formación intelectual y ambiente histórico* (Madrid : Alianza Editorial, 1989) ; André Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, trans. Lydia Davis with Robert Hemenway (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1998); and Lawler 1993, cited in full at note 7.

⁴³ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. W. Trotter (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1958), fr 327. Subsequent references to this source will be to fragment numbers as given in this edition, which follows the Brunschvicg numbering.

⁴⁴ Lawler 75.

concerning one's own ignorance. Here it is also relevant to recall Tocqueville's contention that "it is not only necessary but desirable" that even philosophers believe some things on faith.⁴⁵ Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that both Tocqueville and Pascal think that reason by itself cannot resolve all of the most profound questions that concern human beings.

In light of his assessment of the limitations of the human intellect, Tocqueville advances a moderate critique of unmediated rationalism on account of its centrifugal effects on the political and social world. As indicated previously, he urges that "general ideas pertaining to God and human nature" be shielded from the skeptical questioning of individual reason.⁴⁶ As he puts it, "there must always be a place in the intellectual and moral world where authority exists...individual independence may be great or small, but it cannot be boundless."⁴⁷ However, he does not want to eliminate applications of skeptical rationalism in politics, but only to circumscribe them.

Pascal, by contrast, draws a different conclusion from his assessment of the limitations of the human intellect. He rejects rationalism in politics completely, holding that the attempt to return to "natural and fundamental laws of the state" is "a game certain to result in the loss of all."⁴⁸ As he sees it, the reason for this lies in humans' self-love. Civil war, which he calls the greatest evil, will surely result if we try to establish a rational state that rewards merit, because all will insist that they are deserving.⁴⁹ Indeed, self-love

⁴⁵ Tocqueville 490.

⁴⁶ Tocqueville 502.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Fr. 284.

⁴⁹ Fr. 313

makes humans hate the truth of their imperfection.⁵⁰ In his critique of rationalism in politics, Pascal even goes so far as to assert that “the caprice of men has so many vagaries that there is no such [natural] law” common to all humanity.⁵¹

A few paragraphs later, he revises this formulation slightly, conceding that there are no doubt natural laws, but insists that “good reason once corrupted”—that is, corrupted by original sin—“has corrupted all.” Indeed, in his view, reason cannot discover what “is just in itself.” Given the fact of reason’s weakness, he suggests that the surest thing to do is to affirm established custom, which he argues “creates the whole of equity.”⁵² Pascal does believe that we can grasp some measure of justice, to the extent that God wills to reveal it to us.⁵³ What he doubts is that man can realize a just political order on the basis of this knowledge, given the difficulty of making might obey right.⁵⁴ Reason may reveal to us the good we ought to pursue and the evil we ought to avoid, but, as Pascal puts it, “it is power that makes opinion.”⁵⁵ Submission to the authority of convention is Pascal’s solution to the inability of reason to ascertain rules of justice that command universal assent.⁵⁶ Given all this, it should come as no surprise that Pascal holds a relatively low view of political life, referring to it at one point as a “lunatic asylum” dominated by “madmen.”⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Fr. 100

⁵¹ Fr. 294

⁵² Fr. 294; see also fr. 309 and fr. 312.

⁵³ Fr. 375.

⁵⁴ Fr. 298, 299.

⁵⁵ Fr. 303.

⁵⁶ Virgil Martin Nemoianu, "Pascal on Skepticism and Order" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2002), 142.

⁵⁷ Fr. 331.

Though Tocqueville adopts much of Pascal's criticism of rationalism, he rejects his solution. Like Pascal, Tocqueville seems to believe that there is a conception of justice by which human order could be judged and found deficient.⁵⁸ But, unlike Pascal, this does not lead him to reject politics completely. Similar to Pascal, Tocqueville evinces little faith in utopian schemes that seek to replace "complex traditional customs" with "simple, elementary rules...deduced from reason and natural law."⁵⁹ But he does not follow Pascal in calling for a suspension of one's doubt and skeptical questioning of those customs. He refers to the "injustices" of aristocratic societies, which makes it clear that he sees something positive in doubt's undoing of hierarchies sanctioned by tradition.⁶⁰ It is not just that he thinks Pascal's approach is morally deficient, though. Rather, Tocqueville likely regards Pascal's submission to established convention as ultimately futile, given that "the gradual development of equality of conditions" that characterizes democracy is a "providential fact,"⁶¹ and this equality, in his view, cannot fail to destroy what is purely conventional in thought.⁶² As indicated previously, for Tocqueville the social and the intellectual are mutually reinforcing. The progress of equality in the socio-political sphere makes it virtually impossible to completely expel doubt and skeptical questioning.

Yet, Tocqueville elsewhere asserts that it is both necessary and desirable for some authority to exist in the intellectual world.⁶³ In light of most people's inability to use their

⁵⁸ Tocqueville 833.

⁵⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 128.

⁶⁰ Tocqueville 824.

⁶¹ Tocqueville 6

⁶² Tocqueville 551.

⁶³ Tocqueville 490.

own individual reason to attain strong beliefs about God, the soul, and human beings' duties to each other, Tocqueville argues that authoritative beliefs pertaining to religion are most desirable of all. Indeed, religions that provide clear notions about God and human nature, and do not seek to inhibit the growth of the mind in other realms, impose what he terms a "salutary discipline on the intellect."⁶⁴ In his view, a large part of the advantage of this discipline is that it enables self-government. Indeed, he expresses doubt about whether humans can ever tolerate both complete religious independence and total political liberty.⁶⁵ For Tocqueville, then, submission to authority must play some role in human life precisely so that it does not play *every* role.⁶⁶ His objective is to qualify and criticize the general tendency of Enlightenment rationalism, not oppose it outright.

⁶⁴ Tocqueville 501-502.

⁶⁵ Tocqueville 503.

⁶⁶ Nemoianu 211.

IV. Doubt and Religion

Although Tocqueville is full of praise for the religion of Americans in *Democracy in America*, it is worth exploring at some length what he thinks would be the consequences of doubt eroding religious faith. After all, his insistence on the need for received authority in the intellectual realm seems somewhat at odds with his statement that the development of equality of conditions tends to undermine what is conventional in the realm of thought. Given that religion undoubtedly imposes far less of a “salutary discipline on the intellect” in the United States today than when Tocqueville visited, this line of inquiry is more than just idle speculation. Rather, it provides some insight into how Tocqueville would account for our present situation.

In Volume 1 of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville boldly asserts that “unbelief is an accident; faith alone is the permanent condition of humankind.”⁶⁷ A few pages later, though, he qualifies this statement by labelling schism and indifference as “two great dangers [that] threaten the existence of religion.”⁶⁸ Indifference, he indicates, arises when “negative doctrines” assert the falsity of one religion without arguing for the truth of any other. Although he doesn’t explicitly say so, these “negative doctrines” sound like the sort of ideas that might emerge into a culture’s intellectual landscape when doubt is unbounded and all received sources of authority are submitted to the scrutiny of the individual intellect. As has already been shown, this is precisely the direction towards which democracy tends. The notion of doubt as a force that pulls individuals toward ruin is vividly present in

⁶⁷ Tocqueville 342

⁶⁸ Tocqueville 345

Tocqueville's evocative description of religious indifference taking hold. He declares that "swept along by an imperceptible current which they lack the courage to fight yet to which they surrender with regret, they abandon the faith they love in order to follow doubt that leads to despair."⁶⁹

Later, in Volume Two, Tocqueville expands on this idea, declaring that when a people's religion is destroyed, "doubt takes hold of the highest regions of the intellect and half paralyzes all the others...such a state inevitably enervates the soul; it weakens the springs of the will and prepares citizens for servitude."⁷⁰ The connection between doubt's erosion of religion on one hand, and the decline in the possibility of meaningful political deliberation on the other, is apparent in Tocqueville's declaration that individuals who have lost their religion "defend their opinions badly or give them up all together."⁷¹ This passage suggests that when skepticism undermines religious faith, that doubt diffuses into the realm of moral and political standards more generally. This statement also provides additional insight into how exactly doubt that saps faith in God might incline people toward servitude. By weakening people's convictions, such doubt discourages individuals from considering themselves capable of and in need of persuading and being persuaded. This shift limits the possibility of robust public debate, and therefore poses a threat to the realization of self-government. Paradoxically, the unrestrained doubt that causes this danger to self-government is in Tocqueville's telling latent within democracy itself.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Tocqueville 502-503.

⁷¹ Tocqueville 502.

Though the growth of doubt may weaken religion and undermine the possibility of public debate that democracy requires, Tocqueville nonetheless suggests that doubt will not do away with all authority in the intellectual realm. As noted previously, he categorically asserts that there must be a place where authority exists in this domain.”⁷² One might wonder how this proposition can possibly be true if the democratic trend toward greater reliance on individual reason as a guide to truth undermines intellectual and moral sources of authority. In Tocqueville’s understanding, however, it is precisely this reliance on individual reason that establishes the power of the majority over thought. In yet another paradox, unbounded intellectual freedom can lead to herd-like conformity. According to Tocqueville, in democracy, “men have no faith in one another because of their similarity, but that same similarity gives them almost unlimited confidence in the judgment of the public.”⁷³ Indeed, “not only is common opinion the only guide left to individual reason in democratic nations, but its power is there is infinitely greater than it is elsewhere.”⁷⁴ He makes this claim more vivid by positing that, in times of equality, “faith in common opinion will become a sort of religion, with the majority as its prophet.”⁷⁵ Such phrasing suggests that this ersatz religion of majority opinion may take the place of genuine religions when doubt enervates those belief systems. Crucially, though, this “faith” would not carry with it the benefits that Tocqueville attributes to genuine religion because it would not provide answers to “primordial questions” about God and human nature.

⁷² Tocqueville 490

⁷³ Tocqueville 491.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Tocqueville 492.

The consequences of the substitution of the religion of common opinion for genuine religion, though, becomes clear when we consider why exactly genuine religion imposes a salutary check on democracy. A particularly relevant reason to consider here is the fact that religion, by establishing the sovereignty of God, places a limit on the otherwise untrammelled sovereignty of the people. Paradoxically, Tocqueville regards this constraint on popular sovereignty as crucial for self-government. He reaches this conclusion from the observation that people “become frightened in the face of unlimited independence.” To assuage this fear, they surrender their liberty and subject themselves to a master.⁷⁶ Thus, complete freedom is unbearable, and leads naturally to despotism. Religion assuages this anxiety, and, by circumscribing freedom, makes free government possible. As noted previously, Tocqueville wants authority to reign in some spheres of human life so that it does not rule over every domain.

Tocqueville also indicates that religion provides an important moral restraint on democracy. This is evident in his statement that the strong presence of religion in America is the reason why no one there has seen fit to advance the claim that “everything is permitted in the interest of society.”⁷⁷ In this remark, we can clearly discern the connection that Tocqueville draws between the absence of religion and social corruption. When the corrosive power of doubt loosens the moral inhibitions that religion imposes, it risks generating a situation in which no norm remains to check the majority’s pursuit of what it regards as its own good.

⁷⁶ Tocqueville 503.

⁷⁷ Tocqueville 337.

In summary, the democratic social state produces a popularization of the Enlightenment philosophers' unwillingness to defer to received opinions, in which all citizens rely on their own individual reason. But the limitations of the power of individual reason, both natural and historically contingent, prevent people from attaining firm consensus about the sorts of moral and metaphysical issues that they need to live their lives. Given this limitation of skeptical rationalism, Tocqueville asserts that dogmatic beliefs are necessary and desirable, and dogmatic beliefs in matters of religion are most desirable of all. He argues that this restraint on intellectual freedom makes political freedom possible.

Tocqueville makes clear, though, that when indifference causes religion's hold on people to loosen, then doubt seizes the higher realms of their mind, and saps the strength of their convictions. Furthermore, doubt about religious claims engenders a broad skepticism about moral principles in general. This imperils the sort of public debate crucial to self-government, and leaves little to restrain the pursuit of interest. Additionally, once the answers that religion provides to fundamental existential questions are thrown into doubt, and tumult reigns in the intellectual sphere, people become "anxious and fatigued." Their desire for firmness and stability makes them receptive to servitude.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Tocqueville 503.

V. Mediating Doubt and Renewing the Possibility of Politics

At first glance, it is not immediately apparent what forms of moral and intellectual authority could possibly provide the same sort of salutary restraint that religion does. After all, these restraints seem to be largely matters of convention, and democracy undermines existing social conventions while “preventing men from settling easily on new ones.”⁷⁹ Further reflection, though, reveals that the means of checking this excess of democracy lies at least in part in harnessing a particular idea that democracy itself engenders. Indeed, Tocqueville states that equality suggests a number of ideas that would not otherwise occur to the human mind.⁸⁰ One such idea that democracy suggests is universal rights. Indeed, that democracy puts the idea of rights within everyone’s reach is in Tocqueville’s assessment one of democracy’s greatest merits.⁸¹ In a stirring passage that is worth quoting at length, he provides insight into the importance of rights:

Is it not obvious to you that belief is everywhere giving way to reasoning and sentiment to calculation? If, in the midst of this universal upheaval, you do not succeed in linking the idea of rights to the personal interest that stands out as the only fixed point in the human heart, what means of governing the world will be left to you other than fear?⁸²

Based on this declaration, it seems that rights could provide some normative foundation to replace the traditional sources of value that democratic doubt eroded, thereby providing a basis for debate, persuasion, and action. Before becoming too enamored with this solution, though, we ought to ask what exactly about the “idea of rights” will lead doubt-wracked

⁷⁹ Tocqueville 690.

⁸⁰ Tocqueville 514.

⁸¹ Tocqueville 273.

⁸² Tocqueville 274.

individuals in a democratic social state to hold to it persistently rather than discarding it along with so many other debunked doctrines. Formulating an answer to this question requires that we look to the style of poetry democracy gives rise to, the compassion democracy engenders, and the tendency toward general ideas that it promotes. Doubt plays a role in unleashing all three of these phenomena, which shows that Tocqueville recognizes the positive as well as negative consequences of doubt's spread, and that his discussion of this points the way toward how its salutary effects can be harnessed to moderate the negative ones.

A fitting place to begin this discussion is with Tocqueville's discussion of the sources of poetry in different societies. He defines poetry as "the search for and depiction of the ideal" and states that the aim of poetry is "not to represent what is true, but to embellish it."⁸³ It might seem odd to claim that an aesthetic enterprise like poetry could explain the solidity of a moral-political concept like universal rights. The poetry of democracy, though, highlights the tendencies of the idealizing imagination in the democratic soul more generally, and therefore provides insights into its normative dimensionality.⁸⁴ Doubt's central role here is apparent in Tocqueville's contention that, in democratic centuries, doubt pulls the poet's imagination back down to earth and confines him to the visible and real world."⁸⁵ Indeed, equality "does not destroy the imagination, but it does limit it, forcing it to hew close to the earth as it flies."⁸⁶ With these words,

⁸³ Tocqueville 554.

⁸⁴ Steven Bilakovics, *Democracy without Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 60.

⁸⁵ Tocqueville 555.

⁸⁶ Tocqueville 702.

Tocqueville indicates that the objects of the idealizing imagination of democratic people cease to be gods or heroes, as was the case in aristocratic societies, and become things more within the realm of day-to-day experience. Impelled by this reorientation of imagination, poets will first turn to “inanimate nature,” although he notes that this is only a “passing phase.” In the long run, he declares, democracy will “deflect the imagination from everything external to man in order to focus it exclusively on man himself.”⁸⁷

Democratic poetry thus concerns itself not with supernatural beings or exemplary individuals, but rather humans considered in the abstract. As Tocqueville puts it, “man taken apart from time and country and set before nature and God” will be the main, if not the only focus of poetry.⁸⁸ Strikingly, Tocqueville goes so far as to argue that nothing lends itself more to portrayal of the ideal than attempting to sound the profundities of humanity’s “immaterial nature.”⁸⁹ In his understanding, then, doubt pulls the poetic imagination down to earth, but it also inspires it to plumb greater depths, and to take as its objects those that embody the universal qualities of humanity, rather than that which exceeds humanity. This illuminates positive aspects of doubt that stand in contrast to its negative consequences that have been enumerated up to this point. Indeed, it seems that for Tocqueville it is *precisely* the irreducibly uncertain or enigmatic character of humanity’s “immaterial nature” that makes it fit to be a persistent object of democratic imagination. This is evident in his claim

⁸⁷ Tocqueville 556.

⁸⁸ Tocqueville 560.

⁸⁹ Tocqueville 559.

that if human nature were completely obscure or totally clear, it would not be suitable for poetry.⁹⁰

If we pursue the earlier suggestion that poetry reveals some aspect of a culture's normative dimensionality, then it is readily apparent that this shift in the imagination away from the exemplary few and towards the essence of the human being is naturally conducive to the notion of universal rights. One modern interpreter of Tocqueville points to this fact when he notes that the self—at once universal and unique—takes the place of the noble aristocrat as the focal point of poetical imaginings.⁹¹ Democratic poetry thus buttresses the idea of individual rights by idealizing the abstract and universal individual, who is the bearer of those rights.

Crucially, the “general compassion for all members of the human species” that Tocqueville says people in democratic centuries exhibit fortifies democratic poetry in its support for universal rights. The reason for this, in his view, is that their sensibility “extends to a wider range of objects.” There is no misery that a democratic individual “cannot readily conceive,” Tocqueville argues, because his imagination readily puts him in the place of the one who is in pain. His pity is “tinged with something personal, causing him to suffer when the body of his fellow man is torn to pieces”⁹² The compassion characteristic of democratic peoples, then, is not a conscious inclination toward philanthropy but a heightened capacity for empathetic response.

⁹⁰ Tocqueville 560.

⁹¹ Bilakovics 62.

⁹² Tocqueville 658.

Elsewhere, Tocqueville connects the source of this compassion with the universalizing tendency also present in the democratic mind, and which seems to provide a crucial precondition for the idea of rights. A person in a democratic country, he asserts, sees only people more or less like himself, so he cannot think of any part of the human species without enlarging and expanding his thought until it encompasses the whole of humanity. In the mind of such an individual, “any truth applicable to himself seems applicable in the same way to all his fellow citizens.” Tocqueville proceeds to suggest that this recognition of similarity opens up the mind to generalizations like natural rights.⁹³ One could even posit a connection between these two trends, to the extent that the generalizing abstraction and the identifying emotion obey the same impulse. That is to say, through the general idea of rights, one identifies each human being with every other human being. Similarly, through compassion, one identifies one’s own self with any other human being.⁹⁴ In this way, compassion for humanity and the idea of rights reinforce each other.

While the universalizing tendency of the democratic imagination is conducive to the establishment of individual rights as a new source of intellectual authority for moral and political discourse, it also bears responsibility for a limitation that the idea of rights face in fulfillment of this role. Accounting for this propensity, Tocqueville notes that, if one repudiates all received tradition in order to seek one’s way by the light of individual reason alone, the resultant opinions will be based on conceptions of human nature, which

⁹³ Tocqueville 496.

⁹⁴ Manent 49.

inevitably yields a large number of general notions.⁹⁵ A few pages earlier, though, he made clear that general ideas attest not to the strength of the human intellect, but to its insufficiency, for in nature “no two beings are exactly alike.”⁹⁶ In a chapter on how democracy changes language, he expands on this idea, demonstrating how this tendency can produce negative consequences. According to Tocqueville, the passion for general ideas manifests itself in language through the constant use of generic terms and abstract words. In his view, a principal defect of this is that it can lead to obscurity and vagueness of thought and speech. As he puts it, such terms “make the expression more rapid and the idea less clear.”⁹⁷

Strikingly, Tocqueville goes on to assert that the indeterminate character of these generic, abstract words holds particular charm for individuals in democratic countries because such people are “almost always wracked by doubt.” As he puts it, they “often have vacillating thoughts,” so they “need very broad expressions to contain them.”⁹⁸ This hints at a serious limitation of rights as a new source of intellectual authority and basis for moral and political deliberation for democratic people. Rights appear particularly vulnerable to being invoked in an imprecise and nebulous way,⁹⁹ which would limit their utility as sources of authority to appeal to in political debate. Individuals might deploy such terms as rhetorical weapons while possessing only a minimal consensus on what they meant. A

⁹⁵ Tocqueville 497.

⁹⁶ Tocqueville 494.

⁹⁷ Tocqueville 553.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Tocqueville himself invokes rights at multiple points in *Democracy in America*, but provides few concrete examples of what rights he has in mind.

slide towards excessive vagueness in the idea of rights could even have the effect of reinforcing the skepticism of normative authority already present among democratic people.

Beyond this limitation of rights, another difficulty with the democratic imagination's zeal for general ideas is that, taken to an extreme, it risks undermining the notion of human agency.¹⁰⁰ This is hinted at in Tocqueville's discussion of the tendencies of historians in aristocracy and democracy. He observes that in aristocratic times, people naturally believed that the activities of the multitude must always be traced back to the specific deed of an individual. By contrast, in democratic times, "when all citizens are independent of one another and each of them is weak...individuals seem to have absolutely no power over the masses." Furthermore, society seems to operate on its own through the "free and spontaneous cooperation" of all.¹⁰¹ Tocqueville adds that this stimulates the mind to search for "the general reason that could have struck so many intellects at once and simultaneously reoriented them all."¹⁰² In seeking to resolve this problem, one is drawn to the belief that human behavior "is not voluntary and that societies are unwittingly obedient to a superior force, which dominates them."¹⁰³ The exit of the aristocratic lord from the world stage thus lays the groundwork for explaining human action in terms of vast, unseen, and impersonal imperatives that seem nearly irresistible.¹⁰⁴ Although not explicitly mentioned here, doubt is nonetheless an implicit theme in this

¹⁰⁰ Bilakovics 65.

¹⁰¹ Tocqueville 569.

¹⁰² Tocqueville 570.

¹⁰³ Tocqueville 571.

¹⁰⁴ Bilakovics 66.

passage, to the extent that the absence of individual influences in democracy and the democratic imagination's propensity to general ideas prompts individuals to doubt whether they possess any real control over their destinies. A weakened belief in human agency obviously poses a profound threat to the prospect of realizing freedom through self-government.

One element of life in a democratic age offers a potential counter to this erosion of the belief in individual agency, as well as bulwark against the language of rights slipping into indeterminacy. That element is the practice of associating with one's fellows for a common purpose. In Tocqueville's view, this constitutes the freedom most natural to human beings, after the freedom to act alone.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, in his understanding, this "most natural freedom" possesses unique importance. He strikingly declares that in democratic nations, "associations must take the place of the powerful private individuals that equality has eliminated."¹⁰⁶ What exactly Tocqueville means by this, however, requires a bit of unpacking.

It is fitting to begin this task by providing a more complete picture of the role that associations fulfill. That, in turn, requires saying a bit about how democracy shapes relations among people. According to Tocqueville, democracy disposes each citizen to "cut himself off from the mass of his fellow men and withdraw into the circle of family and friends," leaving the larger society to "take care of itself."¹⁰⁷ While aristocracy "linked all

¹⁰⁵ Tocqueville 220.

¹⁰⁶ Tocqueville 598.

¹⁰⁷ Tocqueville 585.

citizens together in a long chain,” democracy “breaks the chain and severs the links.”¹⁰⁸ In this way, it “drives kin closer together while at the same time driving citizens further apart.”¹⁰⁹ Taken in conjunction with Tocqueville’s preceding remark that democracy “relaxes social bonds but tightens natural ones,”¹¹⁰ this suggests that politics and social life are not wholly natural, and democracy is in some sense anti-political. Thus, the mechanism by which the links of the chain of social life are re-forged must in some way be artificial, and contain some aspect of aristocracy. And in fact, it is in exactly these terms that he describes associations, with a particular emphasis on political associations.

While democracy leads each citizen “back to himself,”¹¹¹ a political association “draws a multitude of individuals out of themselves simultaneously.” Though those individuals may differ in any number of ways, “the association brings them together...having met once, they can find each other again.”¹¹² As Tocqueville makes clear, the value of this contact is potentially enormous. It is via political associations, he declares, “that Americans of all walks of life, all casts of mind, and all ages...see and speak to one another” and perhaps “come to a common understanding.”¹¹³ One scholar elucidates the importance of this fact by noting that in political associations, actual people, equal and similar but with differences, have to reach an understanding of each other by means of exchange and debate rather than through presuming some more basic or abstract sameness

¹⁰⁸ Tocqueville 586.

¹⁰⁹ Tocqueville 691.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Tocqueville 587.

¹¹² Tocqueville 605.

¹¹³ Tocqueville 608.

of identity or interest. These associations, then, teach citizens how to accept the possibility of persuasion.¹¹⁴ Thus, a crucial foundation for self-government is fortified. In fact, although the remarks quoted above focus on political associations, Tocqueville gives no reason why they would not apply equally to civil associations, which he observes are far more numerous in the United States.¹¹⁵

Indeed, a few pages later, Tocqueville offers further examples of the salutary effects of *all* associations, both civil and political. In the midst of a discussion associations' importance, Tocqueville declares that "feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart expands, and the human spirit develops only through the reciprocal action of human beings on one another." He immediately goes on to note, though, that such action "is almost nonexistent in democratic countries" and so "must be created *artificially*."¹¹⁶ Only associations, he says, are up to this task. He underlines this unique competency by averring that a government cannot by itself sustain and revitalize the circulation of feelings and ideas in a great nation.¹¹⁷

By arguing that associations sustain, revitalize, and renew the circulation of ideas, Tocqueville subtly shows how they possess the potential to keep in check the corrosive doubt that democracy engenders. It requires little stretch of the imagination to suppose that one of those ideas that associations give life to is that of rights. Furthermore, given that associations involve the reciprocal action of specific human beings on one another for

¹¹⁴ Bilakovics 120.

¹¹⁵ Tocqueville 595.

¹¹⁶ Tocqueville 598, emphasis mine.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

particular goals, associations could also provide an element of concreteness to the idea of rights, thereby mediating its tendency toward excessive abstraction and vagueness. It follows from this that a robust engagement in associations, both civil and political, serves to elevate and sustain rights as a source of normative authority in democratic countries. This new “dogmatic belief” restrains the doubt that democracy’s elevation of the individual intellect unleashes, and it also imposes a check on the pursuit of material interest. Furthermore, by realizing a common goal through the pooling of individual effort, associations also counteract the tendency of democratic people to doubt their own agency.

These, then, are the ways that associations take the place of the powerful private individuals that the equality of conditions has eliminated. They re-forged links in the chain of society by bringing people into contact with one another. They introduce and sustain ideas, most crucially moral and intellectual ideas like universal rights. Finally, by combining peoples’ energy to attain ends greater goods than what most isolated individuals could achieve, they affirm democratic citizens’ belief in their own capacity to shape their destiny. In this manner, associations provide a salutary restraint on doubt and make self-government possible.

VI. Conclusion

In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville shows that doubt in democracy arises not only from the doctrines of Enlightenment philosophers like Descartes, but also from distinguishing features of what Tocqueville calls the democratic social state. Specifically, democracy's emphasis on equality in social and political life leads individuals to reject received sources of intellectual authority, opting instead to seek on their own and in themselves alone the reason for things. However, Tocqueville makes clear that there are nonetheless limits on the extent to which this popularized skeptical rationalism can generate knowledge. Some of those limits arise from the very same democratic social state that generates the doubt. Others, though, arise from certain fixed aspects of human nature.

The biggest drawback of democratic peoples' reliance on individual reason as a means to knowledge is that most people lack the ability to reach the solid convictions about God and human nature that they need to live their lives well. In light of this fact, Tocqueville argues that dogmatic beliefs in religion are necessary and desirable. In his view, such dogmatic beliefs constitute a modest restraint on intellectual liberty necessary to preserve political liberty.

Left unmediated, though, democratic people's tendency to skepticism and doubt poses serious risks for liberty. First, it leaves no standard for individual conduct besides material interest, which attenuates beliefs about other, higher ends. Second, it erodes personal convictions, undermining the basis of the public debate necessary for political freedom. Third, it weakens belief in individual agency, a notion that self-government

cannot function without. Thus, in the absence of some limit to restrain it, democratic doubt sets the stage for servitude.

Nonetheless, other remarks Tocqueville makes in *Democracy in America* suggest that a robust conception of individual rights can provide a new source of intellectual authority for political and moral debate that is resistant to doubt's corrosive power. The reasons for the potential solidity of the belief in rights reside in the tendency of the poetic imagination in democracy to idealize the abstract individual, who is the bearer of those rights, as well as the general compassion that people in democracy exhibit. The practice of associations in civil and political life helps prevent the conceptualization of universal rights from becoming overly abstract, and also reaffirms democratic peoples' beliefs in their own agency.

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