



Opening the Democratic Heart: Interest, Charity, and Well-Being in the Political Thought of Alexis de Tocqueville

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*Opening the Democratic Heart: Interest, Charity, and Well-Being in the Political Thought of
Alexis de Tocqueville*

A dissertation presented

by

Sarah H. Gustafson

to

The Department of Government

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Abstract

Alexis de Tocqueville's concept of *intérêt bien entendu*, as developed in *Democracy in America*, is among his most notable concepts. However, it is also among his most ambiguous, with interpretations of its meaning ranging from civic republican to utilitarian to Christian, among others. It is ironic that a concept that roughly translates to interest rightly understood remains so varyingly understood. However, that may explain why his theory of civil society also remains poorly understood, despite Tocqueville's renown as a theorist of civil society.

This dissertation examines Tocqueville's often neglected notes on *intérêt bien entendu* to highlight his theorization of it in light of what he understood as forms of Christian virtue and love. In the process, it reconstructs his account of human nature; interrogates his understandings of utility and virtue, and honor and virtue; and draws attention to his style and goals as "democracy's spiritual director." It then considers what this reading of *intérêt bien entendu* clarifies about soft despotism and its effects on democratic institutions and democratic character. The often-unremarked fact that *intérêt bien entendu* disappears under soft despotism corresponds to the characterization of soft despotism as atomizing, atomistic, and personally individualistic. It also reflects soft despotism's structural weakening of the spaces and practices of a free, participatory democratic politics and of the civic and social spaces where moral virtues are

practiced, habituated, and elevated through the “reciprocal action of men upon one another.”

“There is no vice of the human heart that pleases [despotism] as much as egoism: a despot easily pardons the governed for not loving him, provided that they do not love each other.”

Finally, it turns to Tocqueville’s writings on charity, social reform, and public policy in the *Memoirs on Pauperism* and other texts to underline the relationship between *intérêt bien entendu* and charity and to nuance his account of soft despotism with the help of his writings on the democratic welfare state. Informed by the Christian political economy of his day, Tocqueville’s wrestling with the challenges posed by pauperism and industrialization demonstrates sensitivity to the distinction between ideal theory and what is prudent or possible. It likewise reflects a desire to balance the just demands of solidarity with the vulnerable against the variable political, social, and moral consequences of different forms of public charity. Tocqueville readily admits the necessity of a limited welfare state, or “Christian charity applied to politics.” However, a flourishing democratic social state requires association, the activities of which include pursuing goals associations set themselves and the distinctive moral formation that occurs in the space between the State and the family through fellowship, mutual dependence, and roles and relationships both chosen and given.

Following this thread through Tocqueville’s thought helps us situate him in a specific French moral tradition and in discussions of his day about religion’s bearing on liberal political economy and democratic politics. It also suggests Tocqueville may be a resource for contemporary discussions of the anthropological, theological, and religious underpinnings of welfare policy, liberalism, theories of social justice and solidarity, and accounts of human flourishing.

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Acknowledgements and Dedication

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Friends are not necessary for mere survival, but they are necessary in a life worth living. I owe a profound debt to the friends who made my years of graduate school such a joy. This includes especially the “Drinklings.” Iron sharpens iron. It is fitting therefore, both because of its topic and my gratitude, that this dissertation is dedicated to my friends.

Introduction

Although political economy today strikes me as materialistic in all its efforts, I would like the journal to emphasize the more immaterial aspects of this science; I would like it to bring in ideas and feelings of morality as elements of prosperity and happiness; and I would like it to try to rehabilitate spiritualism in politics and to make spiritualism popular by driving home its utility.¹

To take on the subject of Alexis de Tocqueville is to take on a man and a body of work that has become so canonical within the study of American politics and so familiar as to – unfortunately – often become trite, cliché, pedestrian. Everyone feels they know Tocqueville. The brilliant young mind whose travels to America in the early 1830s and whose theorization of the democratic social state in *Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840) secured his immortality was attentive not only to his ideas themselves but also to what was required to convey them to his potential audience given his political, intellectual, and social context. Building from his conviction that democracy was a providential fact and that democracy as a fact shaped not just the structure of political organization but the mind and the heart, Tocqueville painted a tableau of democratic life in its most intimate details as well as in its grand sweeps. This deliberately non-philosophical style of political philosophy and his captivating prose are among the reasons why he continues to enchant new readers. These are also often among the reasons why, in William Galston’s words, “Tocqueville is more often quoted than understood.”² One might suggest with a bit of good humor that it should become an official requirement of candidates for President of the

¹Alexis de Tocqueville to Louis de Kergolay, September 28, 1834, in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Lettres choisies*, (Paris : Gallimard, 2005), 308.

² William Galston, “Civil society and the ‘Art of Association’”, *Journal of Democracy* 11, 1 (2000): 64-70.

United States that they misquote Tocqueville, for it has become a custom strong enough to seem like a law.

Born in 1805 to an aristocratic Norman family, of ancient feudal nobility on his father's side and of more recent nobility on his mother's, Alexis Charles Henri Clérel, comte de Tocqueville, studied law in Paris and Versailles as a young man before embarking on a voyage to America to examine its penitentiary system for the benefit of the newly established July Monarchy.³ He would later confess that the penitentiary system report was nothing other than a pretext, a passport, for him and his lifelong friend and intellectual collaborator Gustave de Beaumont, to see America and to escape French domestic politics. From May 1831 to February 1832, Tocqueville and Beaumont traveled through Jacksonian America, beginning in New York, before proceeding to the wilderness of Michigan, Canada, Boston, Philadelphia, Ohio, New Orleans, and Washington, DC. Their subsequent report on the penitentiary systems solidified their status as public intellectuals but it was the overwhelming success of the publication of *Democracy in America* Volume I in 1835 that truly made Tocqueville's name. Following its publication, Tocqueville became demonstrably more politically active, participating in local Norman politics and eventually running for (twice, succeeding on the second effort) and winning election to the Chamber of Deputies in 1839. A second volume of *Democracy in America* followed in 1840, after which Tocqueville threw himself into the practical activity of political life, until the Revolution of 1848, the establishment of the Second Republic, and the coup d'état

³ There are a few notable biographies, intellectual biographies, and historical accounts of Tocqueville and his travels. See: Hugh Brogan, *Alexis de Tocqueville: A Life*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Leo Damrosch, *Tocqueville's Discovery of America*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010); Andre Jardin, *Tocqueville*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1988); Jeremy Jennings, *Travels with Tocqueville Beyond America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2023); George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville in America*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1938); Olivier Zunz, *The Man Who Understood Democracy: The Life of Alexis de Tocqueville*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, soon Emperor Napoleon III, in December 1851, put an end to his public political career. During the last decade of his life, Tocqueville remained active in social reform circles, particularly Catholic ones, and returned to the study of politics. He published his second magnum opus, *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, in 1856, before passing away of complications from tuberculosis at the age of 53.

That he belongs to both America and France – and in Françoise Mélonio’s estimation, is with Montesquieu “the only thinker common to both American and French cultural heritages and the one who explored the disparity between American and French democracy most profoundly”; that he was an aristocrat who became democratic by reason; that he was a Frenchman who married an Englishwoman; and that for long periods of his life he felt estranged from the Catholic faith and yet died a Catholic in good standing; these together make his work complex and subtle and the work required to understand him demanding. His is an “unusual position” that many commentators and scholars have described as a “strange liberalism” or an “aristocratic liberalism,” a position of marginality and liminality “between two worlds,” his work a “conceptual Atlantic Ocean” and “site of transition and exchange” between different “intellectual universes.”⁴ Tocqueville himself described encountering and instructing democracy through his new science of politics like trying to navigate a rushing river: “... placed in the middle of a rapid river, we obstinately fix our eyes on some debris that we will still see on the bank, while the current carries us away and pushes us backwards toward the abyss.”⁵ But to develop Mélonio’s

⁴ See Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, trans. Beth G. Raps (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998). See also Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Alan Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schliefer, 4 vols., bilingual edition (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), 16. Henceforth DA.

oceanic metaphor further, the clarity and calm at the surface of his theory, from which many gain their superficial impressions of Tocqueville, should not detract from the profundity and greatness below, even if it often does in fact. It is a tribute to Tocqueville's astuteness as philosopher and writer that those who skim the surface feel nevertheless that they know him well and deeply.

This is not a study of Tocqueville's reception. Such ground clearing though is necessary because it reinforces that the waters into which one travels by studying Tocqueville are sometimes crystalline, sometimes quite murky, and far more mysterious sometimes than can meet the eye. This study aims to add to what can be known about the depths of Tocqueville's theory by examining one of his most notable and central concepts, *intérêt bien entendu*. Though *intérêt bien entendu* is a concept that has received no scant attention in Tocqueville literature, it is remarkable the degree the wide array of interpretations of it. It remains poorly understood. The different ways in which it is translated attest to the difficulty in grasping what Arthur Goldhammer thought Tocqueville had left "ambiguous, I think deliberately."⁶ Often translated as self-interest rightly or well understood or enlightened self-interest, I choose to leave it in French in this dissertation as *intérêt bien entendu* in part to emphasize the disunity of interpretations and how the work of translation both clarifies and narrows the definition or received meanings of terms. As will be articulated more fully in Chapter 1, conceiving of *intérêt bien entendu* as *self-interest* certainly captures the selfish orientations of the democratic mind as it judges and pursues its interests, that is, what it understands to be good. But *intérêt bien entendu* is not phenomenologically *self-centered*. Rather, it helps individuals rise above egotism to bring the

⁶ Arthur Goldhammer, "Tocqueville, Associations, and the Law of 1834," *Historical Reflections*, 35, 3 (2009): 74-84.

individual into communion and community with others. Retaining *intérêt bien entendu* in French conveys that more clearly.

Chapter 1 advances an understanding of *intérêt bien entendu* through the lens of Christian moral virtue and what Tocqueville describes as the “love of God that makes men virtuous.” While a scholar would be justified in advancing such an argument on the basis of observed common patterns of thought – as in, a “Christian virtue ethics reading of Tocqueville’s *intérêt bien entendu*” – examining *intérêt bien entendu* in this way is in fact justified by Tocqueville’s own writings both published and unpublished, especially his notes on *Democracy*. This is not the first project to take this tack on this concept, though it will be the first to stress the set of Tocqueville’s notes on *intérêt bien entendu* that tie the concept to Christian virtue. Tocqueville’s understanding of religion is an area far too diverse, rich, even crowded, to canvas here, but excellent work by Alan Kahan, Joshua Mitchell, Peter Augustine Lawler, Lucien Jaume, Dana Jalbert Stauffer, Jean Yarbrough, and others have raised the question of the religious and theological resonances, dimensions, upshots, and derivations of Tocqueville’s account of *intérêt bien entendu*. The scholarly consensus is clear that, in the words of Jon Elster, Tocqueville “situates himself within a long French moral tradition” that was essentially downstream of and shaped by Christian theology and that was especially concerned with the morality of self-interest and the relationship between pride, self-interest, and love, or charity.⁷ The degree to which scholars should take this intellectual and theological context as fundamental or in some way determinative, and what doing so would mean for Tocqueville’s political theory is a rather more interesting, unresolved, and potentially disquieting question. It is a question that Tocqueville’s

⁷ Jon Elster, *Alexis de Tocqueville: The First Social Scientist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 52.

readers who emphasize his specifically Christian theological inheritances, for example Mitchell and Lawler, have repeatedly addressed. Among Tocqueville's Straussian readers, his translator Harvey Mansfield has commented that Tocqueville's liberalism is a liberalism with soul.⁸ Yarbrough, even more forcefully, has argued that we ought to place a "more metaphysically and theologically grounded understanding of the soul at the *center* of Tocqueville's political project."⁹ But as Chapter 1 will make clear, to try to understand or frame *intérêt bien entendu* in light of Tocqueville's understanding of Christian moral virtue cuts against many traditional understandings of Tocqueville and therefore is bound to raise many questions. This dissertation will not respond to or anticipate all of them; nor does it aim to discredit with any finality the other possible interpretations of a notably slippery and ambiguous concept.¹⁰ Nor, by recalling the ambiguity of *intérêt bien entendu* does it intend to suggest that Tocqueville writes or argues in a manner that is accidental, lazy, or non-philosophical. On the contrary, Tocqueville was an exacting stylist. He was extremely concerned how his work may or may not be received, and aware of the limitations posed to authors of controlling the meaning of a text. Rather, by examining and framing *intérêt bien entendu* in this way, we discover a Tocqueville who, having taken up a theme in Christian theology and early modern French moralism, interprets, presents, and applies that theme in the context of the democratic social state and in a way suited for the democratic intellect and heart, with the aim of encouraging the best possible democratic social state and the best possible democratic well-being. From this opens several further rich avenues to

⁸ Harvey C. Mansfield, "Tocqueville on Religion and Liberty," *American Political Thought* 5 (2016): 250-275.

⁹ Jean M. Yarbrough, "Tocqueville on the Needs of the Soul," *Perspectives on Political Science*, 47, 3 (2018): 123-141. Yarbrough suggests Mansfield undersells and "[makes] short work of the distinctively religious hope for immortality".

¹⁰ As we will see, to suggest a religious or spiritual orientation to *intérêt bien entendu* is not to say it is not political. The spillover and porousness effects make it political, though it need not be political in origin.

explore: the moral character of democratic peoples; the dangers of soft despotism for that moral character and for human relationships; and the ways in which the democratic social state might, for better and for worse, try to promote well-being, including through welfare policy and other forms of public policy incentives.

In approaching the subject, I take as a given two core elements of Tocqueville's thought that Joshua Mitchell has explained well and so I will here rely on him. The first is the circularity (and therefore complexity) of cause and effect: "For Tocqueville, there is no such thing as unilinear in the social world. One factor may be predominantly a cause, it is true; but it is then also affected by what it causes."¹¹ The "mutual causation" which appears throughout Tocqueville "makes Tocqueville's thinking so subtle" as to be often and readily misunderstood. This is especially true of his writings on associations and on religion and political life. The second is what Mitchell calls "spillover effects."¹² Its name he draws from *Democracy* I, Part II, Chapter 6. Even were its name not to have been directly inspired by the text, it would accurately convey a distinctive component of Tocqueville's thought about the domains and modes of human life and the insufficiency of the language of public and private to understand him. In Mitchell's words,

...[Tocqueville's] concern again and again is with the character formed by involvement in one institutional form and the beneficent effects such character formation has in another domain. The spillover effect is a key entrée into the inner citadel of Tocqueville's thinking about character formation...

One of Tocqueville's important contributions was to have incorporated into social and political theory, perhaps more than anyone else, the insight that while the spheres of life may be distinct, habits of thinking in one realm spill over onto another without regard to the borders that logic [or politics] might wish to impose. ...

The character formed in one arena of life affects the dispositions, capacities, and thoughts exhibited in another. While there may be a logical separation between the two spheres,

¹¹ Joshua Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 18. Henceforth *Fragility*.

¹² *Ibid*, 22-28.

family and polity, there is a real-life spillover; habits of thought produced in one domain dispose persons to behave in certain ways in another domain. There are, on this view, prepolitical foundations of politics.¹³

This dynamic describes the relationship between family and polity, between family and association, between religion and polity, and infinite other interactions besides. In a friendly critique of Mitchell, I suggest that spillover fails to capture the entirety of the phenomenon. I add the idea of porousness; it is not that for Tocqueville, one is formed and filled up at home, and those virtues spill out into the public sphere. Rather the movement of the self between the domains of life is an essential part of human moral formation and also of political life. This is consonant with human experience; whatever juridical separations or theoretical distinctions we can recognize between domains of life, these domains are permeable because the human person moves between them, his moral character formed by that movement and mutual influence as much as by the mores proper to each separate domain.

A few words about the title. The title of this dissertation is “Opening the Democratic Heart.” It is inspired by Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*. Its inspiring the title is not meant to suggest sustained influence or ongoing engagement with Bloom throughout this dissertation. (You will see there is none.) However, such a title would make little sense if it did not speak to Tocqueville. Bloom’s language of openness shares something with Tocqueville in its evocative, poetic style, as well as its substance. Take for example his claim

Actually openness results in American conformism—out there in the rest of the world is a drab diversity that teaches only that values are relative, whereas here we can create all the life-styles we want. Our openness means we do not need others. Thus what is advertised as a great opening is a great closing.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid, 23-24.

¹⁴ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 25th. Ed., (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012), 14.

Bloom applies this paradoxical nature of openness and closedness, expansion and contraction, to the philosophical and academic life of universities and their students, highlighting that forms of openness can mask, be built upon, or justify forms of close-mindedness or isolation no less important to notice and no less influential for going unappreciated. The American mind is closed because it is too open and as a result, “we do not need others.” This is a claim that goes beyond the classroom. Bloom noted, in Tocquevillian fashion, the ways in which this fake openness manifested across the domains of life, including love and self-centeredness. Tocqueville in fact makes an appearance in this section. “Students these days are pleasant, friendly and, if not great-souled, at least not particularly mean-spirited. Their primary preoccupation is themselves, understood in the narrowest sense,” he wrote.¹⁵ How does this become political, according to Bloom?

Tocqueville describes the tip of the iceberg of advanced egalitarianism when he discusses the difficulty that a man without family lands, or a family tradition for whose continuation he is responsible, will have in avoiding individualism and seeing himself as an integral part of a past and a future, rather than as an anonymous atom in a merely changing continuum. The modern economic principle that private vice makes public virtue has penetrated all aspects of daily life in such a way that there seems to be no reason to be a conscious part of civic existence. As Saul Bellow has put it, public virtue is a kind of ghost town into which anyone can move and declare himself sheriff.

Country, religion, family, ideas of civilization, all the sentimental and historical forces that stood between cosmic infinity and the individual, providing some notion of a place within the whole, have been rationalized and have lost their compelling force. America is experienced not as a common project but as a framework within which people are only individuals, where they are left alone. To the extent that there is a project, it is to put those who are said to be disadvantaged in a position to live as they please too. ...

If there is an inherent political impulse in man, it is certainly being frustrated. But this impulse has already been so attenuated by modernity that it is hardly experienced.

¹⁵ Ibid, 56.

Students may indeed feel a sense of impotence, a sense that they have little or no influence over the collective life, but essentially they live comfortably within the administrative state that has replaced politics.¹⁶

Bloom goes on to note that the “inevitable individualism, endemic to our regime,” is accompanied by the decline of the family as the locus of the most natural and most immediate care and concerns, above all the “love of one’s own” that reflects natural interest and that then contributes to love of country and love of the common good. The growth of the welfare state too alleviates the duties of care at a subsidiary level. This produces parents and children who are “not coldhearted; the substance of their interests merely lies elsewhere.”¹⁷ Such Americans are not only not lukewarm; they are not interested in the things that are *close to them*, be it their families or politics. Instead they are “spiritually unclad, unconnected, isolated, with no inherited or unconditional connection with anything or anyone.”¹⁸ All of this, Bloom contends, leads to a “psychology of separateness” which foreshadows disaster: “the possibility of separation is already the fact of separation.”¹⁹ This manifests in an unwillingness or inability to conceive of bonds of mutual dependence, such as in marriage, as life-giving constraints rather than as oppressive ties to be liberalized or destroyed. In sum, a specific sort of closing of the American mind occurs alongside a closing of the American heart to those things to which our hearts should be the most open. We become, in Bloom’s words, “social solitaires,” existing as atomized individuals within political life, bizarrely echoing the liberal state of nature from within an administered, comfortable, quotidian existence.

¹⁶ Ibid, 57-58.

¹⁷ Ibid, 59.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 88.

Tocqueville's classic statements of democratic individualism describe just such a closing, not of the American mind, but of the American heart. "Thus, not only does democracy make each man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants from him and separates him from his contemporaries; it constantly leads him back toward himself alone and threatens finally to enclose him entirely within the solitude of his own heart."²⁰ By contrast, as he put it in an equally classic and immensely clarifying statement of the effects of *intérêt bien entendu* through association, "Sentiments and ideas are renewed, the heart grows larger, and the human mind develops only by the reciprocal action of men on each other."²¹ Man's natural inclination to political and social life notwithstanding, the heart must be continually reopened. This is not just a matter of importance for the decent drapery of life. It is also a matter of political life itself, for despotism thrives where love, sacrifice, and devotion to one another, to intermediary goods, and to the political common good are not:

Despotism, which, by its nature, is fearful, sees in the isolation of men the most certain guarantee of its own duration, and it ordinarily puts all its efforts into isolating them. There is no vice of the human heart that pleases it as much as egoism: a despot easily pardons the governed for not loving him, provided that they do not love each other. He does not ask them to help him lead the State; it is enough that they do not claim to run it themselves. Those who claim to unite their efforts in order to create common prosperity, he calls unruly and restless spirits; and, changing the natural meaning of words, he calls good citizens those who withdraw narrowly into themselves.²²

Again, to title this dissertation in a fashion invoking Bloom is misleading given what will follow.

However, it points to one of the central claims of this dissertation, namely that understanding *intérêt bien entendu* in light of the Christian moral tradition clarifies the manner in which *intérêt*

²⁰ DA, 884.

²¹ DA, 900.

²² DA, 887-888.

bien entendu can open the heart and lead to a transcendence of the self that brings the self and its interests – its good – into conformity and communion with others in the pursuit of human flourishing and the political common good. For, as Brian Danoff put it, Tocqueville held that “republicanism and religion should provide people with a notion of what freedom is *for*, a notion of what it means to lead a good life, a notion which goes beyond self-interest.”²³ Or, in Mitchell’s words, for Tocqueville what is good in worldly terms will comport with what is good in the “economy of salvation” and “Christianity is a training in self-interest rightly understood.”²⁴ Perhaps *intérêt bien entendu* can also be a training for, in Tocqueville’s words, the “love of God that makes men virtuous” and that sustains through the practice of the virtues both political liberty and human flourishing rightly and richly understood in its spiritual and material dimensions.²⁵ Scholars such as Dana Jalbert Stauffer have characterized *intérêt bien entendu* as cold; it “fails to provide a rationale for devotion; it opposes it and undermines it.”²⁶ It helps to shrink and enclose the heart. For Peter Augustine Lawler, though it keeps “open the possibility of spiritual responses” to democratic life, *intérêt bien entendu* is “heartless.”²⁷ One might argue that that is how it becomes in practice, but that would be as a result *intérêt bien entendu* failing, becoming instead *mal entendu*. One of the accidental tasks of this project, by drawing on Tocqueville’s notes, is to remind us that *intérêt bien entendu* is in fact insufficient on its own; it depends on an idea of the good and on the right understanding of that good by those who practice

²³ Brian Danoff, “Alexis de Tocqueville and authority in America,” PhD diss., Rutgers The State University of New Jersey, May 2003, 298.

²⁴ Mitchell, *Fragility*, 24, note 63, 190, note 96.

²⁵ DA, 924, note k.

²⁶ Stauffer, 772.

²⁷ Peter Augustine Lawler, “Tocqueville on the Doctrine of Interest,” in *Homeless and at Home in America*, (South Bend: St. Augustine Press, 2007), 152-167.

and pursue it. It is hard to make sense of *intérêt bien entendu* without a good to be comprehended, without something at which it might aim.

But we should pause a moment: can we say that freedom is *for* something for Tocqueville that goes beyond self-interest? Notwithstanding Tocqueville's well-recognized shades of classical political thought, it is a relatively uncommon position that Tocqueville either is a teleological thinker, that his thinking reveals teleological patterns, or that he has an idea of the good beyond the political liberty at which all regimes or social states and all men might aim.²⁸ However, as the chapters will each in their way address, Tocqueville does present an implicit, sometimes inchoate, but discernible view of human nature by which he judges regimes, and with it, ideas of what politics is *for* and what is therefore inconsistent with both political liberty and the human good rightly understood. Tocqueville's "new political science" is one that aims to educate democratic men in their "true interests," that is, in their good:

To instruct democracy, to revive its beliefs if possible, to purify its mores, to regulate its movements, to substitute little by little the science of public affairs for its inexperience, knowledge of its true interests for its blind instincts; to adapt its government to times and places; to modify it according to circumstances and men; such is the first of duties imposed today on those who lead society.

A new political science is needed for a world entirely new.²⁹

An even more powerful indicator in this direction is Tocqueville's reminder that though the framework and language of interest will predominate in democratic times, because the time of "blind devotions and instinctive virtues is fleeing from us," man's interest itself remains to be clearly defined and set. "How each man will understand his individual interest remains to be

²⁸ Notable exceptions are Bruce Frohnen and to some degree Alexander Jech. See this discussion in Chapter 1.

²⁹ DA, 16.

known.”³⁰ That, as they say, is the essential question. Tocqueville, as a philosopher cum democratic spiritual director, aims to make democracy *good*, to help define and clarify democracy’s interests and that of the men within it. That *intérêt bien entendu* would express, reflect, and direct others towards that good should be no surprise.

Chapter 1, “Discovering *intérêt bien entendu*,” lays out the exegetical argument on behalf of this reading of *intérêt bien entendu*. In the process it details some of the other interpretations of the concept, explicates Tocqueville’s account of human nature and his art of writing, and reveals the relationship we can discern between utility and virtue when we understand *intérêt bien entendu* in this way. While focused on *Democracy in America*, it draws attention where helpful to Tocqueville’s letters, his context, his interlocutors, and to other published writings.

Chapter 2, “*Intérêt bien entendu* and soft despotism’s effects on democratic character and political society,” reconstructs Tocqueville’s account of soft despotism in light of this reading of *intérêt bien entendu* and the striking fact that *intérêt bien entendu* disappears in Tocqueville’s analysis of soft despotism. Though soft despotism arises in part from the democratic sentiment of human vulnerability and need, a danger of soft despotism is that it undermines and assimilates to itself through its regulatory power and authority (often benevolent and justifiable on democratic grounds) the spaces, tasks, and practices of civil society and association in which *intérêt bien entendu* is necessitated, encouraged, practiced, made habitual, and even elevated. Soft despotism paradoxically attends to the material needs of the vulnerable whilst increasing democratic individualism; the democratic heart seems to expand whilst it becomes enclosed on itself. The chapter argues principally with reference to *Democracy in America* but enlists several of

³⁰ DA, 923, 967.

Tocqueville's other writings – particularly on the public virtue (or lack thereof) of his contemporary Catholics – to elucidate the argument.

Chapter 3, “Charity, welfare, and putting theory into practice,” moves us from *Democracy in America* into Tocqueville's writings on social reform, particularly his account of public versus private charity as given in the *Memoirs on Pauperism*. This chapter both brings us back towards Chapter 1 in prioritizing charity – the theological virtue of the love of God and love of others in God's name which is related to *intérêt bien entendu* – as a category of analysis while building on the findings of Chapter 2 that soft despotism runs the risk of crowding out spaces for both *intérêt bien entendu* and higher virtues that are learned, practiced and habituated, and elevated in the free spaces of civil society and association. Tocqueville grounds his critique of public or legal charity – welfare – in the nature of the virtue of private charity, and considers at length the “fatal” consequences of a benevolent principle of redistribution. These writings reaffirm the picture of welfare as soft despotism in *Democracy*, that the State

has undertaken almost alone to give bread to those who are hungry, relief and a refuge to the sick, work to those without it; it has made itself almost the unique repairer of all miseries. ... Education as well as charity has become a national affair among most of the peoples of today. The State receives and often takes the child from the arms of its mother in order to entrust it to its agents.³¹

Yet they also undermine any image of Tocqueville as a strict libertarian. The *Memoirs on Pauperism* and his writings on social policy meditate on the differences between political theory and the ideal, on the one hand, and on the other, what is achievable, politically necessary, and called for based on emergency and benevolence as a matter of prudent statesmanship. They also meditate on the difference between political rights and gifts. Tocqueville finds in the right to welfare something dehumanizing and depersonalizing but which provides a modicum of material

³¹ DA, 1223.

support, and finds in the morally superior gift of charity and in the voluntary association of civil society the face-to-face encounters increasingly rare in a democratic age and increasingly made redundant by welfare itself. Yet private charity is spontaneous and unreliable, the habit of association weak in France. What is to be done is a question flush with the trade-offs, constraints, and externalities that afflict the practitioner of politics, and not the theorist.

That Tocqueville ultimately concludes in favor of a form of limited public welfare – “Christian charity applied to politics” -- reflects this tug of war between the dangers of soft despotism and the genuine needs of the poor. It belies any strict Tocquevillian libertarianism on social policy and emphasizes his pursuit of the prudent and best possible, not of the perfect or ideal. Tocqueville’s active engagement with the non-perfectionist French and English political economy of his day, including Christian and Catholic political economy, clarifies this further. His understanding of what man’s interest or good is; of what constitutes his well-being and his poverty; and of the need for charity, *intérêt bien entendu*, association, and a justice that does not crowd out the richness, dynamism, fellowship, and face-to-face encounters of civil society; this all together suggests a social and political vision that, while liberal, relies on a distinctive and strong, if sometimes implicit, moral vision as a foundation. In Dana Villa’s words, Tocqueville, despite doing “theoretical heavy lifting” for a “pluralist conception of politics,” lacks “real *moral* pluralism.”³² This Tocquevillian vision also displays much in common with patterns of natural law reasoning and the Catholic Social Thought tradition.³³ It is in fact remarkable the resemblance between Tocqueville’s approach to questions of solidarity and subsidiarity and that

³² Dana Villa, “Hegel, Tocqueville, and ‘Individualism,’” *Review of Politics* 64, 4 (2005): 659-686.

³³ See for example Michael Pakaluk, “Natural Law and Civil Society,” *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society*, ed. Simone Chambers, Will Kymlicka, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 131-148.

of Catholic Social Thought. Take, for example, remarks made by Pope Benedict XVI in 2008 before the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences:

The totality of social conditions allowing persons to achieve their communal and individual fulfilment is known as the *common good*. *Solidarity* refers to the virtue enabling the human family to share fully the treasure of material and spiritual goods, and *subsidiarity* is the coordination of society's activities in a way that supports the internal life of the local communities. ...

true solidarity – though it begins with an acknowledgment of the *equal* worth of the other – comes to fulfilment only when I willingly place my life at the service of the other ...

A society that honours the principle of subsidiarity liberates people from a sense of despondency and hopelessness, granting them the freedom to engage with one another in the spheres of commerce, politics and culture (cf. *Quadragesimo Anno*, 80). When those responsible for the public good attune themselves to the natural human desire for self-governance based on subsidiarity, they leave space for individual responsibility and initiative, but most importantly, they leave space for *love*...³⁴

Pope Benedict's invocations of Christology aside, this is very much consonant with Tocqueville's view. (Because of the clarity with which Benedict expressed the position, it will reappear at several junctures in this dissertation.) It is not my task or intention within the confines of this project to outline the shared patterns of thought, intellectual lineage, or other resemblances between Tocqueville's strange liberalism and the Catholic intellectual tradition. But the similarity is worth noting and reflecting on. Tocqueville did in fact actively engage the Catholic social, economic, and political thought of his day. As Chapter 3 will discuss, the nineteenth century French Catholic social movement remains an understudied area in both Francophone and Anglophone scholarship. This is to the great detriment of our understanding. The articulation of the relationship of charity to social justice as it is conceptualized in the Catholic tradition is one from which philosophers and students of politics can productively learn and with which we

³⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, "Address to Participants in the 14th Annual Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences," May 3, 2008, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080503_social-sciences.html. .

might creatively interrogate the structures and “theological assumptions”, in Elizabeth Anderson’s words, of contemporary politics, including welfare arrangements.³⁵

What are the stakes of this inquiry and how might it be developed further? I have already indicated several areas of scholarship, beyond the precise nature of *intérêt bien entendu*, to which this project can speak. These, for reasons of space and scope, can remain only suggestions here. Among them is Tocqueville’s relationship with the ideas of the French moralist and Catholic traditions and with the Catholics of his day, and its implications for the Catholic Church’s position vis-a-vis liberalism in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Among them is also the religious dimensions of Tocqueville’s political economy. Scholars such as Richard Swedberg and Michael Drolet have done excellent studies of Tocqueville’s political economy and note that Tocqueville came to study political economy in order to better comprehend questions of morality and politics, but their focus remains squarely on his political economy rather than on how his political economy enlightens Tocqueville on both religion and association. It also adds a piece to the puzzle of our understanding of what is distinctive about Tocquevillian association and civil society as compared to other liberal theories of society and voluntary association. Tocqueville’s understanding of associations in civil society Richard Boyd reminds us “remains poorly understood,” despite being what everyone believes they understand well in Tocqueville.³⁶

To better understand Tocqueville’s idea of associations would include applying his insights to welfare policy and to philanthropy. As to welfare policy: The reader who encounters only *Democracy in America* and its theorization of soft despotism will likely and for good reason

³⁵ Elizabeth Anderson, “Why do so many Americans hate the welfare state?” *The Irish Times*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/why-do-so-many-americans-hate-the-welfare-state-1.4057860>.

³⁶ Richard Boyd, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, ed. Richard Boyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022,) 24-25.

assume that Tocqueville opposes welfare states. It is also not surprising that Gertrude Himmelfarb's edition of the *Memoir on Pauperism* was published in an era of welfare reform. The reality of Tocqueville's thought is, however, far more complex. In Daniel J. Mahoney's estimation, "We misread his powerful and still relevant warning against the tutelary state if we confuse it with an absolute opposition to centralized government within its own sphere or to government provision for the poor... the moral and political alternatives are not exhausted by the socialist confiscation of human liberty or by the utopia of an ultra-minimalist state."³⁷

Tocqueville is no ideologue. Ewa Atanassow is among the scholars whose focus on Tocqueville's public policy reads his policy writings as more than ephemeral or contingent or of mere historic rather than philosophical interest. Rather, they offer windows into the relationship between philosophy and politics itself.³⁸ This project shares something with Atanassow's in that it encourages readers of Tocqueville to appreciate his philosophical rigor and the compelling logic of his thought *and* to note that the practice of politics is distinct from theory. Tocqueville understood that politics meant not the pursuit of the ideal but bridging, in Atanassow's words, the universal and the particular and bringing about the best possible under particular conditions and constraints. Tocqueville's manner as a "thinker-statesman" of navigating that difference in matters of welfare offers a valuable case study.³⁹

³⁷ Daniel Mahoney: "It should be clear that for all his concerns about the dangers of tutelary despotism and the socialist subversion of democracy, Tocqueville did not oppose the welfare state per se at least in a modest and self-limiting form. Within bounds, it was a legitimate application of Christianity to politics." Daniel Mahoney, "Christianity, Democracy, Socialism: Tocqueville's defense of a limited public charity in politics," *The Catholic Social Science Review*, 19 (2004): 39-46.

³⁸ Ewa Atanassow offers a good example of this. Ewa Atanassow, *Tocqueville's Dilemmas: Sovereignty, Nationalism, and Globalization*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022.)

³⁹ Daniel Mahoney, *The Statesman as Thinker: Portraits of Greatness, Courage, and Moderation*. Encounter Books, 2022.

As to philanthropy, in *On the Penitentiary System in the United States and its Application to France (1833)*, Tocqueville and Beaumont differentiate between French philanthropy and the religious and charitable spirit they observed in America.⁴⁰ In America, philanthropy is generally understood as an overflowing of the religious and charitable spirit and the spirit of association. Penitentiary reforms are local and state-level, not national, and generally driven by associations before being adopted politically. The efforts and experiments in penitentiary reform there, despite the separation of Church and State, is also eminently religious and concerned with reform of the soul. In other words, the American philanthropy Tocqueville and Beaumont observed was an outflowing of Christian charity through associations. By contrast, in France philanthropists are largely secular and opposed to clergy and this forms, to Beaumont and Tocqueville, a huge barrier to American-style penitentiary reform. Many French philanthropists are materialists. Many desire to implement via the centralized administrative apparatus “philosophical doctrines” and “have not guarded themselves against the dangers of a theory carried to its furthest consequences.” “... most often philanthropy among us is only an affair of the imagination,” and as translator Emily Ferkaluk argues, Tocqueville and Beaumont hoped to educate their readers to support moderate, viable, local reforms rather than the progressive, exaggerated, utopian and bureaucratic programs of the French philanthropic elites and *publicistes*. This distinction between the alliance of local Christian charitable associations and local politics, on the one hand, and humanitarian, scientific philanthropy partnered with the administrative and secular state on the other is one Olivier Zunz (a translator and biographer of Tocqueville) draws in his history of

⁴⁰ Gustave de Beaumont, Alexis de Tocqueville, *On the Penitentiary System in the United States and its Application to France*, trans. Emily Katherine Ferkaluk, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70799-0>.

American philanthropy from the late nineteenth century to today.⁴¹ With the rise of the robber barons after the Civil War – a new industrial aristocracy Tocqueville anticipated – giving in America transformed from Christian, modest, local, and connected to the township model of democratic politics, to industrialist, secular, humanitarian, and scientific. “America’s tradition of small-scale, local associations” was “superseded” by the private foundation, which over time came to partner closely with the federal government and the administrative state, each sharing (as Tocqueville predicted of industrialists and the centralized government) the same methods of administrative science. Such philanthropic organizations of the non-profit sector operate tax-free provided they reinvest any profits in activities deemed “charitable” or for the common good. Zunz suggests that Tocqueville’s idea of *intérêt bien entendu* is well-represented, even expanded, in mass philanthropy; it is a “constant re-enactment of self-interest properly understood.”⁴² Undoubtedly mass philanthropy has achieved ends which its local charitable predecessor could only dream. It has changed the landscape of American voluntarism. One therefore might wonder what has, for good and ill, been lost morally and politically in the “large organizational revolution that American managerial and financial capitalism orchestrated in the last century and a half,” a revolution that produced a professional (non-voluntary) nonprofit sector and the modern public-private partnership, that contributed to a number of landmark Supreme Court rulings about corporate interests, lobbying, and free speech, and that coincided with the decline of American civil society as documented by neo-Tocquevillians such as Robert D. Putnam.⁴³ American philanthropy became a “capitalist venture in social betterment, not an act of kindness

⁴¹ Olivier Zunz, *Philanthropy in America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁴² *Ibid*, 286.

⁴³ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 20th anniversary edition, (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2020).

as understood in Christianity.”⁴⁴ Revisiting the links between *intérêt bien entendu* and charity, and between local forms of care and democratic governance can perhaps enlighten some of the questions and anxieties around the political implications of nonprofits and interest groups.⁴⁵

Finally, Tocqueville’s understanding of *intérêt bien entendu*, charity, and the nature of well-being in democratic ages as explored in this dissertation contributes something to what could be called (and here I am inspired by the luxury debates) the “liberalism debates.” These debates over the history, nature, and goals of the liberal project have come in waves throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, with an explosion of scholarship over the last several years.⁴⁶ Tocqueville famously remarked that the democratic mind prefers general language and “broad expressions” to accommodate changing thoughts.⁴⁷ “An abstract word is like a box with a false bottom; you put the ideas you want into it, and you take them out without anyone seeing.” Liberalism often seems such a word. Its meaning and common traits may be generally recognizable; as the old saying goes, you know it when you see it. Yet on closer examination of the substance, one is hard pressed to find a consensus as to what counts as “liberal” and how the fact of that variety ought to be handled by scholars and historians.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 2.

⁴⁵ For example, Linsey McGoe, *No Such Thing as a Free Gift*, (New York: Verso, 2016). Rob Reich, *Just Giving: Why Philanthropy Is Failing Democracy and How It Can Do Better* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

⁴⁶ For just a few of the many recent treatments of “liberalism”: Patrick Deen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); *H-Diplo Roundtable XXI-4: The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century*, September 20, 2019, <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT21-4>; Eric Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism: Political Philosophy and the Justice of God*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2019); Helena Rosenblatt, *The lost history of liberalism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Helena Rosenblatt, “Response,” *H-Diplo Roundtable XXI-4: The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century*, 20 September 2019, <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT21-4>; William Selinger, Gregory Conti, “The lost history of political liberalism”, *History of European Ideas*, 46 (2020):3, 341-54; Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2014); David Walsh, *The Priority of the Person: Political, Philosophical, and Historical Discoveries*, (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020).

⁴⁷ DA, 829.

Tocqueville's own strange liberalism is as much or more in keeping with classical and Christian thought as with the liberalisms of a Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Smith, or The Federalist – not to mention the political theories of those for whom he was an interlocutor or inspiration, from Mill and Marx to his interpreters in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Consequently, Tocqueville sits uneasily within the context of these liberalism debates, read, claimed, and utilized by liberals and critics of liberalism alike. His thought is a kind of meeting place of these different viewpoints.

Among those things that make Tocqueville's liberalism distinctive are his style and chosen method of philosophy, as well as his ability to esteem, admire, and uphold liberal political institutions on the basis of political liberty whilst *also* recognizing that liberalism or that democracy as a regime is only as good as its citizens. For as much as liberal political institutions attempt to insulate political life from the vagaries and vacillations of an arbitrary will, self-government and the principle of popular sovereignty of the people limit their ability to do so.⁴⁸ Political liberty and its right uses depend on the moral character of citizens; this is a classic tenet of civic republican theory. However, to say that political liberty depends on the moral character of citizens is to come close to a lie by omission. For Tocqueville, the moral character of citizens in their mode as citizens depends on their moral character as individuals and as men, women, parents, spouses, children, neighbors, volunteers, etc., in a variety of other chosen and non-chosen roles and identities which shape moral character.⁴⁹ These chosen and non-chosen modes

⁴⁸ In an interesting note, Tocqueville describes religion as a form of “law” and obedience to it “the free choice of a moral and independent being,” majority opinion “moves... haphazardly”. The omnipotence of the majority is “arbitrariness” unless bounded by a higher law, especially religion but also firmly entrenched constitutional checks and balances and rights. DA, 720, note p.

⁴⁹ Nancy Rosenblum articulates one vision of the qualities of neighbors. Nancy L. Rosenblum, *Good Neighbors: The Democracy of Everyday Life in America*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016.) Wilson Carey McWilliams relies heavily on Tocqueville for inspiration behind his account of fraternity, though Tocqueville

and the virtues which characterize living them well are given space to develop and become habitual in domains of life where the mode of “citizen” is not irrelevant, but it is not primary either. Hence, in Mitchell’s words, the “fragility of freedom”: absent such an awareness and appreciation for these modes of life and their virtues, political liberty is more inclined to give way to despotism, and the virtues, habits, and practices of those intermediary spaces of life that form moral character may give way to the selfishness, thinness, and contractarian mindset of which liberalism is often accused. Ironically, in that way, despotism is compatible with a certain selfish liberal individualism – exactly as Tocqueville argued.

In the last several decades, in these “liberalism debates,” historians of political thought and philosophers have repeatedly turned to the moral, theological, or ethical grounds of liberalism as an attempt to understand what it is and is not. This includes self-described liberal philosophers concerned with liberalism’s relationship with love and the supererogatory, and scholars asking broader questions about whether liberal political theories can supply a means of transcending the self – on the assumption such transcendence is possible and valuable – without a recourse to theism.⁵⁰ Under consideration in these arguments and in the arguments to which

himself scarcely uses the term. Wilson Carey McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America*, intro. Susan McWilliams Bardnt, 50th anniversary edition, (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2023).

⁵⁰ Remi Brague, *The Kingdom of Man*, trans. Paul Seaton, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018); Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Ryan Patrick Hanley, *Love’s Enlightenment: Rethinking Charity in Modernity*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Axel Honneth, “Love, Society, and Agape: An Interview with Axel Honneth,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 16 (2013): 251– 252. Simon May, *Love: A History*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), and May, *Love: A New Understanding of an Ancient Emotion*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Eric Matthew Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013); Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism*; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), and Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2015). Hanley provides an overview of recent literature on love and political theory and a clear articulation of the problem liberalism may have with love and “whether it is truly possible to have both universal love and self-transcendence without theism.” Hanley, *Love’s Enlightenment*, 1-30, 171-173.

they respond is whether liberalism is either essentially or meaningfully selfish, and to what degree that selfishness (if true) is in fact a problem for liberal theory.

This is a line of critique that emerged in Tocqueville's own day but remains part of these "liberalism debates," with philosophers described as communitarians – whether they themselves would subscribe to that designation – identifying in liberal ideas of politics the capacity to produce a selfishness, narrowness, or thinness that renders the political community a vehicle for pursuing individual self-interest and the aggregated self-interested ends of a collection of individuals, rather than anything recognizable as a common good distinct from such an aggregate. This may even be purposeful, as in Robert Nozick's minimal state or John Rawls's theory of justice, in the name of a distinctive liberal conception of justice that aims at maximal individual autonomy under conditions of social contract and pluralism.⁵¹ In philosopher Michael Sandel's words, under such a liberal conception, the political community is no longer one with "constitutive ends" in which the self-interest of the person, rightly understood, is fulfilled at least in part through the meaningful, duty-laden identities and duties imposed by roles in household or polis and by the natural duties we owe to others qua neighbors and fellow citizens. A person in a community "incapable of constitutive attachments" would be without "moral character."⁵² (Such a political community, in Aristotle's understanding, would be a mere alliance and not a polis, possessing no common conception of virtue, the good, civic friendship, and the many other

⁵¹ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).

⁵² Michael J. Sandel, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self," *Political Theory*, 12, 1 (1984): 81-96. That America has become a "procedural republic" was by no means predetermined, on Sandel's view, for when the local democratic republican model was replaced by the "national republic," it still had a politics of the common good. Sandel points to Tocqueville's model of public political life as both national but also "dispersed and differentiated" and complemented by many "indirect modes of character formation" as preserving "the civic strand of freedom" and formative republican politics. Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: A New Edition for Our Perilous Times*, (Harvard University Press, 2022.)

things required for living well as opposed to merely living.⁵³) The unencumbered self of liberal theory, Sandel argued in his influential 1984 critique of Rawlsianism, seemed now to walk among us, “less liberated than disempowered, entangled in a network of obligations and involvements” such as the commitments of the welfare state but without “any act of the will” and “unmediated” by the ties, associations, and identities that would make entanglement “tolerable.” Bloom’s description of his students – that they live in such a way as to suggest that “we do not need others” – is a good piece of evidence suggesting that the worry unencumbered selves walk among us is not unfounded.

The answer to this problem would have to include, as Sandel argues, an appreciation for the plural, diverse, differentiated and yet porous domains of life that indirectly contribute to politics by being sites of moral formation. However, in a liberal framework in which civil society and its associations are conceived of principally as *voluntary* -- in which even the family, perhaps the most natural and necessary of associations, is increasingly understood as optional or voluntary and yet also taken for granted -- one faces the challenge of articulating not only the important *benefits* of civil society and *voluntary* associations but the *necessity* of certain kinds of human fellowship found in the associations and indirectly political domains of common life for the good of human flourishing.⁵⁴ To articulate this means, as I take Tocqueville and others following his example to do, stressing the situatedness, givenness, and encumbrances of human life against the liberal state of nature and rational chooser models. It also means stressing the

⁵³ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 3.1280b-1281a.

⁵⁴ For one interesting take on this, see Annette C. Baier, “What Do Women Want in a Moral Theory?” *Noûs* 19, 1 (1985): 53–63.

cultivation and habituation of practices and virtues in the indirectly political domains of life for the sake of a rich communal life, including a meaningfully free politics.

How this relates to my argument about *intérêt bien entendu* and its relationship to Christian virtue and concepts of well-being becomes clearer with the help of Alasdair MacIntyre. In *Dependent Rational Animals* MacIntyre articulates a challenge to liberal theory in stressing the importance of vulnerability, dependence, and care, all characteristics of the human being as a “dependent rational animal” that many liberalisms and modern philosophies deny. It is an example inspired by the case of the disabled, non-self-sufficient, vulnerable person in a liberal society, whose circumstances offer an extreme example of a basic truth: human vulnerability and affliction, human weakness and imperfection, are quintessential elements of the human life which the Western political tradition, with a few exceptions, often forgets or fails to account for adequately once within the social contract. To respond fully to the truth of the human experience, one needs to be educated to exercise virtues of “acknowledge dependence” in the community or communities of which one is a part.⁵⁵ These virtues of acknowledge dependence and just generosity include, importantly, *misericordia* – a species of theological charity which MacIntyre argues would be a “mistake” not to recognize “at work in the secular world.”⁵⁶ The virtues of acknowledged dependence (to which MacIntyre argues Aristotle was blind) are intimately related to the “common goods of associations and relationships” that exist between the nation-state and the family. In fact, they are specially located in that in-between.⁵⁷ The modern state on its own,

⁵⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1999). “The education of dispositions to perform just this type of act [just, generous, beneficent, and done from pity] is what is needed to sustain relationships of uncalculated giving and graceful receiving” (121).

⁵⁶ Ibid, 124-126.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 130. “If at this point, we turn for assistance to recent social and political philosophy, we will for the most part be disappointed since with rare exceptions work in that area ignores questions about the common goods of

absent the in-between, “cannot provide a political framework informed by the just generosity necessary to achieve the common goods of networks of giving and receiving.”⁵⁸ The family practices and realizes various distinctive virtues and goods to it qua family but “flourishes only if its social environment also flourishes.”⁵⁹ MacIntyre articulates an argument for civil society and association on distinctly non-voluntary, non-libertarian, virtue-ethical grounds: the virtues of acknowledged dependence are taught in and flourish in (to the benefit of all concerned with the political common good) forms of local community and association.⁶⁰ Against some communitarians, he also emphasizes it is a “mistake” to try to make non-local politics resemble the local because the “face-to-face encounters” of local life easily become deformed or oppressive absent the spirit of giving and receiving that ought to characterize those spaces.⁶¹ But “we learn what our common good is, and indeed what our own individual goods are, not primarily and never only by theoretical reflection, but in everyday shared activities and the

associations and relationships that are intermediate between on the one hand the nation-state and on the other the individual and the nuclear family. Yet it is just with this intermediate area that we shall need to be concerned, since those whose relationships embody both a recognition of the independence of practical reasoners and an acknowledgement of the facts of human dependence, and for whom therefore the virtue of just generosity is a key virtue, presuppose in their activities, explicitly or more usually implicitly, the sharing of a common good that is constitutive of a type of association that can be realized neither in the forms of the modern state nor in those of the contemporary family” (130-131).

⁵⁸ Ibid, 133.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 134.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 135. “Neither the state nor the family then is the form of association whose common good is to be both served and sustained by the virtues of acknowledged dependence. It must instead be some form of local community within which the activities of families, workplaces, schools, clinics, clubs dedicated to debate and clubs dedicated to games and sports, and religious congregations may all find a place” (135).

⁶¹ Ibid, 142. “The relatively small-scale character and the face-to-face encounters and conversations of local community are necessary for the shared achievement of the common goods of those who participate in the rational deliberation needed to sustain networks of giving and receiving but absent the virtues of just generosity and of shared deliberation, local communities are always open to corruption by narrowness, by complacency, by prejudice against outsiders, and by a whole range of other deformities including those that arise from a cult of community” (142).

evaluation of alternatives that those activities impose.”⁶² Such a vision, MacIntyre suggests, alleviates us of a crude dichotomy of altruism and egotism, for a crudely articulated contrast between “self-interested market behavior” and “altruistic benevolent behavior” “obscures from view” the fact that certain activities of life are “goods that can be mine insofar as they are also those of others.”⁶³ We need others, and we need the to act upon one another to cultivate that habits, dispositions, and virtues constitutive of human flourishing in community.⁶⁴ “Sentiments and ideas are renewed, the heart grows larger, and the human mind develops only by the reciprocal action of men on each other.”⁶⁵

The argumentative core of this project remains squarely focused on Tocqueville. That said, what I hope will become evident as it unfolds are the ways in which Tocqueville’s understanding of *intérêt bien entendu* as articulated here –its potential to lead on via habituation and education to higher, more selfless virtues such as love and to bind citizens and neighbors in the pursuit of common ends, its need of space independent of the political authority for the moral formation of democratic citizens, and the indispensability of the face-to-face encounters *intérêt bien entendu* both demands and creates – shares much with the logic of Sandel’s account and

⁶² Ibid, 136.

⁶³ Ibid, 160, 119. “It is of great importance not to confuse character of this kind, character informed by the virtue of just generosity, with altruism, as it is usually understood. A presupposition for the application for the notion of altruism is a conception of human beings as divided in their inclinations and passions, some of those being self-regarding, others being-other regarding. ... We do indeed as infants, as children, and even as adolescents, experience sharp conflicts between egoistic and altruistic impulses and desires. But the task of education is to transform and integrate those into an inclination towards both the common good and our individual goods, so that we become neither self-rather-than-other-regarding nor other-rather-than-self-regarding, neither egoists nor altruists but those whose passions and inclinations are directed to what is both out good and the good of others” (160).

⁶⁴ Ibid, 108. “... each of us achieves our good only if and insofar as others make our good their good by helping us through periods of disability to become ourselves the kind of human being—through acquisition and exercise of the virtues – who makes the good of others his or her good, and this not because we have calculated that, only if we help others, will they help us, in some trading of advantage for advantage.” Also DA, 900.

⁶⁵ DA, 900.

especially with the logic of MacIntyre's virtue-ethical account. This tells us something about the nature of Tocqueville's liberalism and about the importance, even necessity, of recognized dependence, vulnerability, care, and even love and about the limits to which these can be politicized while retaining their integrity and formative power. While Tocqueville will conclude that certain forms of public charity are necessary by justice, as both Sandel and MacIntyre recognize, that form of mutual support does not and cannot replace the practices and habits that form and open the heart. Despotism can do without faith, Tocqueville said, but liberty cannot. Just so, despotism can do without love – it can even appear to alleviate us of the need for it -- but flourishing in liberty cannot.

A few notes in conclusion are in order before turning to Chapter 1.

First, as will become clear, some of this argument proceeds by exegesis, some by reference to elements of Tocqueville's life and historical and intellectual context, some by reference to the minds that helped to, to paraphrase Louis Pasteur, prepare Tocqueville's mind.⁶⁶ Never is the evidence supplied by historical and intellectual contexts meant to detract from the originality of Tocqueville's own mind and contributions. Tocqueville made his own context.⁶⁷ At the bare minimum, regardless of where he agrees with or deviates from his interlocutors and predecessors, Tocqueville's unique status in the history of American and French political thought and in the liberal tradition renders the whole of his thought of special note. That the sweep of this argument proceeds at points by a kind of accumulation of evidence to build a whole may by some be interpreted as an indication of weakness. To those inclined to this way of thinking, I ask merely that you walk with me as one would walk and think with Tocqueville, who himself built a

⁶⁶ "Chance favors the prepared mind." Louis Pasteur, Lecture, University of Lille (7 December 1854).

⁶⁷ Harvey Mansfield, "The aristocracy in democracy," *The New Criterion*, June 2013: 69-71.

theory, a unified whole picture of democracy, out of many discrete pieces. I ask that you join me in assembling the pieces of this mosaic and in appreciating the distinctive image of Tocqueville and his political thought that it produces.

Second, a variety of choices were made to arrive at this final version. One was to leave *intérêt bien entendu* untranslated, for reasons briefly canvassed above and that will be revisited in Chapter 1. Another was to move in a manner that is sometimes but not always chronological; the *Memoirs on Pauperism* were written in 1835 and 1840, therefore predating *Democracy in America* Volume II. If I intended to move through the major texts of this examination in a strictly chronological fashion, I might have chosen to conclude therefore with soft despotism in 1840. However, treating charity, pauperism, and welfare as a final chapter not only emphasizes the surprising degree of indeterminacy and political prudence that characterizes Tocqueville's approach to welfare in a way that concluding with soft despotism would not have done. It also makes clearer the degree to which these questions and themes followed him long after *Democracy* into his political career and into his retirement from politics in the 1850s.

Other choices concern what might have included but as of current, are absent. For example, an earlier iteration of this project introduced Tocqueville's views of political economy, *intérêt bien entendu*, and religion with two chapters of intellectual history. The first would have been dedicated to explicating the French Christian moralist tradition that Tocqueville inherits, the second dedicated to the debates of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries about political economy and political economy's relationship to politics, morality, and Christianity specifically. Where that first chapter would have investigated of Fenelon, Pascal, Pierre Nicole, and others, the second would have turned to figures such as Mandeville, Hutcheson, and Smith, and the subsequent generation of Jean-Baptiste Say, Thomas Malthus, and Alban de Villeneuve-

Bargemont. Some of these figures will appear throughout the chapters; they remain important for our inquiry but their treatment has been truncated in order to better serve our focus on Tocqueville. A further choice was to largely leave aside one of Tocqueville's better known minor works, his *On the Penitentiary System in the United States and its Application to France* (1833), and to appeal in passing to his other magnum opus *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution* (1856) where it was fitting. This project doubtless suffers something by their absence, but I leave them to be incorporated more fully in the next iteration of this project.

Chapter 1 : Discovering *intérêt bien entendu*

Tocqueville and Beaumont arrived in New York on May 11, 1831. They shortly discovered that their arrival had caused a sensation, so flattered were New Yorkers that this pair had come from France to learn from the American example.¹ Pierson, in his telling of their first few days, notes that the *New York Daily Advertiser* described their coming with great excitement and with hope that, “As humanity is deeply interested in the improvement of the prisons of France and of all Europe, we hope our philanthropists will afford the gentlemen all desirable facilities.”² Though Tocqueville and Beaumont had arrived in an America that was increasingly taken up with philanthropic and humanitarian concerns such as temperance, prison reform, and abolition, it was not necessarily humanitarianism that first struck them as the great American trait. Or to be more precise, they were struck by the ways in which a philanthropic and humanitarian spirit blended with religion and with a distinctly practical and overwhelmingly mercantile approach to living. Among Tocqueville’s first impressions, he listed national pride, religiosity, and this relentless capacity to trade. From 15 May,

Taken altogether they seem a religious people. It is evident that no one thinks of ridiculing the practice, and that the goodness and even the truth of religion are admitted *in theory*. To what point does their life conform to their doctrine. What is the true power of the religious principle on their souls? How is it that the diversity of sects does not engender indifference, if not on the surface at least within? There is what remains to be discovered.³

He went on to remark that perhaps the Americans have such solidly decent morals less because of “the severity of principles” than because the industrious American lifestyle left little time to interrogate their principles or to be tempted to break them. Beaumont’s notes flush out some of

¹ George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938) 60. See also Leo Damrosch, *Tocqueville’s Discovery of America*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010), 15-65.

² Ibid, 61.

³ In Pierson, 69.

the implications of Tocqueville's remark. This is a "middle class people"; Pierson notes that Tocqueville and Beaumont did not even call the American middle class bourgeois, so different did it seem from the French bourgeoisie.⁴ Americans are a "merchant people" and trade is their "*national passion*" but "there is much morality" them though they have a "colder temperament" than the passionate French.⁵ "Thus this people has an interest in being moral; it believes besides in a religion which commands morality, and the nature of its blood, instead of being an obstacle, favors this disposition..."

What Tocqueville in the Introduction to *Democracy in America* described as a new political science for a world altogether new took form gradually, first through his studies of law and his wide readings in economic and political thought in Versailles and Paris in the late 1820s. He had, as Louis Pasteur later put it, a "prepared mind".⁶ The early notes and letters Tocqueville and Beaumont composed from America offer insights into how the two young men, individually and as a pair who would present *On the Penitentiary System* as a product of joint authorship, first formulated and then developed their impressions into theories. As Tocqueville wrote his father, they had "but one single idea since our arrival here": to "know the country we are travelling through... This study... makes us perceive a great number of details which lose themselves in the mass when one does not have recourse to analysis... there is not a man, on whatever rung of society he finds himself, who cannot teach us something."⁷ There are many ways one might

⁴ Pierson, 81.

⁵ Pierson, 71-72.

⁶ Louis Pasteur, Lecture, University of Lille (7 December 1854). "Chance favors the prepared mind, and opportunity favors the bold."

⁷ Pierson, 112-113.

characterize Tocqueville's insights, method, style, and influences that produced *Democracy* and the distinctive political and moral science it models. Pierson perhaps offers a basic consensus view when he says the book was composed from a body of information, by an "ascertainable method," and "under the compulsion of a very definite purpose," producing finally a mixture of "information, methods, and beliefs, all three."⁸ The final product articulated a general theory that made a whole of discrete details and that, while describing the particular American democratic social state, abstracted from it to draw conclusions about the democratic social state more generally.⁹ It was a product of his prepared mind, his observations of Americans, his reflections upon the French, and his intensive reading and research upon his return from the United States.

Arthur Goldhammer, in arguing for the influence of the associations Law of 1834 on Tocqueville's account of associations, comments that Tocqueville's praise of association was not merely or innocently theoretical praise, no "caprice of a theorist solely concerned with political order in the abstract." It was an "audacious if circumspectly formulated protest against a repressive policy" to which Tocqueville obliquely refers. In his treatment of Tocqueville's theory, Goldhammer remarks that Tocqueville "left the meaning of the phrase 'self-interest rightly understood' ambiguous, I think deliberately" though Tocqueville was "absolutely clear" that associations were "essential to achieving the 'proper understanding' required to check the ravages of unmitigated self-interest."¹⁰ The ambiguity of the meaning of *intérêt bien entendu* becomes apparent even from a casual survey of the relevant literature. This is perhaps

⁸ Pierson, 719, 754.

⁹ See Damrosch, 194-216, Pierson, 718-754.

¹⁰ Arthur Goldhammer, "Tocqueville, Associations, and the Law of 1834," *Historical Reflections*, 35, 3 (2009): 74-84.

unsurprising given the subtleties and even elusive quality of Tocqueville's liberalism and of his style and influences.¹¹ In William Galston's words, "Tocqueville is more often quoted than understood."¹² One might even argue the challenge of interpreting *intérêt bien entendu* exemplifies the challenge of understanding Tocqueville.

This dissertation, as mentioned in the introduction, will use the term *intérêt bien entendu* rather than one of its many translations, such as self-interest rightly understood, interest rightly understood, self-interest well understood, or enlightened self-interest. "*Intérêt bien entendu*" preserves its original ambiguous character and is more consistent with the project of this dissertation to develop an additional and alternative understanding that, while not necessarily inconsistent with several other prominent interpretations, varies in key and identifiable ways.¹³ Unlike Rousseau's *amour propre* and *amour de soi* which are explicitly self-referential, Tocqueville's *intérêt bien entendu* is not. Using the French term allows us to distinguish between his specific mentions of *intérêt bien entendu* and the many other terms he uses to convey related but distinct ideas, such as personal interest, individual interest, or particular interest, some of which are more frequent in Volume I, some in Volume II.¹⁴ Tocqueville's concepts are not always

¹¹ Many treatments of Tocqueville contend with these characteristics of his thought. Examples include: Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Aurelian Craiutu, "Tocqueville's Paradoxical Moderation," *The Review of Politics* 67, 4 (2005): 599-629; Sanford Lakoff, "Tocqueville, Burke, and the Origins of Liberal Conservatism," *The Review of Politics*, 60, 3 (1998): 435-464; Lucien Jaume, *Tocqueville*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Harvey C. Mansfield, "Intimations of Philosophy in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*," in *Tocqueville's Voyages*, ed. Christine Dunn Henderson (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2014), 202-241; Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹² William Galston, "Civil society and the 'Art of Association'", *Journal of Democracy* 11, 1 (2000): 64-70.

¹³ See Jon Elster, *Alexis de Tocqueville: The First Social Scientist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 48. For one commentary on translating Tocqueville, see Arthur Goldhammer, "Translating Tocqueville: The Constraints of Classicism," *Tocqueville Review* 26, 1, (2005): 499-2.

¹⁴ One reason for not translating it is that, despite *intérêt bien entendu* generally being rendered as "self-interest rightly understood", it is not clear that Tocqueville understands it as "self" interest. For example, he uses "personal interest" or *l'intérêt personnel* to demarcate an interest that belongs to the one person. He uses the term "personal interest" ten times in *Democracy* Volume I and twice in Volume II – also indicating that "personal interest" is not

clear, his manner of instructing and educating democracy to know its “true interests” proceeds sometime, as Harvey C. Mansfield has compellingly argued, modestly or “by intimation.”¹⁵ His arguments and deeper philosophical positions are not always clearly articulated but must sometimes be gleaned. That they are not clearly articulated does not indicate philosophical incoherence or incompetence but rather ought to be interrogated by the scholar with consideration and acuity.¹⁶ Therefore, though there might be legitimate reason or temptation to render all these terms as forms of or different formulations of *intérêt bien entendu*, I choose to differentiate them for these reasons of precision and careful concern to isolate Tocqueville’s meaning.

I also choose to interpret the two Volumes as forming together one *Democracy*. This is contrary to some who would suggest that they ought to be read separately but consistent with Tocqueville’s own desire that they be read together: “the two parts complement each other and form a single work,” as he wrote.¹⁷ The two Volumes do differ in subject matter and in expository style. His theory does evolve and develop in response both to his ongoing reflections and to contingent events, be they personally experienced (as in the *Souvenirs*) or observed from

necessarily a substitute for or the same as *intérêt bien entendu*. To that point, he even uses “personal interest” in a distinct way DA II.II.8 on *intérêt bien entendu*. See DA 129 (two usages), 315, 385, 391, 394, 431, 479, 481, 656, 921, 1109. Additionally, Tocqueville also uses the terms “particular interest” (*intérêt particulier*) and individual interest. See, for “particular interest,” DA 21, 108, 188, 213, 268, 280, 433, 592, 865, 891, 906, 919, 922, 927, 1114, 1211, 1230, 1270, 1273, 1274.

¹⁵ Mansfield, “Intimations of Philosophy in Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*,” 210-211.

¹⁶ By contrast, Seymour Drescher, *Dilemmas of Democracy: Tocqueville and Modernization*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968), 21-22. “My working assumption is rather that, implicitly or explicitly, contradictory ideas may be pure and simple contradictions. These can only be related, if at all, in terms of their author’s social and biographical setting. This does not amount to dissolving all ideas in to their social and psychological components.... Rather than wishing to synthesize contradictions in Tocqueville, I wish to emphasize the full force of their contradictory and unresolved status in his thought.”

¹⁷ OC, I (2), 7, cited in Wolin, 95. The preeminent example of treating them as separate is Jean-Claude Lamberti, *Tocqueville et les deux démocraties*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1983).

afar. However, as others have remarked in responding to the “two *Democracies*” view, any variations or tensions between the two parts may reflect Tocqueville’s maturation, rather than any theoretical inconsistencies or about-faces irreconcilable with his earlier views.¹⁸

The task of this chapter is to make the case, from the text of *Democracy in America* Volumes I and II, but with special attention to Volume II, that Tocqueville understood *intérêt bien entendu* at least in part in Christian terms and specifically in terms of Christian virtue. Building from Tocqueville’s anthropology, in which interest and man’s natural inclinations to politics and religion are central, it draws from the published text and largely uncited manuscript notes to detail his working out of *intérêt bien entendu* in Christian terms. This departs from some interpretations of *intérêt bien entendu*, which I will discuss shortly. I do not mean to suggest by my interpretation here that the reading I present is the exclusive, only, or best interpretation of a concept that so many other scholars, in their study and erudition over the last century, have understood differently. However, the fact that there remains so much disagreement about what some have called Tocqueville’s “key doctrine” alerts us that there may be much more still to discover.¹⁹ Though this reading departs from some prominent readings, it is not, however, inconsistent with all prominent readings though it builds from passages and writings that similar readings have generally speaking not fore-fronted. As part of making this case, I will at several points address the nature of what has been called Tocqueville’s distinctive “art of writing”. Detailing Tocqueville’s formulation of *intérêt bien entendu* in Christian terms puts in fresh perspective his own strategy as a democratic moralist as well as his understanding of the

¹⁸ See for example Delba Winthrop, “Tocqueville, Revolution and Liberal Democracy,” *The Review of Politics* 52, 2 (1990): 323–29. See also Wolin, 95.

¹⁹ See George Anastaplo, “On the Central Doctrine of *Democracy in America*,” in *Interpreting Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, ed. Ken Masugi, (Savage, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1991), 425–461.

relationship between utility and virtue. Addressing a democratic audience meant Tocqueville wrote carefully, even “modestly.” It also means he “consistently couched his analysis in terms of interest,” rather than in terms of philosophy, virtue, or “rarer human inclinations and desires.”²⁰ Whether *Democracy* can be said to contain a view of “man simply” is contested, and Tocqueville does not engage in abstracted state of nature theorizing.²¹ Yet he offers myriad statements that together suggest a substantive, if veiled, account of human nature.²² His modesty does not preclude his presentation of a philosophy. Similarly, his writing in terms of interest does not preclude his thinking in terms of virtue about *what he also* evaluated and presented in terms of interest. To paraphrase what he wrote of God, perhaps in the eyes of Tocqueville, the beautiful is also the useful.²³

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, provides a brief overview of scholarly literature engaging the concept of *intérêt bien entendu*. It proceeds to lay out Tocqueville’s first thoughts on American interest and the American moral character as articulated in early letters from America. Next, turning to *Democracy* itself, it examines Tocqueville’s view of natural interest,

²⁰ Catherine Zuckert, “The Saving Minimum? Tocqueville on the Role of Religion in America—Then and Now,” *American Political Thought*, 5, 3 (2016): 464-518.

²¹ On Tocqueville’s human anthropology, see Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, trans. John Waggoner, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), and Pierre Manent, “Democratic Man, Aristocratic Man, and Man Simply: Some Remarks on an Equivocation in Tocqueville’s Thought,” trans. Daniel J. Mahoney and Paul Seaton, *Perspectives on Political Science* 27 (1998): 80. Jech contests Manent’s argument. See Jech, “‘Man Simply’”, 84-85. See also Richard Avramenko, *Courage* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 198-199.

Tocqueville’s lack of a state of nature is a widely held view among Tocqueville scholars. For a well-articulated alternative view, see Raul G. Rodriguez, “Tocqueville’s State of Nature Foundation,” *American Journal of Political Science* 66, 2 (2002): 352-64.

²² For one description of discovering, connecting, and discerning the pattern of these “statements, phrases, words, implications, and suggestions,” Mansfield, “Intimations of Philosophy in Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*,” 206. For a discussion of the effect of the social state on nature, see Michael Zuckert, “On Social State,” in *Tocqueville’s Defense of Human Liberty*, ed. Peter Augustine Lawler, (New York: Garland, 1993), 3-17.

²³ DA, 1282, note f.

highlighting its relationship with sociability and religiosity. Then it details Tocqueville's presentation of *intérêt bien entendu* and his working out of the concept in Christian terms, and what that entails for his theory more broadly.²⁴ It then introduces the next chapter, which examines implications of this reading in Tocqueville's account of soft despotism.

Understanding Tocqueville's *intérêt bien entendu*

The literature on *intérêt bien entendu* is wide-ranging and deep. Some readers interpret it as a political concept, for example as Madisonian, pluralist, or republican, though the nuances of these readings are themselves contested.²⁵ Roger Boesche argues Tocqueville does not follow Smith, Mandeville, Madison or “modern pluralists” who view the public interest as constructed from private interests. Rather, Boesche's Tocqueville sees *intérêt bien entendu* as entailing respect for and participation in the political common good.²⁶ For Sheldon Wolin, *intérêt bien entendu*, which he translates as “enlightened selfishness,” amounts to the ego seeing its interests served by the common interest. For him, demotic politics is “rooted primarily in self-interest.”²⁷ Others stress that Tocqueville seems to have initially thought of American interest in light of Montesquieu and that he raised the question in his early letters from America whether republican

²⁴ Tocqueville in the relevant passages uses the term “Christian”, not specifying Catholic or Protestant, or any specific Protestant denomination.

²⁵ Marvin Zetterbaum, *Tocqueville and the problem of democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 101-112; Max Lerner, “Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*: Politics, Law, and the Elite,” *Antioch Review*, 25 (1965): 43-565. Select views on Tocqueville and the Founding: James Ceaser, “Alexis de Tocqueville and the Two-Founding Thesis,” *The Review of Politics* 73, 2 (2011): 219–243. James Ceaser, “Alexis de Tocqueville on Political Science, Political Culture, and the Role of the Intellectual,” *The American Political Science Review* 79, 3 (1985): 656–72; Rory Schacter, “Tocqueville's New Political Science as a correction of The Federalist,” in *Exploring the Social and Political Economy of Alexis de Tocqueville*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2020), 9-36.

²⁶ Boesche, 194-211.

²⁷ Wolin, 195-7, 216.

civic virtue was possible under modern democratic conditions.²⁸ To this we will return. But is *intérêt bien entendu* comparable to civic republican virtue? Jon Elster argues “Civic duty is absent from [Tocqueville’s] work,” and J.L. Kimpell maintains Tocqueville “[stepped] outside of the republican polarity of civic virtue versus self-interest.”²⁹ Others prefer to evaluate *intérêt bien entendu* in terms of rights and honor, arguing that Tocqueville aimed to “expand the modern notion of rational self-interest to include a sense of honor” – problematic because honor is aristocratic. In Delba Winthrop’s words, “That American moral doctrine is a doctrine of self-interest well understood is as much a statement of a problem as it is a solution to it.”³⁰

Still others see strong parallels for *intérêt bien entendu* in Aristotelian virtue ethical or teleological frameworks.³¹ On such a reading, *intérêt bien entendu* makes possible habituation in

²⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville to Ernest de Chabrol, in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. Roger Boesche, trans. James Toupin and Roger Boesche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 37–41. Henceforth *Selected Letters*. See also Schleifer, 290–322. On a similar theme, Brian Danoff, “Lincoln and Tocqueville on Democratic Leadership and Self-Interest Properly Understood,” *Review of Politics* 67, 4 (2005): 687–719. Danoff agrees with Richter that Tocqueville hoped self-interest could be left behind altogether. Melvin Richter, “The Uses of Theory: Tocqueville’s Adaptation of Montesquieu,” in *Essays in Theory and History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 97.

²⁹ Elster, 59. J. L. Kimpell, “Republican civic virtue, enlightened self-interest and Tocqueville,” *European Journal of Political Theory*, 14, 3 (2015): 345–367.

³⁰ Delba Winthrop, “Rights: A Point of Honor,” in *Interpreting Tocqueville’s Democracy in America*, 394–424. Delba Winthrop, “Rights, Interests, and Honor,” *Tocqueville’s Defense of Human Liberty*, ed. Peter Augustine Lawler and Joseph Alulis (New York, NY: Garland, 1993), 203–222.

³¹ Bruce Frohnen, *Virtue and the Promise of Conservatism* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993). Alexander Jech, “‘Man Simply’: Excavating Tocqueville’s Conception of Human Nature,” *Perspectives on Political Science*, 42, 2 (2013): 84–93. Examinations of Aristotelianism in Tocqueville include: James Ceaser, *Liberal Democracy and Political Science*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 1990; Robert Eden, “Tocqueville and the Problem of Natural Right,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, 3 (1990): 379–87; Robert P. Kraynak, “Tocqueville’s Constitutionalism,” *American Political Science Review* 81, 4 (1987): 1175–95; Pierre Manent, “Tocqueville, Political Philosopher,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, ed. Cheryl B. Welch, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 108–20; Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, “Editor’s Introduction,” in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Paul Rahe, *Soft Despotism, Democracy’s Drift*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 221–240. For examples of mapping ancient concepts of virtue onto Tocqueville’s theory, Richard Avramenko and Brianne Wolf, “Disciplining the Rich: Tocqueville on Philanthropy and Privilege,” *Review of Politics* 83, 3 (2021): 351–374; Avramenko, *Courage*; Shannon R. Krause, *Liberalism with Honor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

behaviors and dispositions that uphold political liberty and the common good. The common good is not, on this view, a utilitarian aggregate of individual goods, but its own good in which individuals participate and which is non-rivalrous to private goods.³² For some, other moral and ethical frameworks better capture Tocqueville's posture towards the democratic soul and the "modern moral outlook."³³ Such readings especially approach *intérêt bien entendu* through his attentiveness to psychology and religion, chiefly the Christian tradition in the French and American contexts.³⁴ There is broad agreement Tocqueville "situates himself within a long French moral tradition" that was shaped by Christian theology and was particularly concerned with the morality of self-interest.³⁵ As a result, Tocqueville has been given the title of democracy's "spiritual director" operating in the tradition of Fenelon, Pascal, and others.³⁶ Nevertheless, interpretations of the possible religious character of *intérêt bien entendu* differ. Stressing Tocqueville's echoes with Augustine, Joshua Mitchell argues "self-interest rightly

³² Maura Priest, "Alexis de Tocqueville's Citizenship: A Model of Collective Virtue," in *Exploring the Social and Political Economy of Alexis de Tocqueville*, 189-224. See also Michael Pakaluk, "Natural Law and Civil Society," *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society*, ed. Simone Chambers, Will Kymlicka, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 131-148.

³³ Dana Jalbert Stauffer, "Tocqueville on the Modern Moral Situation: Democracy and the Decline of Devotion," *American Political Science Review*, 108, 4 (2014): 772-783.

³⁴ Aaron L. Herold, "Tocqueville on Religion, the Enlightenment, and the Democratic Soul," *American Political Science Review* 109, 3 (2015): 523-534. Also Mansfield, "Intimations of Philosophy." For biographical treatments of Tocqueville's religiosity: Hugh Brogan, *Alexis de Tocqueville* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Andre Jardin, *Tocqueville*, (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988); Olivier Zunz, *The Man Who Understood Democracy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

³⁵ Elster, 52. See also Ryan Patrick Hanley, "Tocqueville and the Philosophy of the Enlightenment," in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, ed. Richard Boyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022,) 47-68. See also Ryan Patrick Hanley, *The Political Philosophy of Fénelon* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), and Ryan Patrick Hanley, *Love's Enlightenment: Rethinking Charity in Modernity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

³⁶ Aurelian Craiutu, "Tocqueville's Dialogues," in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, 69-99. Ralph Hancock suggests Tocqueville wants to "save democratic souls" but takes Tocqueville's "governing intention" as political, not moral. Ralph Hancock, "The Uses and Hazards of Christianity in Tocqueville's Attempt to Save Democratic Souls," in *Interpreting Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, 348-393.

understood is not political in origin. It is religious”; a free Tocquevillian liberal, commercial republic depends on prior theological foundations.³⁷ Others take the Jansenist and French moralist traditions as crucial but do not see *intérêt bien entendu* as necessarily religious in either origin or in orientation. Peter Augustine Lawler, who stresses Pascal’s influence on Tocqueville, contends *intérêt bien entendu* is “heartless” but while pretending to be utilitarian, it keeps “open the possibility of spiritual responses” to democratic life.³⁸ Lucien Jaume’s Tocqueville is “broadly ... utilitarian” yet deeply spiritual, his political science infused by Jansenist and Pauline themes, concerns, and style.³⁹ For Jaume, *intérêt bien entendu* creates “une belle illusion” that obscures the admixture of virtue and self-interest in the heart.⁴⁰ Alan Kahan’s Tocqueville, like Françoise Mélonio’s, is a “Pascale politique.”⁴¹ Kahan insists *intérêt bien entendu* is a “secular mechanism” that, like religion, offers checks and balances on the soul. That said, Kahan does not understand religion and *intérêt bien entendu* as rivals; he does not consider *intérêt bien entendu* virtuous but it can “lead a person to religion” and “contributes to, and encourages, real virtue and

³⁷ Joshua Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 81, 190. Henceforth *Fragility*. Also Joshua Mitchell, “It is not Good for Man to be Alone,” *Friendship and Politics*, ed. John Von Heyking, Richard Avramenko, (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 268-284; Joshua Mitchell, “Tocqueville’s Puritans,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, 347-366.

³⁸ Peter Augustine Lawler, “Tocqueville on the Doctrine of Interest,” in *Homeless and at Home in America*, (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 2007), 152-167. Lawler wrote on Pascalian themes in Tocqueville repeatedly. See Peter Augustine Lawler, “The Human Condition: Tocqueville’s Debt to Rousseau and Pascal,” in *Liberty, Equality, Democracy*, ed. Eduardo Nolla (New York: NYU Press, 1992), 1-20. Peter Augustine Lawler, *The Restless Mind* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993). Peter Augustine Lawler, “Tocqueville on Pride, Interest, and Love,” *Polity* 28, 2 (1995): 217-236. See also on nineteenth century Jansenism and its relationship to liberal political thought, Cheryl Welch, “Jansenism and Liberalism: The making of moeurs in social change,” *History of Political Thought* 7, 1 (1986): 151-65.

³⁹ Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 156, 146-191.

⁴⁰ Lucien Jaume, “Le ‘Cœur Démocratique’ Selon Tocqueville,” *La revue Tocqueville* 27, 2 (2006) : 35-44.

⁴¹ Alan Kahan, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 11, 75. Alan Kahan, “Checks and Balances for Democratic Souls,” *American Political Thought* 4 (2015): 100-119. Alan Kahan, “Democratic Grandeur,” in *Tocqueville’s Voyages*, 177–201. Françoise Mélonio, “‘Une sorte de Pascal politique’ : Tocqueville et la littérature démocratique,” *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France*, 105 (2005) : 273-284.

greatness.”⁴² Catherine Zuckert articulates a related view that “The specifically religious content of ‘interest well understood’ was minimal but irreplaceable” and that the “necessary beliefs are few, simple, and we should note, not distinctively Christian.”⁴³

Still others who stress Tocqueville’s role as democratic moralist argue compellingly that *intérêt bien entendu* is not in harmony with or conducive to religious or moral virtue and devotion, specifically Christian or otherwise. Dana Jalbert Stauffer voices one iteration of this view. For her, *intérêt bien entendu* seems necessary in democracy given the “modern moral outlook.” In fact, however, it “fails to provide a rationale for devotion; it opposes it and undermines it.”⁴⁴ Jean M. Yarbrough offers a countervailing perspective. Against the functionalist interpretations of Tocqueville, she contends he is concerned with both human grandeur and the immortality of the soul; both liberty and religion respond to the needs of the soul.⁴⁵ On her view, it is “tempting to conclude” Tocqueville “lost faith” in Christianity’s ability to moderate democratic materialism. However, the “lowly doctrine of self-interest” does not make disinterested contemplation or sincere “love of God” impossible.⁴⁶

It becomes clearer, in light of the literature, that the task of interpreting *intérêt bien entendu* thus is closely related to interpreting the intents of Tocqueville’s political science and his role as a moralist working within the constraints of the democratic social state, including the

⁴² Kahan, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Religion*, 60-61.

⁴³ Zuckert, “The Saving Minimum? Tocqueville on the Role of Religion in America—Then and Now.”

⁴⁴ Stauffer, 772.

⁴⁵ Jean M. Yarbrough, “Tocqueville on the Needs of the Soul,” *Perspectives on Political Science*, 47, 3 (2018): 123-141. William Galston also contests the functionalist arguments. William Galston, “Tocqueville on Liberalism and Religion,” *Social Research*, 54, 3 (1987): 499-518.

⁴⁶ Yarbrough, 133-134.

constraints of language and style.⁴⁷ His was a “new kind” of liberalism in style as much as substance.⁴⁸ Hence the distinctive Tocquevillian “art of writing” that is simultaneously approachable and charming but also subtle and slippery.⁴⁹ This is perhaps among the reasons not just *intérêt bien entendu* but his “characterization of civil society remains poorly understood”, despite the amplification of Tocquevillian civil society on Right and Left in the last century.⁵⁰ As Richard Boyd notes, the “bumper sticker Tocqueville” is so familiar that his theory has been romanticized and idealized without it or its implications being fully grasped.

It has long been tradition in Tocqueville scholarship to rely on notes, letters, or other lesser, non-canonical, or unpublished writings to clarify the published text’s possible meanings. That a set of neglected notes displays Tocqueville’s theorization of *intérêt bien entendu* in terms of Christian virtue may raise as many questions as it answers. Yet, considering this widely varying literature and in the spirit of exploring what remains poorly understood, it behooves the scholar to seek greater clarity. That is the task here which this chapter undertakes by an accumulation of evidence ranging from the historical and contextual to the exegetical. We can begin with what he first thought of the interest of Americans.

⁴⁷ On Tocqueville’s democratic language, see for example Richard Avramenko, “The Grammar of Indifference: Tocqueville and the Language of Democracy,” *Political Theory* 45, 4 (2017): 495–523; Salih Emre Gercek, “Alexis de Tocqueville’s Reluctant ‘Democratic Language,’” *Review of Politics* 83, 1 (2021): 21–44; Jaume (2013), 193–226).

⁴⁸ See Herold, “Tocqueville on Religion, the Enlightenment, and the Democratic Soul,” and Mansfield, “Intimations of Philosophy in Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*.”

⁴⁹ Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 188–190, Mansfield, “Intimations of Philosophy in Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*,” 207–11.

⁵⁰ Richard Boyd, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, 24–25. See also Richard Boyd, *Uncivil Society: The Perils of Pluralism and the Making of Modern Liberalism*, (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2004). On Tocqueville’s adaptation by American Right and Left, see Richard Boyd, “Tocqueville’s Conservatism and the Conservative’s Tocqueville,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, 133–156, and Robert T. Gannett, Jr., “Tocqueville and the Political Left in America,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, 157–177.

His prepared mind and first encounters with the interested Americans

Tocqueville first broached the topic of self-interest or of interest among the Americans early in his travels to America. His thinking on it, however, evolved as he came to know the Americans better and as his observations came into sharper focus, a process Wolin compares to the artistic or poetical process of painting a tableau or crafting a mythos, “imagistic rather than pointillist.”⁵¹ As Tocqueville wrote in Volume I’s Introduction, “I admit that in America I saw more than America; I sought there an image of democracy itself, its tendencies, its character, its prejudices, its passions; I wanted to know democracy, if only to know at least what we must hope or fear from it.”⁵² Notwithstanding his genius, his eyes took time to adjust to the new sights and to not just see more clearly, but to understand what he saw. Before we offer an exegesis of Tocqueville’s anthropology and of *intérêt bien entendu*, how did Tocqueville think of interest initially upon his arrival in America? We can glean some indications from what we know he read, others by his writings.

As to what he read, it is a scourge to Tocqueville’s admirers and scholars that so little is clearly known about his reading habits and of what he did and did not read. This includes in political economy, an area scholars have until recently found lacking in Tocqueville. Drescher notes that Tocqueville’s later library in Normandy contained both Say’s optimistic liberal political economy as well as the more pessimistic Sismondi. As we will explore in Chapter 3, Tocqueville’s interlocutors on political economy were varied and grew over time, as his travels to England and Ireland and his political participation brought industrialization into closer view.

⁵¹ On Tocqueville’s artistic vision and theory as seeing or *theoria*, see Wolin, 34-56, 76-101, 153, 163-167, 281. See also Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 184-189.

⁵² DA, 28.

Now, it suffices to briefly provide some historical context to what shaped what Tocqueville may have thought of “interest” as a concept.

Beyond whatever he had discovered and explored of Enlightenment texts in his father’s library as a teenager, and beyond his readings while studying the law, Tocqueville was of course a bright young man absorbing the intellectual debates of his day. He and his peers read widely in the liberal *Globe* newspaper, where articles on Smith, Say, Malthus, and Ricardo offered criticisms of both the mercantilism and physiocracy of the Villèle administration and of newfangled Saint-Simonian theories. Writers such as Charles Duchâtel insisted, against the Quesnay-style top-down state organization of the economy, that “Only in allowing individuals to exercise their own self-interest without hindrance could society’s interest be attained.”⁵³ Duchâtel similarly linked this argument to a defense of association which legitimist circles would often adopt. As a young man seeking to forge the “political man” in himself, Tocqueville of course made moves to become familiar with these debates. In the winter of 1828-1829, when Say began a series of lectures at the *Conservatoire des arts et métiers* on his *Cours complet d’économie politique*, Tocqueville and Beaumont studied the economist Jean-Baptiste Say, sometimes seeking clarification of Say’s ideas from their friend Andre Dupin. Brogan suggests, however, they did not get very far in that undertaking, so absorbed were they in Francois Guizot’s lectures which were offered in the same period. Michael Drolet nevertheless shows via Tocqueville’s notes on Say that the young man did make a serious and engaged attempt. In Drolet’s words, “Though Tocqueville rejected Say’s observations on commodities, he endorsed significant aspects of Say’s work, particularly the political economist’s stress on the importance

⁵³ See Michael Drolet, “Democracy and political economy: Tocqueville’s thoughts on J.-B. Say and T.R. Malthus,” *History of European Ideas* 29, 2 (2003): 159-181.

of self-interest rightly understood to good government and an egalitarian society.”⁵⁴ After the pair departed on their American journey from Le Havre on April 2, they returned to Say’s *Cours d’économie politique* while on board the ship, suggesting they took Say as a helpful preparation for their discovery of America.⁵⁵

That said, by the time Tocqueville composed *Democracy* I and II, Tocqueville had found he had non-minor quibbles with Say’s economic thought. Say did not believe in checks and balances, as did Montesquieu and Guizot in politics, as did (analogously) Smith and Malthus in the realm of economic interests. Furthermore, Say did not view economics as a discipline to be incorporated in broader study – where for Smith, political economy was part of jurisprudence and politics, and for Malthus, Villeneuve-Bargemont, and others, it was part of a broader Christian moral science of politics. Later in life, Tocqueville offers sharp public criticism of Say for arguments that economics could be a universal science, above and separated from moral and political concerns.⁵⁶ Tocqueville’s reassessment of Say and of his branch of liberal political economy was certainly well underway as he wrote *Democracy* I. The notes on *Democracy* II which put *intérêt bien entendu* in Christian terms underscore what other scholars have noted, that by 1840 (or as early as 1835 and 1836, with the “Memoir on Pauperism”), that reassessment had been completed. As we will discuss at greater length in Chapter 3, which turns to how a Christian

⁵⁴ Drolet, 168. Drolet continues: “... this had much to do with Say’s assessment of America as a large-scale republic whose inhabitants through a judicious combination of laws, customs, manners, and civic education successfully united virtue with self-interest.”

⁵⁵ Brogan, 90, 150. Jardin makes a similar suggestion (Jardin, 81) that they were far more interested in politics and history than in economic thought. Mélonio does not discuss Say but underlines the degree to which Tocqueville had an idiosyncratic intellectual formation, due to his liberal politics, on the one hand, but also to his aristocratic and Catholic upbringing. See Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, 7-17.

⁵⁶ See Drolet, 172, in which he cites Tocqueville to Edouard, 19 March 1844, OC, XIV, pp. 239–240, and an article in *Le Commerce*, 6 January 1845 where he criticizes Say for arguing economics is a universal science. Roger Boesche, ‘Tocqueville and *Le Commerce*’, pp. 285–286. F

understanding of *intérêt bien entendu* enlightens Tocqueville's writings on social reform, there is a strong case to be made that Tocqueville had also been primed by his Jansenist inclinations and by his own religious feelings – however understood -- to accept Christian moral and economic critiques of liberal economic and political thought and adapt them in a manner he considered both compatible with his own unique liberalism and salutary for the democratic social state. As he wrote in 1834, before he had finished *Democracy I* and as he and his friends contemplated the project of a newspaper together,

Although political economy today strikes me as materialistic in all its efforts, I would like the journal to emphasize the more immaterial aspects of this science; I would like it to bring in ideas and feelings of morality as elements of prosperity and happiness; and I would like it to try to rehabilitate spiritualism in politics and to make spiritualism popular by driving home its utility.⁵⁷

Let us return, however, to Tocqueville's early discussions of American interest. On May 29, 1831, as Tocqueville and Beaumont made their trip to Sing-Sing from New York City, where they had been feted for about two weeks, Tocqueville made the following note:

The theory of ancient Republics was the sacrifice of the interest of the individual to the general good; in this respect one can say that it was virtuous. The theory of this one seems to be to include the interest of the individual in that of the whole. A sort of refined and intelligent egoism seems to be the pivot on which the whole machine turns. These people do not bother to find out if public virtue is good, but they claim to be able to prove that it is useful. If this last point is true, as I in part believe, this society can pass for enlightened, but not virtuous. But how far can the two principles of the good of the individual and the good of the whole really coincide?⁵⁸

A few days later, on June 1, he proved himself still preoccupied with this question, and posited a potential solution:

When one reflects on the nature of this society, one sees up to a certain point the explanation of the preceding: American society is composed of a thousand different elements newly brought together. The men who live under these laws are still English, French, German,

⁵⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Oeuvres Complètes* XIII-1, pp. 361-362, letter to Kergolay in 1834.

⁵⁸ Cited in Pierson, 113.

Dutch. They have neither religion, nor morals, nor ideas in common. Up to the present it cannot be said that the Americans have a national character, unless it is that of having none. Hence there are no common memories, no national roots. What can then be the only tie which unites the different parts of this vast body? *L'intérêt*?⁵⁹

A June 9 letter to his friend in Versailles Ernest de Chabrol puts some of these early estimations of the American character in a similar light.

Imagine, my dear friend, if you can, a society formed of all the nations of the world... people having different languages, beliefs, opinions: in a word, a society without roots, without memories, without prejudices, without routines, without common ideas, without a national character, yet a hundred times happier than our own; more virtuous? I doubt it. That is the starting point: What serves as the link among such diverse elements? Interest. That is the secret. The private interest [*intérêt particulier*] that breaks through at each moment, the interest that, moreover, appears openly and even proclaims itself as a social theory.

In this we are quite far from the ancient republics, it must be admitted, and nonetheless this people is republican and I do not doubt it will be so for a long time yet. And for this people a republic is the best of governments.

I can explain this phenomenon only by thinking that America finds itself, for the present, in a physical situation so fortunate that private interest [*intérêt particulier*] is never contrary to the general interest, which is certainly not the case in Europe. ...

One must not look here either for that family spirit or for those ancient traditions of honor and virtue that distinguish so eminently several of our old societies of Europe. A people that seems to live only to enrich itself could not be a virtuous people in the strict sense of the word; but it is well ordered. ...

... take all that I have just told you as only first impressions which one day I will perhaps modify.⁶⁰

A reader familiar with *Democracy* can immediately identify in these initial impressions ideas that would endure – interest as an important moral tie – and ideas Tocqueville would later modify or completely jettison – the absence of an American national character and the lack of religion, mores, and ideas in common. From the start Tocqueville was deeply concerned therefore with the American national and moral character, and perceived that interest, related to but distinct from

⁵⁹ Ibid, 114.

⁶⁰ Tocqueville to Chabrol, June 9, 1831, in *Selected Letters*, 37-41; also in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Lettres Choiesies*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), *Lettres Choiesies*, 184-188, and in Pierson, 129-131.

virtue, was central to Americans and would be central to his understanding of them. As other scholars have emphasized, he did first attempt to understand the nature of that interest by a Montesquieuan comparison between ancient and modern republics and the principles foundational to their character. However, around the same time, Tocqueville wrote to his father that “There is nothing absolute in the theoretical value of [American] political institutions.”⁶¹ Tocqueville and Beaumont still had much to learn and observe. We cannot draw from these first impressions any firm conclusions.

The Fourth of July celebrations in Albany several weeks later would correct many of these impressions by showing Tocqueville glimpses into the American national character. In fact, American political and civic culture had in it “something deeply felt and truly great”. Though the American government seemed to him a shadow of the French, this did not stop Americans from pursuing and achieving various ends through civil society for the public interest or common good.⁶² Shortly before the Fourth, writing to friend Louis de Kergolay, Tocqueville demonstrated that his evaluation of the moral character of Americans has continued to deepen. Kergolay had asked Tocqueville whether there “are *beliefs* here.”⁶³ Contrary to early June, Tocqueville now describes his envy that in America the “immense majority are united in regard to certain common opinions”. These include the nature and goodness of republican politics, “faith in human wisdom” and “faith in the doctrine of human perfectibility” and capacity for enlightenment. Of religion he observes a strong preference for morality over dogma, though once he says Americans “formerly” preferred discussions of dogma and now practice a “so-called tolerance”

⁶¹ Pierson, 115.

⁶² In Pierson, 183.

⁶³ Tocqueville to Kergolay, June 29, 1831, in *Selected Letters*, 45-59; also in *Lettres Choisies*, 191-202.

which seems to him “nothing but huge indifference.”⁶⁴ (He would later revise this slightly, after meeting the intellectuals of Boston and Philadelphia.⁶⁵) It is against Catholicism, he says, that each Protestant sect defines itself. While the Protestant majority “[lives] and [dies] in compromises” and in radical forms comes close to pure philosophy, Catholics continue to believe in their Church’s strong intellectual authority and therefore are “as intolerant in a word as people who believe”. Where Protestant ministers are “in effect businessmen of religion,” Catholic priests “are completely devoted to the religion of sacrifice they have embraced.” Unitarianism is the farthest in the direction Protestantism has gone towards natural religion, deism, and pure philosophy. Both it and Catholicism each “grow rich” from “the losses of [mainstream] Protestantism.” He concludes that, were men to increasingly be attracted to natural religion of the sort towards which Unitarianism tends, they would lose “any belief in the afterlife and they will fall steadily into the single doctrine of self-interest [*l’intérêt*].”⁶⁶

It would take several years of further research, reading, and contemplation – 1832 to Volume I’s publication in 1835 – for Tocqueville to produce a whole from these discrete and impressionistic observations. They should not be given undue weight. They also carry a different interpretative weight than the notes he composed as he drafted and wrote *Democracy*. However, let us isolate two notable points. First, Tocqueville initially attempted to put American interest and self-interest in contrast with the virtue of ancient republics at a time when he understood

⁶⁴ *Selected Letters*, 48.

⁶⁵ Tocqueville to Chabrol, October 26, 1831, *Lettres Choiesies*, 241-248. “Il arrive de là qu’en Amérique la religion est encore, après la politique, ce qui occupe le plus les intelligences. Il est évident qu’ici les caractères froids et calculateurs, les esprits argumentateurs et logiques, ont une grande pente à arriver de degré en degré jusqu’au déisme, tandis que les âmes ardentes, les imaginations passionnées, sont entraînées vers le catholicisme. Ce dernier se trouvera un jour en face de la religion naturelle, je ne doute nullement de la chose bien que j’ignore l’époque de son arrivée. »

⁶⁶ *Selected Letters*, 52.

Americans as so diverse as to have no sets of common ideas or beliefs. Interest, in this first framework, would be the moral tie universally acceptable to all, despite differences of religion, language, etc. However, he next perceived that Americans did in fact possess a common national character and sets of ideas and beliefs about politics and the substance of morality. He then posited that interest might be all that would remain as the substance of moral doctrine if democratic peoples lost their belief in the afterlife and immortality of the soul.

In both instances, Tocqueville takes interest (as we will further discuss shortly) as part of the foundation of man's nature. Hence it serves as 1) a common denominator in the face of what he first thinks is an overwhelming diversity that prevents more substantial moral ties, and as 2) the last remaining "doctrine" left to man to follow if positive religion in the form of Protestant or Catholic Christianity is replaced by a deism that slides into atheism or pantheism. Self-interest is what remains when higher moral systems have been abandoned. That is not clearly an endorsement. For many of his contemporary Frenchmen, it would be the farthest thing from an endorsement of America.⁶⁷

How then to understand Americans' materialistic and mercantile industriousness and sometimes cold and calculating manner? Their public spiritedness and, from the perspective of a Frenchman, remarkable absence of administrative centralization? Their capacity for township governance and habit of association, often to humanitarian or philanthropic ends? Their distinctive, unified acceptance of republicanism in the political order and of Christianity in the moral order? Was there a virtue to be found in the way Americans pursued their interests, and if so, what was the nature of that virtue? Most generally, what might be gleaned from the example

⁶⁷ See Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 106-115.

of the American people for the providential march of democracy in France? Tocqueville would return to Paris, beset by cholera, in early 1832 to begin working on these questions, questions of such magnitude and scope that one volume would not suffice to answer. From here we turn to the text of *Democracy* itself.

Self-interest, the “fixed point in the human heart”

Whether or not Tocqueville can be said to have an idea of man, identifiable apart from the regime, is a question that has been of some fascination and contestation among scholars.

Alexander Jech suggests that when we seek “Man simply” in Tocqueville, we should not seek a “third man” but rather “principles inherent in humanity in virtue of which human nature is transformed by its circumstances.”⁶⁸ The social state, like a classical regime, builds upon nature, giving form to the underlying human matter, including “self-interest and the religious impulse.”⁶⁹ Consistent with others in the liberal tradition, Tocqueville develops an account of human beings as naturally interested and as naturally self-interested – or, to use his exact words, men each possess a personal interest which is “the only fixed point in the human heart,” a statement that echoes his earlier notes from America that posit personal or private interest as a least common denominator. The full statement, often used as the compelling foundation for a Tocquevillian anthropology based on interest, appears towards the end of *Democracy* I, in “Of the Idea of Rights in the United States.”

Don’t you see that religions are growing weaker and that the divine notion of rights is disappearing? Don’t you find that mores are becoming corrupted and that, with them, the moral notion of rights is fading away? ...

⁶⁸ Jech, 85. Jech’s argument relies on Zuckert, “On Social State.”

⁶⁹ Ibid.

If, in the midst of this universal disturbance, you do not succeed in linking the idea of rights to personal interest, which offers itself as the only fixed point in the human heart, what will you have left for governing the world, if not fear?⁷⁰

In stressing personal interest, Tocqueville echoes Hobbes, Locke, and others in the early liberal tradition.⁷¹ Simultaneously “Of the Idea of Rights in the United States” alerts the reader to Tocqueville’s differences from his liberal antecedents and his similarities to classical and Christian antecedents.⁷² He begins this section not with rights or interest but with virtue: “After the general idea of virtue, I do not know any more beautiful than that of rights, or rather these two ideas merge. The idea of rights is nothing more than the idea of virtue introduced into the political world.”⁷³ Virtue and rights are linked, as are rights and interest. By a transitive property, so too, then, would virtue and interest be.⁷⁴

Tocqueville in fact makes deliberate efforts here to distinguish his view of self-interest from that of liberalism’s foundations in Hobbes and Locke, both of whom ground human experience in sensation. He cites here *homo puer robustus*, in a clear allusion to Thomas Hobbes as well as a potential allusion to Rousseau who cites this Hobbesian dictum in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*. As for Hobbes, interest is essential to Tocqueville’s account of human nature. This justifies a helpful, though all too brief and simplistic, comparison.⁷⁵ *Leviathan*

⁷⁰ DA, 391.

⁷¹ See Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1997), 119-124, on interest’s construction as a modern answer to the classical framework of passion, virtue, and vice.

⁷² Jech, 89. Mitchell, *Fragility*, 74-87. See also Rahe, 158, for a nice statement of Tocqueville’s closeness to the “outlook of the ancients”. See also Mansfield, “Intimations of Philosophy,” and Harvey C. Mansfield, “Tocqueville on Religion and Liberty,” *American Political Thought* 5 (2016): 250-275.

⁷³ DA, 389.

⁷⁴ Delba Winthrop argues that “The doctrine of self-interest well understood that Tocqueville describes is essentially that of natural rights theorists.” Winthrop, “Rights, a Point of Honor,” 413.

⁷⁵ Mitchell demonstrates Hobbes is not always far from Tocqueville. Mitchell, *Fragility*, 40-66.

begins from a materialist account of man's senses, imagination, passions, and ideas, and establishes as his greatest desire "continuall successe in obtaining those things which a man from time to time desireth, that is to say, continuall prospering." According to Hobbes's definition of science as an understanding of causality, man knows no other Felicity than "the Felicity of this life. ... Life is itself but Motion, and can never be without Desire, nor without Fear, no more than without Sense."⁷⁶ The authorized Sovereign establishes a peace which "all men agree... is Good" by ending the "warre of every man against every man" in coexistence under a common Power.⁷⁷ Hobbes's materialist human anthropology detailing the brutality of men by nature necessitates the authorization of a strong Sovereign based on fear for one's interest and therefore a form of coercion. When Tocqueville in this section on rights criticizes governments and theories founded on fear and force, Hobbes is an indirect object of Tocqueville's criticism.⁷⁸ For Tocqueville, however, interest is neither so material nor so this-worldly; that man has a spiritual nature that will not be satisfied by merely material interests is axiomatic for him in a way that it is not for Hobbes. On the one hand, Hobbes views religion as responding to a natural need in men; "the seed of *Religion*" is special to Man among other creatures.⁷⁹ The "invisible powers" of religion respond to a human need to allay "perpetual feare" and anxiety about *this world*, and Hobbes repeatedly underscores that we can know very little about anything beyond this world. In Hobbes as in Tocqueville, men then have, in Tocqueville's words, "an immense interest in

⁷⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed Richard Tuck, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 46.

⁷⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 90.

⁷⁸ DA, 392.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 75-76.

forming very fixed ideas about God, their soul, their general duties toward their creator and toward their fellows.”⁸⁰

The differences between Hobbes and Tocqueville, whatever their similarities, are significant. Tocqueville cites him in order to offer a critique, just as Rousseau did. Hobbes’s man is fundamentally asocial and selfish; government comes into being for his peace and tranquility and therefore makes him sociable and maintains his sociability through fear for his life and felicity. It creates his rights; his selfishness therefore long precedes his rights, and it is his selfishness that preserves his life under the Sovereign. Hobbes justifies Leviathan on the grounds that men can only discover their sociability through the imposition of law, names, definitions, and rules by a common power. In the state of nature, with its diverse and sundry laws of nature, the most fundamental principle is that of self-preservation, and therefore of pursuing one’s interest defined as continual secure existence. Man has no nature beyond what can be said of his capacity for material sensation and his experience of sensations. Hobbes’s political philosophy might very well exemplify, from Tocqueville’s perspective, the moral philosophy of a democratic social state in that it frames and explains all human action in terms of self-interest. For Tocqueville, however, this does not make it true nor should explanations and justifications for human behavior based on “interest” be taken simply at face value.

Tocqueville argues that the language of interest becomes more important under democracy because personal interest will “become more than ever the principal, if not the sole motivating force of the actions of men.”⁸¹ That is to say, the democratic social state *makes*

⁸⁰ DA, 743.

⁸¹ DA, 923.

interest the principal way in which men understand and explain themselves. Therefore, though interest is essential to human nature, it is unclear to Tocqueville whether interest *is really* the *sole* motivating force behind human action and human nature. Tocqueville famously argues Americans claim to act out of self-interest but often “give themselves to the disinterested and unconsidered impulses that are natural to man.”⁸² Tocqueville concludes that though the framework of interest will predominate, because the time of “blind devotions and instinctive virtues is fleeing from us,” “how each man will understand his individual interest remains to be known.”⁸³ Instructing democratic peoples in their “true interests” [*vrais intérêts*] is one of the central purposes of his new political science.

To instruct democracy, to revive its beliefs if possible, to purify its mores, to regulate its movements, to substitute little by little the science of public affairs for its inexperience, knowledge of its true interests for its blind instincts; to adapt its government to times and places; to modify it according to circumstances and men; such is the first of duties imposed today on those who lead society.

A new political science is needed for a world entirely new.⁸⁴

He returns to this language of “true interests” several times. Again, in the “Introduction”:

Then I imagine a society where all, seeing the law as their work, would love it and would submit to it without difficulty ... Since each person has rights and is assured of preserving his rights, a manly confidence and a kind of reciprocal condescension, as far from pride as from servility, would be established among all classes.

Instructed in their true interests, the people would understand that, in order to take advantage of the good things of society, you must submit to its burdens. The free association of citizens would then be able to replace the individual power of the nobles, and the State would be sheltered from tyranny and from license.⁸⁵

⁸² DA, 921.

⁸³ DA, 923, 967.

⁸⁴ DA, 16.

⁸⁵ DA, 20.

What then are man's true interests, and more specifically, what are the true interests of democratic men, qua individuals and qua common political society? Men can understand their interests poorly. Their interests are complex and are for Tocqueville (unlike for Hobbes) irreducible to sensation, material security and felicity, or anxious protection of their material security. Man has "instincts" that "exist despite his efforts."⁸⁶ This is not limited to interest; it also includes the inclination to political society and the spiritual and religious impulse. Tocqueville's statement that personal interest is the "only fixed point" in the human heart must be qualified in reference to his many other statements about human nature and its "unchanging foundations." Like Hobbes, Tocqueville believes that a common power, in the form of a social state, does and necessarily will shape men and modify their nature. However, Tocqueville is much closer to the ancients and to Montesquieu in asserting, in Paul Rahe's words describing Montesquieu, that "men are naturally social" and in rejecting "Hobbes's contention that the sole passion to be reckoned on is fear."⁸⁷

In his approach to the natural state of man where it concerns politics, Tocqueville does not follow state of nature traditions in which men are naturally asocial. Given the opportunity to do what Locke does in treating America as an example of either the state of nature or of the social contract par excellence, Tocqueville does the opposite. America's point of departure is the combination of the spirit of liberty and the spirit of religion, embodied in the New England township and the Puritan spirit, which is distinctly and clearly social and covenantal. We can debate whether Tocqueville was correct or circumspect in so prioritizing the New England character, over the Southern (which, in the case of Jamestown, more modeled the Lockean spirit)

⁸⁶DA, 940.

⁸⁷ Rahe, 103. Rahe puts Montesquieu and Rousseau in dialogue with Hobbes, not Tocqueville unfortunately.

or the Midwestern and Western frontiersman (more akin to the Hobbesian), or whether he erred theoretically by so devaluing the Declaration of Independence so as to give it effectually no causal power in the Founding.⁸⁸ However, he chose New England and in so doing, declared man naturally social and naturally political, and happiest in such a communal context. Tocqueville presents the township as the “only association that is so much a part of nature that wherever men are gathered together.” “Town society exists therefore among all peoples... the town seems to come directly from the hands of God.”⁸⁹ Townships have a “happy existence.” Their free institutions “recall constantly and in a thousand ways to each citizen that he lives in society ... by working for the good of your fellow citizens, you finally acquire the habit and taste of serving them.”⁹⁰ Therefore, “although private interest directs most human actions, in the United States as elsewhere, it does not rule all.” Man’s natural sociability is also seen in the “conjugal association” and the family, which, like the township, are natural.⁹¹ These natural associations provide a backdrop to the manifold voluntary associations of civil society. Against that backdrop, voluntary associations, which arise from the natural diversity of personal interests, build a thick social fabric. Due to this diversity, it is impossible and futile to attempt to “force [all men] to lead a common existence” but in the township, man’s self-interest is nevertheless educated through sharing in common life.⁹² As Mitchell emphasizes, Tocqueville has a keen sense of the political

⁸⁸ See on this Ceaser, “Alexis de Tocqueville and the Two-Founding Thesis.”

⁸⁹ DA, 101, 103-104, 114. Tocqueville compares the township to the medieval parish. Alexis de Tocqueville, *L’ancien régime et la révolution*, (Paris : GF Flammarion, 1988), 142. Henceforth ARR.

⁹⁰ DA, 893.

⁹¹ DA, 1064.

⁹² DA, 1068, 1268-9. See also Cyril Ferraton “L’idée d’association chez Alexis de Tocqueville, » *Cahiers d’économie Politique* 1, 46 (2004) : 45- 65.

and social implications of the Biblical profession, “it is not good for men to be alone.”⁹³ Thus while Tocqueville says personal interest is “the only fixed point in the human heart”, personal interest cannot be educated, well understood, or fulfilled atomistically.

Because however “habits of thinking in one realm spill over onto another,” that education is not *only* political and social.⁹⁴ In Tocqueville’s words, “Sentiments and ideas are renewed, the heart grows larger, and the human mind develops only by the reciprocal action of men on each other.”⁹⁵ The education of natural human interest is necessarily a moral education, and for Tocqueville mores derive from the social state and from religion. Tocqueville argues repeatedly that religiosity or the religious impulse is as natural to the human heart as personal interest, and that the two are intertwined.⁹⁶ The Puritans had an interest, for example, in intrepidly journeying to America because “wanted to assure the triumph of *an idea*,” namely how they would together, in political community, live out their theology.⁹⁷ Therefore, interest is a fixed point in the heart, but men also have “an immense interest in forming very fixed ideas about God, their soul, their general duties toward their creator and toward their fellows.”⁹⁸ Knowledge of one’s *intérêt bien*

⁹³ Mitchell, “It is not Good for Man to Be Alone.”

⁹⁴ Mitchell, *Fragility*, 24.

⁹⁵ DA, 900.

⁹⁶ I use these terms loosely, as Tocqueville does; however, spirituality suggests the general longing for the eternal and “contemplation of another world” to which religion, understood as an organized and (this is key) *directed* form of spirituality, leads.

⁹⁷ DA, 54. Also 78: “You must not believe that the piety of the Puritans was purely speculative, or that it proved to be unfamiliar with the course of human concerns. Puritanism, as I said above, was almost as much a political theory as a religious doctrine.”

⁹⁸ DA, 743, 475.

entendu in the form of a Pascalian wager -- perhaps more sometimes than sincere love of God, “for who can read the recesses of the heart?” --- brings Americans to “the foot of the altar.”⁹⁹

Religion appears twice in *Democracy* Volume II, first under the intellect, then under the heart and sentiments. Organized religion responds to man’s natural religiosity as well as to the social need for binding, widely held dogmatic beliefs.¹⁰⁰ In democracy religion “reigns... less as revealed doctrine than as common opinion” though this does not make religion and opinion the same. Whereas religion is a form of “law” and obedience to it “the free choice of a moral and independent being,” majority opinion “moves... haphazardly”. The omnipotence of the majority is “arbitrariness” unless bounded by a higher law, be it political or religious.¹⁰¹ In Volume I, Tocqueville intreats readers to take religion seriously because “the divine notion” of rights is “disappearing” as “religions are weakening.” Rights, like religion, are an aristocratic inheritance to be treasured; we should be interested in rights, and therefore interested in religion. However, he also defends religious faith on non-functionalist grounds as responding to and channeling the natural aspirations of man.

Never will the short space of sixty years enclose all of the imagination of man; the incomplete joys of this world will never be enough for his heart. Among all beings, man alone shows a natural distaste for existence and an immense desire to exist he scorns life and fears nothingness. These different instincts constantly push his soul toward the contemplation of another world, and it is religion that leads him there. So religion is only a particular form of hope, and it is as natural to the human heart as hope itself. It is by a type of mental aberration and with the help of a kind of moral violence exercised over their own nature, that men remove themselves from religious beliefs; an irresistible inclination

⁹⁹DA 475, 928.

¹⁰⁰ DA, 711-720. Note: I use these terms spirituality and religion, and religious impulse, loosely, as Tocqueville does; however, spirituality suggests the general longing for the eternal and “contemplation of another world” to which religion, understood as an organized and (this is key) *directed* form of spirituality, leads. For an examination of the “natural state of religion in democracy,” distinct from man’s natural religiosity, see Aristide Tessitore, “Alexis de Tocqueville on the Natural State of Religion in the Age of Democracy,” *Journal of Politics* 64, 4 (2002): 1137-1152.

¹⁰¹ DA, 720, note p.

brings them back to beliefs. Unbelief is an accident; faith alone is the permanent state of humanity.

So by considering religion only from a human viewpoint, you can say that all religions draw from man himself an element of strength that they can never lack, because it is due to one of the constituent principles of human nature.¹⁰²

The religious impulse, like hope and self-interest, is “irresistible.” Unlike in Hobbes, for whom religion is a consequence of fear and anxiety over one’s present material security projected into “invisible powers”, for Tocqueville religion reflects man’s attraction to the eternal and natural capacity for hope, not fear.¹⁰³ The human mind, if we “allow [it] to follow its tendency... will seek” not “to *harmonize* earth with Heaven,” to make the heavenly kingdom come.¹⁰⁴

Later, Tocqueville explains that the human soul occasionally breaks the “material bonds” that keep Americans in pursuit of worldly security.

Man has not given himself the taste for the infinite and the love of what is immortal. These sublime instincts do not arise from a caprice of the will; they have their unchanging foundation in his nature; they exist despite his efforts. He can hinder and deform them, but not destroy them.

The soul has needs that must be satisfied; and whatever care you take to distract it from itself, it soon becomes bored, restive, and agitated amid the enjoyments of the senses.¹⁰⁵

Here Tocqueville’s similarities to the classical and Christian traditions appear more clearly, his difference from Hobbes the more striking. Man is a desiring, restless, spiritual animal placed in the ladder of creation between beast and angel. His instincts have an “unchanging foundation” which neither he nor the social state can destroy, though he and the social state can distort their expression. This nature makes possible a form of grandeur specific to him qua human being,

¹⁰² DA, 482, 391.

¹⁰³ Mansfield, “Tocqueville on Religion and Liberty,” 261.

¹⁰⁴ DA, 467.

¹⁰⁵ DA, 940.

even in and even because of his restlessness.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, even from the “purely human point of view”, man has an “interest” in “fixed ideas” of God because they aid in achieving “enduring things.”¹⁰⁷ Religious peoples demonstrate it best: “concerning themselves with the other world,” they have “the great secret of succeeding in this one.”¹⁰⁸ To gain one’s life, it helps to lose it.

All positive religions, as Tocqueville sees them, give specific form and content to the ineradicable human desire for the eternal and transcendent. However, not all religions are equally suited, in Tocqueville’s eyes, to this purpose generally or to fulfilling this purpose in democracy specifically. The democratic social state is a product, in some ways accidentally, in others intrinsically, of Christianity. Christianity, under the separation of Church and State, is therefore well suited.¹⁰⁹ However, the Christian religion is not useful in the way all religions are useful, because Tocqueville seems to think or entertain that Christianity is true. “I believe Christianity comes from God”, he writes in his notes, “and that it is not a particular state of humanity that gave birth to it.”¹¹⁰ If Christianity is not the product of a social state, its teachings transcend the

¹⁰⁶ To treat restlessness and the anxieties of the soul as a disease to be eradicated fully destroys what is truly human. See Lawler, *The Restless Mind*.

¹⁰⁷ DA, 966. See Alec Arellano, “Tocqueville on Intellectual Independence, Doubt, and Democratic Citizenship,” *Review of Politics*, 82 (2020), 49–72; Sarah Gustafson, “A Tocquevillian Marketplace of Ideas?,” *Exploring the Social and Political Economy of Alexis de Tocqueville*, 101–30. On religion’s ability to broaden temporal awareness, see Agnès Antoine, “Democracy and Religion: Some Tocquevillian Perspectives,” in *Reading Tocqueville*, ed. R. Geenens et al., (New York: Palgrave, 2007): 132-141.

¹⁰⁸ DA, 966.

¹⁰⁹ Discussions of Christianity and civil religion in Tocqueville include: Richard Avramenko, “Tocqueville and the Religion of Democracy,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 41 (2012): 125-137; Carson Holloway, “Religion in Democracy in America,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, 327-345; Galston, “Tocqueville on Liberalism and Religion”; Cynthia J. Hinckley, “Tocqueville on Religious Truth and Political Necessity,” *Polity* 23 (1990): 39-52; Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 65-81, 145-159; Jech, “‘Man Simply’”; Kahan, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Religion*; Sanford Kessler, “Tocqueville on Civil Religion and Liberal Democracy,” *The Journal of Politics* 39, 1(1977): 119–46; Lawler, *The Restless Mind*; Jack Lively, *The Social and Political Thought of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); Mitchell, *Fragility*, 162-214); Yuji Takayama, “Beyond ‘civil religion’ – on Pascalian influence in Tocqueville,” *History of European Ideas* 48, 50 (2022): 518-535; Zetterbaum (1967); Catherine Zuckert, “Not by Preaching: Tocqueville on the Role of Religion in American Democracy,” *Review of Politics* 43 (1981): 259-280; Zuckert, “The Saving Minimum?”.

partial truths of aristocracy and democracy. Tocqueville takes Christianity as expressing and directing the natural religious impulse to good ends in democracy. He also takes it as reflecting truths of the human condition that rise above the social state and therefore are not merely conventional or honorable.

This would, importantly, distinguish ideas of virtue, including Christian virtue, from those of honor. Tocqueville in fact makes such distinctions. In his notes on honor in the United States in Volume II, he is at pains to make sure readers understand he does not understand honor as the same or a replacement for concepts of good and evil. Honor is a supplement to them, though they may also contravene or obscure ideas of good and evil.

I fear that the outcome of my chapter is that true and false, just and unjust, good and evil good and evil, vice and virtue are only relative things depending on the perspective from which you see them, a result that I would be very upset to reach, for I believe it false; and in addition such an opinion would be in clear contradiction to the ensemble of my opinions.¹¹¹

Honor is “in view of opinion;” it is what men praise and blame, thus relative and conventional.¹¹² Virtue, by contrast, “is in view of God and of yourself,” though men have often not taught that, preferring to confuse the two so that the recompense of those who “submit to the laws of honor” seems to be in the “other world.”¹¹³ “Judgment, discernment, spiritual effort are necessary for virtue; only memory is necessary to conform to honor.” Because honor comes from mores, and mores from religion, the honorable and the virtuous may coincide. They remain, however, conceptually distinct, with honor playing a special role in the formation of associational or

¹¹⁰ DA, 748, note f, 750, note g.

¹¹¹ DA, 1095, note d.

¹¹² DA, 1095-1096, notes d, e, and f, for the distinctions Tocqueville draws between honor and virtue.

¹¹³ DA, 1096, note f.

community bonds and therefore being more personal and proximate.¹¹⁴ Men experience immediately the praise and blame of their peers; one does need to be convinced of transcendent truth in order to follow the sanctions that issue from praise and blame. When Tocqueville discusses honor, he does so in a section of *Democracy* hundreds of pages after his discussion of *intérêt bien entendu*. This separation ought to indicate something to us. It does not mean *intérêt bien entendu* is unrelated to honor.¹¹⁵ It does, however, suggest we maintain in our minds that honor may overlap with interest and virtue practically and effectually while also being conceptually very different.

The “unchanging foundations” of human nature and the non-relative nature of the good notwithstanding, Tocqueville appreciates the social state’s power to mold its citizens qua citizens and qua persons. The social state may alter hearts and minds through ideas, sentiments, and mores in a variety of ways that undermine political liberty and degrade human welfare.¹¹⁶ Democratic peoples are particularly vulnerable to the “dangerous sickness” of intellectual materialism.¹¹⁷ They are liable to theorize that the “brain secretes thought”, the soul is a falsehood, and the universe is one simple whole.¹¹⁸ In the tumult of everyday life, they are also liable to neglect their souls. Lest men gradually become “without discernment and without progress, like the animals” and lose their capacity for political liberty, he maintains the necessity of being guided by non-material and immortal principles, even if one’s belief is insincere or a

¹¹⁴ DA, 1094. See Winthrop, “Rights: A Point of Honor,” 418-421.

¹¹⁵ See Winthrop.

¹¹⁶ DA 831-842, 853-860, 711-726.

¹¹⁷ DA 957.

¹¹⁸ DA 477, 757-758, 831-842. See also Avramenko, “Tocqueville and the Religion of Democracy”; Hinckley, “Tocqueville on Religion and Modernity”; Uner Daglier, “Tocqueville, Democratic Poetry, and the Religion of Humanity,” *Utilitas* 34 (2002):1-18.

Pascalian wager.¹¹⁹ Again Tocqueville seems to prevaricate in this functionalism, however.

Commenting on Plato's doctrine of the immortality of the soul, he argues that "The instinct and taste of humanity uphold this doctrine" because:

The heart of man is vaster than you suppose; it can at the same time enclose the taste for the good things of the earth and the love of the good things of heaven; sometimes the heart seems to give itself madly to one of the two; but it never goes for a long time without thinking of the other.¹²⁰

Let us take a step back and review: It is clear Tocqueville's anthropology makes personal interest central. However, to this we must add several caveats. The first is that the nature of that interest is clarified and contextualized by Tocqueville's other striking comments, reflections, and intimations about man's political and religious nature. The second – to which we will return later -- is that personal interest qua self-interest ought to be distinguished from *intérêt bien entendu*.¹²¹ A third is that Tocqueville clearly also thinks the democratic mind is shaped by the language and framework of interest; virtue appeals to democratic minds less.¹²² Democrats cannot follow their aristocratic forefathers in all things but rather "must work hard to attain the type of grandeur and happiness that is appropriate" for them.¹²³ We might interpret this as democracy replacing virtue with interest and even making conditions of virtuous action impossible.¹²⁴ However, the goal of Tocqueville's new political science is to educate democratic peoples in their "true interests" and

¹¹⁹DA, 759-762, 831-842, 853-860, 987-994, 963-4.

¹²⁰ DA, 960.

¹²¹ More on this later but visit footnote 15.

¹²² DA 926.

¹²³ DA, 1283.

¹²⁴ As Stauffer does. Stauffer, "Tocqueville on the Modern Moral Situation."

“to counterbalance our particular defects” – to educate against the social state.¹²⁵ This opens another possibility: though Tocqueville as an astute spiritual director “couched his analysis” in the framework of interest, in order to educate against the social state he may still have evaluated interest and *intérêt bien entendu* in terms of virtue. If so, it may imply, as some scholarship has suggested, that *intérêt bien entendu* is not necessarily opposed to virtue or even leads to it.¹²⁶

“The love of God which makes men virtuous”

We find evidence for Tocqueville’s theorization of *intérêt bien entendu* in terms of virtue, specifically Christian virtue, in his notes on a few key chapters in *Democracy in America* Volume II Part II. First, let us consider the first use of *intérêt bien entendu* in Volume I and the logic and structure of Volume II as it develops towards those key chapters. Tocqueville, ever the careful writer, often speaks through the order of his chapters.

Intérêt bien entendu first appears in Volume I’s “On the Future of the Three Races”, where Tocqueville discusses the mix of ideas, sentiments, mores, and institutions that maintain the Union. Tocqueville argues “a tight bond exists among the material interests” of the states, but the “opinions and sentiments”, i.e. the “immaterial interests of man,” form a tighter bond. The Union, charged with all “general interests”, “assures the independence and greatness of the country,” and “you rarely feel it act.” By contrast, in the states “true political life is found,” and they regulate “liberty, fortune, life, the entire future of each citizen.”¹²⁷ Patriotism, “most often...

¹²⁵ DA, 815-817, 965-968, 16.

¹²⁶ For a similar suggestion, see Brian Danoff, “Alexis de Tocqueville and Authority in America,” (PhD diss., Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey), 298.

¹²⁷ DA, 583.

only an extension of individual egotism,” remains at the state level.¹²⁸ However, Americans have “great interest” in the Union to better enjoy the material prosperity made possible in being united on the “immense continent that God granted them as their dominion”.¹²⁹

Though patriotism remains largely local, Americans consider a “great number of objects in the same way”. It is not fundamentally the Constitution or economic prosperity that keeps the country together but their sentiments, opinions, and mores: “What maintains a large number of citizens under the same government is much less the reasoned will to remain united than the instinctive and, in a way, involuntary accord that results from similarity of sentiments and resemblance of opinions.”¹³⁰ Thus, “divided as they are... [Americans] constitute nonetheless a single people” with a distinctive self-image.¹³¹ When material and political interests wane, shared belief and sentiment preserve social unity. This includes both republican sentiment and religious belief. Americans are Christian either by philosophy or by genuine profession, so “they agree on the general principles” that guide their politics and the “moral opinions that regulate the daily actions of life.” This includes the belief that “knowledge of one’s self-interest well understood [*intérêt bien entendu*] is enough to lead man toward the just and the honest....”¹³²

The full passage is worth quoting:

The Anglo-Americans place moral authority in universal reason, as they do political power in the universality of citizens, and they consider that you must rely on the sense of all in order to discern what is permitted or forbidden, what is true or false. Most of them think that knowledge of his interest well understood [*intérêt bien entendu*] is sufficient to lead a man toward the just and the honest. They believe that each person by birth has received the

¹²⁸ Ibid, 589.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 594.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 598.

¹³¹ Ibid, 598.

¹³² Ibid, 597-600.

ability to govern himself, and that no one has the right to force his fellow to be happy. All have an intense faith in human perfectibility; they judge that the diffusion of knowledge must necessarily produce useful results, ignorance must lead to harmful effects; all consider society as a body in progress; humanity as a changing scene, where nothing is or should be fixed forever, and they admit that what seems good to them today can be replaced tomorrow by something better that is still hidden.

I do not say that all these opinions are correct, but they are American. At the same time that the Anglo-Americans are thus united with each other by these shared ideas, they are separated from all other peoples by a sentiment, pride.¹³³

This marks the introduction of *intérêt bien entendu* in *Democracy*. All prior invocations of interest, be they expressed as personal, individual, or particular interest, or general interest, are not, technically speaking, *intérêt bien entendu*. This distinction goes nearly unremarked by scholars. While Tocqueville's uses of invocations of interest are various and sometimes ambiguous, we should give him the benefit of the doubt that he chooses carefully when and where he uses one term over another.

What can we learn from *intérêt bien entendu*'s introduction here? Tocqueville has established in this final chapter of Volume I that European greed displaces Native Americans from territory which they can reasonably claim, and that short-term interest perpetuates slavery, though it is against long-term interests. Americans profess belief in self-government, but slavery belies this profession of faith, or at least undermines its practice. He has also established that material and political interests but above all common sentiments preserve the Union. In his discussion of the tyranny of the majority, he argues that above the positive law of majoritarian democracy, there exists a law, grounded in the "sovereignty of the human race" and the repository of good opinion, to which people may appeal when a national democratic majority overrides minority rights. "...when I refuse to obey an unjust law, I am not denying the right of

¹³³ Ibid, 600.

the majority to command; I am only appealing from the sovereignty of the people to the sovereignty of the human race.” His comments on slavery build on this by emphasizing that the institution is contrary to natural law, Christianity, and the laws of political economy.¹³⁴ It is a “spiritual despotism,” the “order of nature” reversed; humanity “[cries] out under the laws.” Despite these statements against the institution, which are clearly of a moral nature, it is often remarked that many of Tocqueville’s arguments against slavery concern long-term political and economic interests and the interests of the masters. Their long-term material security is jeopardized by the institution of slavery, as much as it leads to short term benefit. So too are their souls warped, and southern mores warped, by the institution. What we should note here is that Tocqueville in his treatment of slavery offers a study in the democratic moralism he urges others to do. *Through* the arguments he makes about long term economic and political interests of Whites, he introduces ancient and Christian arguments about the virtuous or tyrannical soul and the just and unjust exercise of power. “Christianity destroyed slavery only by asserting the rights of the slave; today you can attack it in the name of the master. On this point, interest and morality are in agreement.”¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Much has been written on Tocqueville’s account of the three races in America. For some examples: Seymour Drescher, *Tocqueville and Beaumont on Social Reform*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). Seymour Drescher, “Democracy, Civil Society and Antislavery in Tocquevillian Perspective,” *Slavery & Abolition* 35, 4 (2014): 593–610. Sally Gershman, “Alexis de Tocqueville and Slavery,” *French Historical Studies* 9, 3 (1976): 467–83. Bartholomew H. Sparrow, “The Other Point of Departure: Tocqueville, the South, Equality, and the Lessons of Democracy,” *Studies in American Political Development*, 33, 2 (2019): 178–208. Andreas Hess, “Gustave de Beaumont,” *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 9, 1 (2009): 67–78. Laura Janara, “Brothers and Others: Tocqueville and Beaumont, U.S. Genealogy, Democracy, and Racism,” *Political Theory*, 32, 6 (2004): 773–800. Margaret Kohn, “The Other America: Tocqueville and Beaumont on Race and Slavery,” *Polity*, 35, 2 (2002): 169–93. Mark Noll, “Tocqueville’s America, Beaumont’s Slavery, and the United States in 1831–32,” *American Political Thought*, 3, 2 (2014): 273–302. Diana J. Schaub, “Perspectives on Slavery: Beaumont’s ‘Marie’ and Tocqueville’s ‘Democracy in America.’ (Politics and Literature),” *The Legal Studies Forum* 22 (4): 607. Alvin B. Tillery, “Tocqueville as Critical Race Theorist: Whiteness as Property, Interest Convergence, and the Limits of Jacksonian Democracy,” *Political Research Quarterly*, 62, 4 (2009): 639–52.

¹³⁵ DA, 561.

We must deduce then that Americans do not always comprehend their own personal interests or the interests of humanity, despite also being drawn to humanitarian thinking. They comprehend their interests incompletely, shortsightedly. They need to be habituated “to think of the future,” to rise above “brutish indifference” and the disposition “to act as if they will exist only for a single day.” However, Americans can be taught, proud though they are, because they are proud that as Americans, they desire what is better. They expect progress and possess a “faith in human perfectibility” such that “what seems good to them today can be replaced tomorrow by something better that is still hidden.” Their personal interest, the only “fixed point in the human heart,” becomes interest “bien entendu” when guided in community by informal mores, Christian faith, and the spirit of association and the formal laws of political association as established in republican forms in the states and in the Federal Constitution.

Let us elicit a few clarifications about how we ought to read *intérêt bien entendu* from this. First, it concerns the relationship between the personal and particular interest and the common interest or the common good. *Intérêt bien entendu* is not the same as personal or particular interests, though it includes them and incorporates them into something beyond mere personal interest. It is distinctively communal and relational; it reflects the complex interplay of personal and particular interests with the general interest or common good in light of shared beliefs about the good. In this initial formulation, *intérêt bien entendu* is also a shared moral belief about how democratic people discover and align themselves, as individual persons and as a collective body, with the good and the “better that is still hidden.”¹³⁶ Therefore, what is in one’s

¹³⁶ See Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 159-191, on obscurity and hiddenness in Tocqueville.

self-interest cannot be understood atomistically; what Joshua Mitchell has called Tocqueville's mediational politics is well on display here.¹³⁷

This passage also suggests that material or economic interest – or interest understood through short-term immanent feelings or concerns -- is insufficient as a moral tie for a good and lasting political society. Aristotle in the *Politics* remarks that good governance concerns “careful attention to political virtue and vice. ... For otherwise the community becomes an alliance which differs from others – from alliances of remote allies – only by location and law becomes a compact, and ... a guarantor among one another of the just things, but not the sort of thing to make the citizens good and just.”¹³⁸ A city that existed as by compact would cease to be, in the Aristotelian sense, a city, for its citizens would have “nothing in common except things of this sort, exchange and alliance.” In other words, citizens would have nothing in common except material interests of economics and defense, both of which Tocqueville enumerates as among the reasons for the maintenance of the American Union. Like Aristotle, however, he considers those interests to be, if not insignificant, insufficient and even unstable absent deeper reasons. (This is also consistent with his initial concerns about American diversity, that ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity might mean economic and material interest is *the only tie*.) Interest, therefore, if well-understood, must be defined in such a way as to include a sharing in common beliefs, sentiments, mores, and ultimately virtue. Tocqueville points to Americans' republicanism as the saving grace of the United States but that republicanism is not defined in merely political and constitutional terms. Republicanism goes far deeper, into the mores and habits:

What is understood by republic in the United States is the slow and tranquil action of society on itself. It is an ordered state actually based on the enlightened will of the people.

¹³⁷ Mitchell, “Tocqueville's Puritans.”

¹³⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1280b.

It is a conciliatory government, where resolutions mature over a long time, are debated slowly, and executed with maturity.

I would like to believe in human perfectibility, but until men have changed in nature and are completely transformed, I will refuse to believe in the duration of a government whose task is to hold together forty diverse peoples spread over a surface equal to half of Europe, to avoid rivalries, ambition, and struggles among them, and to bring the action of their independent wills together toward the accomplishment of the same projects.¹³⁹

A government constituted such as the United States will not last if all that maintains it are its material and economic interests and the written Constitution, without a sharing in common ideas and without the practical reciprocal action of men upon one another which develops something akin to friendship among citizens.

Finally, Tocqueville alerts us here that it matters what Americans understand their interest to be, distinct from what it *is*. There may be a gap between these things. Slavery is a clear and illustrative case in his view. It therefore also matters that Americans' idea of their interest, even if it is subject to constraints imposed by both human nature and the social state, is also open-ended, subject to education and betterment. As Tocqueville will discuss and develop further in Volume II, even if he, with his Pascalian and Jansenist appreciation of original sin, cannot bring himself to believe in human perfectibility, Americans do. They believe in moral progress. This progressiveness does not clearly stem from the open-endedness of the content of morality. As we have seen, Tocqueville at least does not wish readers to take from his book that there is no good and bad, just and unjust, or true and false or that all "good" and "bad" is relative to the regime. As we have also seen, he criticizes the institution of slavery on grounds that it represents the "order of nature overturned."¹⁴⁰ What the Americans believe may be different from Tocqueville's own view. However, we can say that the progressive nature of morality may stem at least in part

¹³⁹ DA, 605.

¹⁴⁰ DA, 581-2.

from the limitations of human beings and of their political regimes. These limitations are natural, with a natural limit in death. The limitations are also epistemic and moral. In other words, human beings are not omniscient.¹⁴¹ They often desire what they wrongly think is good. They live in particular times and places, and while they can pass on knowledge through tradition and in that way outlive their own lives, democrats are not inclined to traditional authority. The human ability to discern in a progressive fashion what is moral is not necessarily to say that morality itself changes. It reflects that humans have only imperfect and partial knowledge of the good and wills that are often weak in pursuing it. It is unsurprising then that when Tocqueville turned to write Volume II, he began with the intellect and with the sentiments.

Volume II, Part I: The intellect

Tocqueville, anticipating the criticism his contemporaries and many today will make that the two volumes of *Democracy* do not make a whole book, begins Volume II with a foreword that insists they make one whole. While the first volume tended towards descriptive sociological and political analysis of the American democratic social state, the second takes up instead the new “multitude of sentiments and opinions” and new forms of relationship “that were unknown” prior to democracy.¹⁴² In his notes on this brief foreword, he adds a striking comment, that “I want to divide what is indivisible, the soul. The same soul constantly produces an idea and a

¹⁴¹ See DA, 715, and 715, note j. “There is no man in the world who has ever found, and it is nearly certain that no one will ever be met who will find the central ending point for, I am not saying all the beams of general truth, which are united in God alone, but even for all the beams of a particular truth. Men grasp fragments of truth, but never ruth itself. This admitted, the result would be that every man who presents a complete and absolute system, by the sole fact that his system is complete and absolute, is almost certainly in a state of error or falsehood, and that every man who wants to impose such a system on his fellows by force must *ipso facto* and without preliminary examination of his ideas be considered as a tyrant and an enemy of the human species.” Tocqueville is at once in favor of philosophy but also a kind of epistemic democrat.

¹⁴² DA, 691.

sentiment.”¹⁴³ The notes also show he was uncertain for a time about whether he ought to begin Volume II with individualism, which fell under the sentiments, or with the philosophic method of the democratic intellect.¹⁴⁴ I will here embrace the structure as published (ideas followed by sentiments) as determinative for how we should read Volume II; it is clearly a decision Tocqueville did not make lightly. That said, there is significance to Tocqueville’s reservations about the order for his broader theory. Mitchell uses the language of the circularity of cause and effect in the social realm and the spillover effects between domains of life to describe how Tocqueville thinks of the relationship between areas of life and public and private life. However he embraces something similar in the interior of the human person, where there is a complex choreography between the head and the heart the steps of which a person may struggle to comprehend. (Despite what is often described as his matter/spirit dualism, Tocqueville’s affirmation of both matter and spirit and of men as composed of *both* matter *and* spirit sometimes echoes hylomorphism more than dualism.) Unlike an Aquinas, Tocqueville offers nothing systematic on the level of a philosophy of human action. His statements here and elsewhere nevertheless offer a glimpse of how he thinks about human motivation, while underscoring his indebtedness to the Christian and Jansenist traditions. In Pascal’s words, “The heart has reasons of which reason knows nothing,” but as Pascal says in the second, less famous half of his aphorism, “We know truth, not *only* by the reason, but *also* by the heart.”¹⁴⁵ Similarly, *intérêt bien entendu*, though he develops it under the sentiments, depends on ideas of the good.

¹⁴³ DA, 694, note j.

¹⁴⁴ DA, 697, note a.

¹⁴⁵ Of course, Pascal the mathematician had a healthy regard for reason but in the *Pensées* is concerned to persuade and convince by showing its limits and by stressing the heart. For a good gloss on Pascal and his turn towards the heart as a means of moralism, see Benjamin and Jenna Silber Storey, *Why We Are Restless: The Modern Quest for Contentment*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

Volume II consequently begins with the intellect and Americans' unwitting Cartesianism.¹⁴⁶ Americans habitually prefer their private judgment, drawing "narrowly" into themselves to "judge the world from there." The habit of judging things for themselves, before their eyes, leads them to "scorn forms" as "useless and inconvenient veils placed between them and the truth."¹⁴⁷ This distaste for traditional forms of intellectual authority does not entail a rejection of intellectual authority tout court. Even philosophers, Tocqueville argues, take some ideas on faith. Americans thus defer to two institutions. First, they defer to the crowd's intellectual authority, for "without common ideas there is no common action, and without common action there are still men but not a social body."¹⁴⁸ Second, they defer to those inheritances and traditions that are accepted democratically. Christianity is a religion Americans accept "without examination"; from it flows "a great number of moral truths."¹⁴⁹ Due to man's epistemological limitations, this is "necessary" and "desirable."¹⁵⁰ Christianity, he notes, may alter its form, responding to the "influence exercised... on religious beliefs" by the social state.¹⁵¹ However, the core of Christian teaching – "the relationships of men with God and with each other"—he argues, has persisted across social states. This makes it an irreplaceable source of forms and a teacher of virtues that democratic people habitually need reinforced, like

¹⁴⁶ DA, 704.

¹⁴⁷ DA, 701.

¹⁴⁸ DA, 713, 701.

¹⁴⁹ DA, 705, 707, 724. "It is religion that gave birth to the Anglo-American societies; that must never be forgotten; so in the United States religion merges with all national habits and all sentiments that the country brings forth; that gives it a particular strength" (705).

¹⁵⁰ DA, 715-716.

¹⁵¹ DA, 748.

devotion, perseverance, and forbearance.¹⁵² Tocqueville reminds his readers here of America's point of departure: the Puritans "wanted to assure the triumph of *an idea*."¹⁵³ Ideas therefore are causal. Not just are ideas causal, but in a specific and essential sense, Christianity is causal in the American project.

Ideas also are limiting factors; they set boundaries to the mind and therefore to the heart.¹⁵⁴ So Christianity as an idea, as a religious doctrine, reigns as a religion and as a public moral philosophy. It sets the "circle" beyond which persons adventure to their social peril and it sets the terms of ideas of the good, even if at the same time it is institutionally distinct from politics.¹⁵⁵ The separation of Church and State is no limitation to the infusion of Christian moral concepts and doctrines into politics, both because these ideas are embraced democratically and because the ideas have shaped and provided the groundwork for the institutions themselves. In differentiating the American and French cases, the former in which no democratic revolution took place, the latter still suffering its reverberations, Tocqueville mentions that the equality of conditions that arises after political struggle divides men and encourages them to seek "enlightenment only within themselves alone." In that context, "Each person then tries to be self-

¹⁵² DA, 742-753, 746, 750, 954-962, 965-968. Tocqueville repeatedly distinguishes "the most false and most dangerous religions", which nevertheless perform the most basic tasks of positive religion, from Christianity (754-6).

¹⁵³ DA, 54. Also 78: "You must not believe that the piety of the Puritans was purely speculative, or that it proved to be unfamiliar with the course of human concerns. Puritanism, as I said above, was almost as much a political theory as a religious doctrine."

¹⁵⁴ See Mitchell, *Fragility*, 31, 78-79, on the idea of boundaries.

¹⁵⁵ DA, 707. See also 707-708, note s: "I am firmly persuaded that if you sincerely applied to the search for the true religion the philosophical method of the XVIIIth century, you would without difficulty discover the truth of the dogmas taught by Jesus Christ, and I think that you would arrive at Christianity by reason as well as by faith. So I am not astonished to see in the Americans sincere Christians, but at first glance I am surprised by the manner in which they become so. Within Christianity the American mind is deployed with an entirely democratic independence, but it is very rare for it to dare to go beyond these limits that it does not seem to have imposed on itself."

sufficient and glories in having beliefs that are his own. Men are no longer tied together except by interests and not by ideas...”¹⁵⁶ This is not the American case. Americans are bound together in ways that go beyond interests, by common beliefs and sentiments which make common action possible.¹⁵⁷ Hence a paradox. Equality of conditions uniquely creates a social state in which men have overwhelmingly similar needs, ideas, sentiments, interests, and tastes; at the same time, it “isolates men from each other” and “prevents the reciprocal action” of common life, including the exchange of ideas.¹⁵⁸ It must be specified: the equality of conditions is not, in and of itself, the cause of a social state in which men have nothing in common but interests. Equality of conditions is compatible with shared beliefs and ideas; it does not mean a world run purely by interests. However, because equality isolates, the equality of conditions is uniquely capable of producing a world in which men think of their interests in individualistic and self-centered ways and then extrapolate that principle to all other men, even if it is inaccurate to do so. This is an example of both the oversimplifying manner of the democratic mind, which prefers broad generalizations to particularities, as well as the democratic tendency to atomization.¹⁵⁹ Religion, combining intellectual and spiritual belief with social practice, provides democratic individuals with a framework through which to approach and understand their interests. It also provides them with social practices through which that framework will be experienced and shared in association and communion with others.

¹⁵⁶ DA, 708-709.

¹⁵⁷ DA, 713.

¹⁵⁸ DA, 720.

¹⁵⁹ This is both a coordination problem and a communication problem -- in the words of “Cool Hand Luke,” what we have here is a failure to communicate.

We cannot here treat with any detail the remainder of Part I though we must raise one point about his specific treatment of Christianity. As Mansfield has argued, Tocqueville's oft-cited "contempt" for metaphysics does not prevent him from developing metaphysical views or from providing, if "not a foundation, but a road towards" something we could call his metaphysics.¹⁶⁰ Tocqueville's chapters on religion in Part I on the intellect stress the individual and communal interest in fixed ideas about God and the soul; "You cannot keep these ideas from being the common source from which all the rest flows."¹⁶¹ Even "very false and absurd" religions do some good insofar as they, qua religions, impose "a salutary yoke on the intellect"; even if they do not "save men in the other world," they are "useful to their happiness and to their grandeur" in this world.¹⁶² The possible religions Tocqueville identifies as rivals to Christianity in democracy, such as pantheism or democratic poetry, sit uneasily with Tocqueville's suggestion that religion by nature (even bad religion) draws man out of himself and towards the eternal and the communal.¹⁶³ (If religions place the "object and desires of men above and beyond the good things of the earth" and establish duties towards other men, though I and most scholars are inclined to treat democratic pantheism as a species of religion, we might probe whether on Tocqueville's terms it fits the description.) Pantheism, which is bolstered by democratic poetry, sets the human person and the human things in a fundamentally different relationship to the Creator and the rest of creation compared to the Christian tradition. The obsessive "idea of unity"

¹⁶⁰ Mansfield, "Intimations of Philosophy," 213.

¹⁶¹ DA, 743.

¹⁶² DA, 744.

¹⁶³ DA, 745-6. Tocqueville implicitly defines religions as placing the "object and desires of men above and beyond the good things of the earth", elevating "his soul toward realms very superior to those of the senses," and as imposing "some duties towards the human species or in common with it" and therefore dragging him "from time to time, out of contemplation of himself." This raises the question whether democratic pantheism such as Tocqueville describes, or democratic poetry, could be considered religious on his terms.

leads to an abolition of the distinct Creator God and this leads to the abolition of men – it “destroys human individuality”.¹⁶⁴ All those who “remain enamored of the true grandeur of man must join forces and struggle against” pantheism and the “fatal” illness that its twin, democratic materialism. Pantheism, democratic poetry, and democratic history, each of which Tocqueville treats in Part I, demonstrate that Tocqueville is not only concerned that democrats, as individuals and as collective political communities, affix themselves to a set of metaphysical, religious, and spiritual views that provide a framework for the practical action of their daily lives. He is of course interested and concerned that there should be such a framework; any framework is better than none. David Foster Wallace expressed a Tocquevillian thought when he suggested “there is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.”¹⁶⁵ However, Tocqueville is hardly neutral as to what that framework should be, at least for a liberal democratic social state. “There must always be boundaries; where they do not exist in the material world, they must exist in the mind.”¹⁶⁶ The ideas of the good that set the boundaries and conditions of political and moral life are, if not uniquely determinative, profoundly determinative for how one understands, rightly or wrongly, what is in one’s interests.

Volume II: The desires and habits of the heart

Volume II Part II, on democracy’s influence on the sentiments, begins with the democratic love of equality before proceeding to three chapters on democratic individualism, three chapters on political and civil associations, and two chapters on *intérêt bien entendu* as a tool against individualism and on its application in religion. The following eight chapters address

¹⁶⁴ DA, 758.

¹⁶⁵ David Foster Wallace, “This is Water”, 2005, <https://fs.blog/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/>.

¹⁶⁶ Mitchell, *Fragility*, 31.

understandings and misunderstandings about spiritual and material well-being that arise from Americans' love of material well-being. Those eight culminate in Chapter 17's plea that "in times of Equality and Doubt, It Is Important to Push Back the Goal of Human Actions." We will examine these in turn but notice that the structure of the argument here presupposes and implies the arguments of Part I, namely the influence of the democratic social state on ideas and the subsequent causality of democratic ideas themselves.

Consequently, when Tocqueville turns to individualism in Chapter 2, he evaluates them both on their origins and on their manner of forming judgments. Judgment is of course about discerning and choosing courses of action through the ratiocinative capacity of the mind and the willing and desiring of the heart. The judgments that arise from egotism and from individualism are both, in Tocqueville's view, faulty judgments but they can be meaningfully distinguished, and their distinctions are salient. Tocqueville would not be the first political philosopher to notice the virtues and vices that uniquely emerge from conditions of equality.¹⁶⁷ But he can claim writing the first modern theory of democracy. The likeness or *semblabilité* that undergirds the equality of conditions – a loose likeness among democratic individuals that makes them *semblables*– is similarly brand new, a result of the Christian *imago dei* but completely foreign to the aristocratic mind. The aristocrat can scarcely imagine a "*fellow*".¹⁶⁸ The nature and shape of equality having been so transformed, so too is the character of the relationship between individuals changed by new forms of democratic equality.

¹⁶⁷ See, among the variety of options one could cite, Plato's Republic Book 8, Aristotle's *Politics*, and Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* IIaeII, question 36 on envy.

¹⁶⁸ DA, 883.

Tocqueville begins with what is not specific to the new democratic social state: egoism. Egoism is a vicious version of natural self-interest.¹⁶⁹ A “vice as old as the world. It hardly belongs more to one form of society than to another” and is “born of blind instinct.”¹⁷⁰ It is not epiphenomenal of a particular social state and like Christianity, it is not partial to any social state. It is a form of self-interest unguided by considerations beyond the self. The egotistical man is like a man in the state of nature; he “views everything only in terms of himself alone... [preferring] himself to everything.” It is still a form of self-interest, but in being anti-social and selfish, it is materialistic, unthinking, appetitive, and “blind.” It is, in a word, Hobbesian.

Individualism, however, is a “sickness peculiar to the heart in democratic times.”¹⁷¹ It reflects not base selfishness and is not simply appetitive. Rather, it involves judgment, “failings of the mind as much as... vices of the heart.”¹⁷² Where egoism has a violent potential inherent in it, individualism is tranquil. It is calculated based on “erroneous judgment”. It does not readily seem vicious at first glance, unlike egotism, but rather reveals its consequences over time, as citizen after citizen “withdraws” from and “abandons” society.¹⁷³ If it does not necessarily make a man’s heart grow smaller, it locks him inside; it “threatens finally to enclose [him] entirely within the solitude of his own heart.”¹⁷⁴ Over time, it becomes egoism.

¹⁶⁹ On individualism’s origins, Koenrad W. Swart, “Individualism in the Mid-19th Century, 1826-1860,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 23 (1962): 77-86.

¹⁷⁰ DA 882

¹⁷¹ DA, 881, note a2.

¹⁷² DA, 882.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ DA, 884.

Surprisingly given Tocqueville's acuity as a psychoanalyst and "spiritual director" of the democratic soul, Tocqueville leaves mostly unarticulated what other philosophers might have explained in detail, namely the intellectual, psychological, and emotional process by which individualism hardens the heart and turns the individualistic individual into an egotistical one. He instead relies on poetic and spatial language to capture the phenomenon. What we can say is that the democratic heart both expands and contracts. Its intellectual comprehension of Humanity writ-large widens and develops, as does its compassion for that Humanity. Meanwhile its personal bonds, moral ties, and political and civic obligations weaken.¹⁷⁵ Whatever the advantages of a broader, more compassionate conception of Humanity, the attenuation of personal bonds undermines political liberty. A democratic habit of individualism means "indifference" towards one's fellow citizens and neighbors becomes understood as a "kind of a public virtue."¹⁷⁶ Despotism thrives on this so-called public virtue of indifference – which is only a "virtue" in the eyes of the governors.¹⁷⁷ For "there is no vice of the human heart that pleases [despotism] as much as egoism;" a despot "easily pardons the governed for not loving him, provided that they do not love each other."¹⁷⁸ Again, habits of one domain of life spill over and democratic ideas of the good matter, for they may in fact be distortions or poor definitions.

Free political institutions buttress the natural inclinations to politics and society against which democratic equality, individualism, and the love of material well-being work.

¹⁷⁵ Compare for example with Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part III, "Of the Foundation of our Judgments concerning our own Sentiments and Conduct, and of the Sense of Duty," paragraph III.I.46.

¹⁷⁶ DA, 889.

¹⁷⁷ Again, Hobbes is perhaps an interlocutor here, even possibly an unconscious one for Tocqueville. The Hobbesian Sovereign sets all words, terms, laws, definitions, names, and doctrines in a way that conduces to public tranquility. Virtue is determined by and for the stability of the regime. Hobbes, 117-154.

¹⁷⁸ DA, 889.

The free institutions that the inhabitants of the United States possess, and the political rights that they use so much, recall constantly, and in a thousand ways, to each citizen that he lives in society. They lead his mind at every moment toward this idea, that the duty as well as the interest of men is to make themselves useful to their fellows; and, as he sees no particular cause to hate them, since he is never either their slave or their master, his heart inclines easily in the direction of benevolence. You first get involved in the general interest by necessity, and then by choice; what was calculation becomes instinct; and by working for the good of your fellow citizens, you finally acquire the habit and taste of serving them.¹⁷⁹

Democratic legislators ought to create incentives that “*force* men” into such activities and civic offices: “for what is society for thinking beings, if not the communication and connection of minds and hearts?”¹⁸⁰ The subsequent chapter on civil associations argues analogously regarding “the art of pursuing in common the object of their common desires.”¹⁸¹ It is here that Tocqueville famously observes “Sentiments and ideas are renewed, the heart grows larger, and the human mind develops only by the reciprocal action of men on each other.”¹⁸² The heart must be continually reopened, whether nudged or even pried open if necessary.

What ought not go unnoticed in these chapters leading to the introduction of *intérêt bien entendu* is Tocqueville’s continued emphasis on the ways in which democratic peoples understand the good or what is in their interests and how those ideas manifest in the sentiments, virtues, and vices in both the private and the public domains. The sentiments and the ideas are not separable; they are mutually reinforcing. *Intérêt bien entendu* as a moral doctrine conveys that by its very wording.

Intérêt bien entendu

¹⁷⁹ DA, 893.

¹⁸⁰ DA, 891, note k.

¹⁸¹ DA, 897.

¹⁸² DA, 900.

Tocqueville only then turns to *intérêt bien entendu* itself. Having established man's interest in fixed ideas about God, the soul, and "general duties" towards God and neighbor, Tocqueville contrasts older doctrines of vice and virtue with the doctrine of *intérêt bien entendu*. The first contrast is with the doctrines of theologians and moralists – one thinks of Augustine, Aquinas, Fenelon, and Bossuet – who wrote in aristocratic times. Then, men once "took pleasure in professing that it is glorious to forget self and that it is right to do good without interest, just like God." Only secretly did they admit such virtue and charity were *also* useful, for they focused on the "beauties of virtue" and made its beauty the "official doctrine."¹⁸³ In democratic times, however moralists "no longer dare to offer [this idea of sacrifice] to the human mind." Arguments about the goodness or beauty of disinterested virtue, he suggests, will fall on deaf ears, for the "imagination soars less" and each person "concentrates on himself" more. Each person is literally and figuratively *self*-centered. It is "necessary" instead for moralists "to show how particular interest merges with general interest" and that sacrifice is necessary and beneficial for the person as it is for the good of all.¹⁸⁴ For example, Americans "never say virtue is beautiful" but they do say it is useful and prove its utility. The veil of utilitarianism nevertheless allows perceptive minds to perceive the potential virtue underneath:

The doctrine of self-interest well understood does not produce great devotions, 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 the will, it brings them near to it insensibly through habits.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ DA, 919.

¹⁸⁴ DA, 918, 920.

¹⁸⁵ DA, 921-922.

Insufficient for perfect virtue, *intérêt bien entendu* offers training in virtue. This is not “contrary to the disinterested advance of the good. These are two different things but not opposite,” he writes in his notes.¹⁸⁶

He also writes in his notes that, like Christianity and egotism, and unlike democratic individualism, *intérêt bien entendu* seems to rise above the social state. As an idea it “has presented itself to the human mind from time to time in all centuries” though in “democratic centuries it besieges the mind.”¹⁸⁷ The published text cites Montaigne to suggest the doctrine “is not new.”¹⁸⁸ Thus, although it is not democratic in origin, it is especially fit for democracy (like Christianity). Like democracy itself, it can elevate the many though it may be insufficient for the few “great souls.” “Not very lofty,” what it lacks in sublimity, it gains in clarity and accessibility; “within reach of all minds”, it “[accommodates] itself marvelously to the weaknesses of men.”¹⁸⁹ It therefore is “imperfect” but fitting for democratic men and will be the maxim of the age. However, it “remains to be known” how men will define their interests.¹⁹⁰ Given the effects of materialism and individualism on the heart, the task of moralists is to help democrats define their interests well, to prevent the closing of the American heart by encouraging a genuinely “enlightened love of themselves” that will lead to better forms of interest, even to disinterested love for other people.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁶ DA, 922, note k.

¹⁸⁷ DA, 919 note f.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ DA, 921.

¹⁹⁰ DA, 922-3.

¹⁹¹ DA, 921.

It is on the note of defining interest well that Tocqueville turns to the application *intérêt bien entendu* in religion. Religion, however, was already on his mind. Tocqueville's extensive unpublished notes on the prior chapter about *intérêt bien entendu* simply make that clear. Speaking of the "extreme efforts" legislators must make "in democracies to spiritualize man," Tocqueville notes there are "distinctions ... between the different doctrines of *intérêt*" -- not *intérêt bien entendu* but *intérêt* generally.¹⁹² He sketches out for himself a set of three doctrines. The first is a "crude egoism that hardly merits the name of doctrine"; it teaches a man to force others yield to his interest and that there is no good beyond his personal interests. Next is a doctrine that teaches "the best way to be happy is to serve your interest, and [that] to be good, honest... requires you often to sacrifice your interest... in a word, that *intérêt bien entendu* requires you often to sacrifice your interest, or rather that to follow your interest overall, you often have to neglect it in detail." Last, he sets out a "doctrine infinitely purer, more elevated, less material" than crude, animalistic egoism or *intérêt bien entendu*.¹⁹³ A person comes to the highest doctrine by "[penetrating] divine thought with his intelligence". He

... sees that the purpose of God is order, and he freely associates himself as depending on his strength, in order to fulfill his destination and to obey his mandate. There is still personal interest there, for there is a proud and private enjoyment in such points of view and hope for remuneration in a better world; but interest there is as small, as secretive, and as legitimate as possible.¹⁹⁴

Interest remains present in man's heart, even as man conforms himself to God, but it is simultaneously lessened and justified to the degree possible for human nature.

¹⁹²DA, 925, note n.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

Tocqueville indicates that positive religions teach and enforce this higher doctrine, finding clever ways to “facilitate its practice.” He provides the example of Christianity, which says “it is necessary to do good *out of love of God* (magnificent expression of the doctrine that I have just explained) and also to gain eternal life.”¹⁹⁵ Tocqueville’s notes reveal prevarication however, about the relationship of Christianity to this highest doctrine and *intérêt bien entendu*. He seems first to indicate that Christianity is the best expression or manifestation of this doctrine. However, he then adds,

Thus Christianity at one end touches the doctrine of *intérêt bien entendu* and at the other the doctrine that I developed afterward and that I could call with Christianity itself the doctrine of the love of God. In sum, a religion very superior in terms of loftiness to the doctrine of *intérêt bien entendu* because it places interest in the other world and draws us out of this cesspool of human and material interests.¹⁹⁶

The Atonement, while not mentioned, is strongly implied; Jesus Christ’s crucifixion and atonement provide the relevant model of selfless love that with hope and faith become the central virtues and aims of the devout Christian life. *Intérêt bien entendu* in its highest forms then seems not only compatible with but “touches” the Christian doctrine of the love of God. That this higher doctrine is so lofty does not seem to prevent Tocqueville from observing that in practice Christianity can overlap both with *intérêt bien entendu* -- such that those who act from *intérêt bien entendu* and those that act from a purer love of God may be confused with each other -- as well as with the higher doctrine that is entirely outside the earthly “cesspool.” One thinks of the difference he later implies between Saint Jerome’s ascetic spiritualism, entirely turned to the other world, and the day-to-day life of ordinary men on whom fall responsibility for this worldly

¹⁹⁵ DA, 925, note n.

¹⁹⁶ DA, 927, note n.

interests.¹⁹⁷ The human heart is not transparent, nor are human deeds; the precise mixture of self-interested and disinterested motives for action is difficult to determine. Religion, however, knows the human heart and knows human nature. Tocqueville suggests it knows to speak of interest in eternal life *and* of the goodness of a sincere love of God that minimizes personal interest to the degree possible. Religion also knows to take advantage of and capture the highest instincts of human nature. He writes in the notes,

The doctrine of *intérêt bien entendu* can make men honest.

But it is only the love of God that makes men virtuous. The one teaches how to live, the other teaches how to die, and how can you make men who do not want to die live well for long? ...

Religions have, by design, made such an intimate union of the doctrine of the love of God and that of interest, that those who are sincerely devout are constantly mistaken, and it happens that they believe that they are doing actions solely in view of the reward to come, actions that are principally suggested to them by the most pure, most noble, and most disinterested instincts of human nature.¹⁹⁸

The difficulty in distinguishing from external actions what is motivated by *intérêt bien entendu* and what is motivated by the “love of God that makes men virtuous” does not mean we should not distinguish them theoretically. The theoretical distinction is significant. Tocqueville does not appear interested in eliding this distinction with arguments about the effectual truths of *intérêt bien entendu* or the love of God that makes men virtuous. But as Tocqueville wrote in Volume I, “who can read the recesses of the heart?”¹⁹⁹ The answer is, only God; epistemologically, humans proceed through a glass darkly.²⁰⁰ Tocqueville additionally suggests, in another note, that “I cannot believe that God put in our souls the *organ* of the infinite... in order to give our soul

¹⁹⁷ DA, 960.

¹⁹⁸ DA, 924, note k.

¹⁹⁹ DA, 475.

²⁰⁰ Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 174-175, 184-189.

eternally only to the *finite*, that he gave it the *organ* of hope in a future life, without future life.”²⁰¹ Hope for immortality reflects a species of self-interest. However, Christian hope is a virtue, not a vice.

What is remarkable here is that Tocqueville in these notes broaches the subjects of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French *pur amour* and quietism debates. These theological debates have always been of interest to scholars of political thought though many of their central figures have also surprisingly escaped systematic or exclusive treatment. A figure such as Francois Fenelon, who has received recent attention, exemplifies this, but one could also speak of Bossuet, Pierre Nicole, and many other theologians whose ideas and terms would be adopted and adapted by Rousseau, Mandeville, Hutcheson, and many others.²⁰² These theological debates hinged on the nature of self-interest, hope for heaven, and love of God, and especially through Fenelon shaped early modern and Enlightenment moral and political philosophy. Tocqueville, despite his recognized indebtedness in style and in substance to Pascal, is rarely included in this conversation, and *intérêt bien entendu* rarely inscribed in its lineage. These notes demonstrate that it should be.²⁰³ While aiming to encourage in men the “love of God that makes men virtuous,” Tocqueville’s Christianity does not scorn interest as necessarily egotistical. It admits interest’s centrality to human nature and its role in promoting virtue. Rather, it builds upon and elevates that nature; *intérêt bien entendu* and the “disinterested advance of the good” are not “contrary”. Great souls do not need interest as a motivation for virtue, but ordinary souls

²⁰¹ DA, 959, note h. Compare with CS Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*: “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.” CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2000).

²⁰² See Hanley, *The Political Philosophy of Fenelon*, 170-197.

²⁰³ Exceptions would include Jaume, Lawler, and Mitchell; Rahe discusses Jansenist and 17th century French ideas of *amour propre* in the context of Montesquieu and Rousseau, but not Tocqueville. Rahe, 32-59, 96-115.

do. *Intérêt bien entendu* helps to elevate ordinary souls. Mitchell argues that for Tocqueville, what is good in worldly terms will comport with what is good in the “economy of salvation” and that “Christianity is a training in self-interest rightly understood.”²⁰⁴ On the basis of these passages, one might also say the opposite: that *intérêt bien entendu* can be a training for the love of God that makes men virtuous.

Many of these notes are echoed in the following chapter on *intérêt bien entendu*’s application in religion, though there are differences. For example, rather than arguing that it “touches” and leads to Christianity, Tocqueville writes in the published text that “Christianity tells us you must prefer others to self in order to gain heaven...[and] that you must do good to your fellows out of love of God,” and “I do not see clearly why the doctrine of *intérêt bien entendu* would put men off from religious beliefs, and it seems to me on the contrary that I am sorting out how it brings them closer.”²⁰⁵ Whereas earlier he cited Montaigne, in this chapter he cites Pascal’s wager. He describes the wager as not “worthy of the great soul of Pascal” though it “sums up perfectly the state of souls” when religious beliefs are faltering as doubt spreads. This implies the wager is an argument to which Pascal’s doubtful readers would assent.²⁰⁶ Again, great souls do not need interest to pursue virtue; only “ordinary souls” do.²⁰⁷ In other words, Pascal, a “great soul”, did in his *Pensées* what Tocqueville now attempts: to “speak to the needs of the soul by appealing to a motive that democratic readers most readily understand.”²⁰⁸

²⁰⁴ Mitchell, *Fragility*, 24, note 63, 190, note 96.

²⁰⁵ DA, 927.

²⁰⁶ DA, 928, note d.

²⁰⁷ DA, 922.

²⁰⁸ Yarbrough, 134.

This analysis of *intérêt bien entendu* in terms of virtue, specifically Christian virtue, is buttressed further by, for example, Tocqueville's 1843 correspondence with Arthur de Gobineau about modern moral philosophy. In 1841, the then young and unknown Gobineau had been designated Tocqueville's new research assistant on a project for the Académie des sciences morales et politiques concerning modern moral philosophy. In an enlightening set of letters, Tocqueville instructs his protegee in what to read but also how to interpret the history of moral and political philosophy. Christianity, he says, is the germ of all modern moral philosophy, including utilitarianism (though Gobineau seemed to fail to grasp that Christianity was a religion and not a philosophy, and therefore not subject to the same kinds of intellectual demonstration).²⁰⁹ Therefore, the important break in the history of moral philosophy, Tocqueville insisted, is not between ancients and moderns but ancients and Christians. Christianity "placed the purpose of life after life and gave a more pure, more immaterial, more disinterested, higher character to morality" and "modern morality... has done nothing other than to develop, extend the consequences of Christian morality without changing its principles. Our society is much more distanced from theology than from Christian philosophy." *Intérêt bien entendu* represents, he says, a recognition that in ages when men doubt and cannot "with security place" the sanction of the moral life "entirely" in the next life, a sanction must be found in this life. English utilitarians are witness to this trend, while Christian moralists, he writes, remain behind the curve. The compatibility of *intérêt bien entendu* with both a correctly understood utilitarianism and with Christian moral philosophy is even raised, however, in the final pages of *Democracy* where Tocqueville suggests God might be a democrat and a utilitarian; "Who knows if, in the

²⁰⁹ DA, 746. *Lettres Choiesies*, 515-18, 533-36. My translation.

eyes of God, the beautiful is not the useful?”²¹⁰ If utilitarian arguments are true, it is because they conform to the good God sees and desires. Ralph Hancock observes that the “apparently straightforward idea” Tocqueville is more interested in religion’s political utility than in its truth becomes “problematic” when one recognizes that for Tocqueville utility is not entirely or principally utilitarian and materialistic.²¹¹ Rather, “what is useful to human beings” and the “question of religious or metaphysical truth may not be entirely separate.” Tocqueville’s presentation of *intérêt bien entendu* in Christian terms and understanding of utility’s compatibility with virtue reinforce Hancock’s observation.

Tocqueville follows *intérêt bien entendu* with a series of chapters explicating how materialism and individualism distort ideas of well-being which, contra Hobbes, Spinoza, and other “materialists” Tocqueville has in mind, cannot be defined in solely material terms.²¹² Democratic peoples’ well-being is threatened by an “excessive love” of *material* well-being that will finally “degrade” them.²¹³ Tocqueville consequently advises erring on the side of spiritualism in order to recover a properly human path between Saint Jerome’s ascetic spiritualism and Heliogabalus’s hedonic materialism.²¹⁴ The task of correction falls especially to legislators and moralists who must “clearly [discern] in advance” the “natural inclinations” of democratic peoples and counteract them.²¹⁵ This includes encouraging citizens to believe in the soul’s immortality, and where that is doubted or doubtful, to cultivate honest habits and a “taste

²¹⁰ DA, 1282, note f.

²¹¹ Hancock, 351-352.

²¹² DA, 957.

²¹³ DA, 957.

²¹⁴ DA, 960.

²¹⁵ DA, 955.

for the future” through work and ambition.²¹⁶ By stimulating a longing for this-worldly success, work nourishes men’s natural capacity to hope and to “cast their sight” beyond immanent desires and their immediate temporal horizon. By accustoming citizens to think about “the future in this world,” they are led “little by little, and without their knowing it, to religious beliefs. ...the means that, to a certain point, allow men to do without religion, is perhaps after all the only one that remains to us for leading humanity back by a long detour toward faith.”²¹⁷ Habits of the heart spill over in both directions, from religion to mores to political society and in reverse. Without mentioning *intérêt bien entendu*, Tocqueville subtly reinforces its logic, again tying the cultivation of this-worldly interests rightly understood to the needs of the soul and to the soul’s fulfillment in the transcendent.

Better understanding *intérêt bien entendu*

The task of this chapter has been to draw out an alternative Tocquevillian understanding of *intérêt bien entendu* that stresses its concept’s indebtedness to Tocqueville’s ideas of Christian virtue. It has done so modeled, in a fashion, after Tocqueville’s own style of philosophy, in which arguments are built and presented to the reader as much by straightforward defenses as by the steady accumulation of ideas, evidence, and suggestions that together form an emergent whole for the reader to behold. Let us review this accumulation of evidence as it has been built up.

This chapter has argued that, though scholarship has offered many different interpretations of *intérêt bien entendu*, such diversity and richness of interpretations suggests that

²¹⁶ DA, 968.

²¹⁷ DA, 968.

it remains difficult for readers of Tocqueville to understand the concept in any precise and clearly defined terms.

It has established that Tocqueville early on thought of interest in both political economic terms and in terms of the Montesquieuan contrast between ancient and modern republics. While there is evidence he never completely jettisoned these views, we should not understand *intérêt bien entendu* in either of these terms exclusively. As Tocqueville better came to understand the Americans and as he developed his distinctive philosophical method and stylistic craft, he came to question his earliest impressions of the Americans and the nature of their self-interest and came to replace them with deeper, more considered views.

The chapter has also argued that though Tocqueville takes personal interest as central to a proper understanding of human nature, the nature of that interest is complex and irreducible to mere material security or prosperity. Rather, interest is clarified by his many other observations about what is natural to men even if the social state can distort or modify the expression of that nature. These other natural human traits include the inclinations to politics and society and the natural spiritual and religious impulses. The fulfillment of human interests, one might argue, lies in no small part in the fulfillment of man's political nature and of his religious nature. To fulfill these, Tocqueville recommends political liberty and Christianity, and if not Christianity then positive religions which embrace the immortality of the soul and which inspire mores and habits consistent with the demands of political liberty.

It has also argued that to understand *intérêt bien entendu* we ought to differentiate it as a term of art, attached to a broad but distinctive set of phenomena, from other different but related terms such as personal interest, self-interest, particular interest, general interest, and the like. It is certainly possible Tocqueville used these terms haphazardly. However, we should give him the

benefit of the doubt. Tocqueville makes such distinctions; they are not invented. Therefore, I have suggested that to translate *intérêt bien entendu* as self-interest rightly understood fails to appreciate these distinctions and that *intérêt bien entendu* is not self-interest at all, but *interest* well-understood. It is not, like Rousseau's *amour propre* or *amour de soi*, or even Pierre Nicole's *amour propre éclairé*, explicitly and clearly self-referential and self-centered. That is, in fact, the point. *Intérêt bien entendu* concerns personal, particular, and self-interest, as well as the general interest, but it is neither of these things solely. It is how these things are related and brought into harmony, how the self and his good communicate with others and their good in order to establish and pursue a common good together. Rights, to which Tocqueville attaches so much importance in his discussions of *intérêt bien entendu*, instantiate this. To translate it as *self-interest* rightly understood, while understandable and by now traditional, obscures the degree to which the person practicing and embodying *intérêt bien entendu* is in communication and involved in a common project with his neighbors and peers as he pursues both his own interests and interests held in common. Individualism and egotism are selfish and enclose the individual in a prison of his own heart's making. *Intérêt bien entendu* does not; it opens the individual to a better understanding of his interest, even to transcendence of merely self-interestedness. It is unlikely that scholars of Tocqueville might move to "interest well understood" from "self-interest well understood," but we should bear these distinctions and matters of translation in mind for how they affect our interpretations of the concepts.

It has finally advanced an argument that Tocqueville understands interest and theorized *intérêt bien entendu* at least partly in Christian terms. This we can ascertain from both the accumulated evidence, structure, and suggestions of the published text. We also see it prominently in his unpublished notes which demonstrate Tocqueville pondered *intérêt bien*

entendu as leading to or opening the possibility of a selflessness he identified as specifically Christian virtue, as the “love of God that makes men virtuous.” This reading, while inconsistent with some readings, is not inconsistent with the many other readings that emphasize the religious or moral character of *intérêt bien entendu*. It does extend them by reference to these neglected notes. Making sense of this has the positive externality that it enlightens Tocqueville’s role as a democratic moralist and democratic “spiritual director.” Tocqueville is, like a spiritual director, wily and concerned with the good of his directee; he speaks the language of interest with a potential end of virtue in mind. It also puts in new light the compatibility in his mind of virtue and utility, if utility is itself rightly understood. They are, as he says, not contrary.

To buttress this argument, the chapter has also underscored that *intérêt bien entendu* depends on both understanding and the will, and that the fulfillment of interests depends on man’s nature. Democratic ideas of the good may be better or worse in regard to the health of their regime and to their ultimate truthful correspondence to the reality of the human condition. The desires of the heart may in the same ways be better or worse. Tocqueville’s quiet, ongoing conversations with ancient political philosophy and with the philosophy and theology of Christian authors such as Augustine, Pascal and Fenelon become far more audible when we read *intérêt bien entendu* in this way. For, when we appreciate that: for Tocqueville man naturally has desires which he, from his natural interest, pursues; that he understands *intérêt bien entendu* as both leading to and compatible with fulfilling the interests of others as well as something higher in the manner of selfless virtue; and that Tocqueville speaks in the language of interest to a people he thinks only understand the language of interest or alternatively are particularly inclined to reject the language of selfless virtue – when we can appreciate these things, it becomes clearer that for Tocqueville, the language and framework of interest is another way of speaking about *the*

good. Tocqueville's vision of the human being is of a creature that seeks its happiness and flourishing, its interest, its good, even if it may misunderstand what that good is. This is the same regardless of whether the social state is aristocratic or democratic. As Aristotle argued, every person seeks what he or she understands to be good; the same can be said of communities.

There are some who are sure to be allergic to the claim Tocqueville's account of interest directs itself to or implies an account of the good. However, this should be, in a way, self-evident. What is in one's interest is what one understands to be good. But let me address, in all too short and casual a fashion admittedly, their potential concerns before I conclude by previewing the next chapter. Tocqueville is a liberal, certainly, but he is a strange and aristocratic liberal, in Boesche and Kahan's formulations. Liberty is to him a sacred thing, but liberty is not for him simply negative or simply positive. It can be either, depending on the circumstance. Nor does he understand liberty in a Hobbesian fashion, as flowing from physical necessity, or in the Millian fashion of "experiments in living" or the harm principle, though he and Mill each expressed anxieties over the conformist impulses of the nineteenth century.²¹⁸ He cites John Winthrop's "beautiful definition" of liberty:

Let us not be mistaken about what we must understand by our independence. There is in fact a kind of corrupt liberty, the use of which is common to animals as it is to man, and

²¹⁸ Much scholarship has been written on Mill and Tocqueville's relationship. Whatever Mill's use and adaptation of Tocqueville's term the "tyranny of the majority," it is far from clear that Tocqueville would have followed Mill in the arguments in *On Liberty* without reservation or contention, and it is even less clear to me that Tocqueville would have endorsed the arguments in "The Subjection of Women" (published in 1869, ten years after Tocqueville's death.) Again, we cannot know. Though political theorists and historians of political thought like to make much of their correspondence as evidence of a friendship, that correspondence was inconsistent, and it cooled dramatically in the last decades of their lives. Mill was much more forthcoming in his personal letters with Auguste Comte in the late 1830s and 1840s than he was with Tocqueville at the same time. Similarly Tocqueville's so called "friendship" with Mill could never rival the intellectual friendship and closeness with Beaumont, Kergolay, Corcelle, and others in his direct circle. If the arrow of influence runs in any direction, it is from Tocqueville to Mill and not Mill to Tocqueville. Zunz notes that, though Mill sent Tocqueville a copy of *On Liberty* (in which Mill adopts the "tyranny of the majority" for his own uses), Tocqueville clearly never cracked open the book. He was dying at the time. He did write back to Mill thanking him and asking how Harriet Taylor Mill was. If he had opened the book, he would have seen it was dedicated to Taylor Mill, who had died in November 1858. *On Liberty* was published in the first months of 1859 and Tocqueville died in April 1859. Zunz, 343.

which consists of doing whatever you please. This liberty is the enemy of all authority; it suffers all rules with impatience; with it, we become inferior to ourselves; it is the enemy of truth and peace; and God believed that he had to rise up against it! But there is a civil and moral liberty that finds its strength in union, and that the mission of power itself is to protect; it is the liberty to do without fear all that is just and good. This holy liberty we must defend at all cost, and if necessary, at risk of our life.²¹⁹

Political liberty is made possible, as Tocqueville repeatedly emphasizes and as some interpreters remind us, on the foundation of shared moral and epistemological values. In Dana Villa's words, Tocqueville, despite doing "theoretical heavy lifting" for a "pluralist conception of politics," lacks "real *moral* pluralism."²²⁰ He is not a moral pluralist in ways that might be ascribed to or inspired by his love of political liberty. In this way, Tocquevillian political liberty takes, if not necessarily for granted then as a given, mores and customs that function as informal laws. Such informal legislation permits individuals to misunderstand their individual goods and in a limited sense to "do as they please" without necessarily being subject to legal or criminal proceedings. Rather, they will be subject to the sanction of society. In this way, the absence of a law does not mean the absence of an understanding of the good or of a set of customs that function in their way as laws. At times Tocqueville despairs of the ways in which this manner of social sanction sets a limit to what can be thought or said. He deplores a world in which a person who thinks differently is *de facto* (if not *de jure*) alienated or ostracized, where his only trial is in the court of public opinion and where that judgment renders him "a stranger among us," his "privileges as a citizen" remaining though "useless" to him, his presence permitted but he without his "rights to humanity."²²¹ This is a special risk in democratic ages given the ways in which the equality of conditions alters the intellect. However, the whole question is not liberty or authority, but the

²¹⁹ DA, 68.

²²⁰ Dana Villa, "Hegel, Tocqueville, and 'Individualism,'" *Review of Politics* 64, 4 (2005): 659-686.

²²¹ DA, 418.

nature of each: "... received beliefs and discovered beliefs, authority and liberty, individualism and social force are needed at the very same time. The whole question is to decide the limits of these two things. My whole mind must be bent to that."²²² However, as we will explore further in the following chapter on soft despotism, a lack of boundaries in the mind creates conditions for soft despotism. Political liberty of the sort Tocqueville admires, esteems, and considers the summit of human political nature is only possible under certain moral and epistemological conditions. Tocqueville is, by our contemporary lights, a strange liberal.

Tocquevillian political liberty also does not recommend disregarding the givens of human nature – such as natural interest, sociability, or religiosity. These givens are salutary constraints themselves, and the social state can modify them but not destroy them. Nor does political liberty endorse a liberty, even if it permits that liberty under certain conditions, to contravene the individual good and the common good by “doing whatever you please”. Closely related to the “whatever you please” principle is the corollary idea that what occurs in the private sphere has no bearing on public.²²³ This is most certainly not the case in Tocqueville’s view. Justice, as Tocqueville recognized, is far more complex. It is also difficult for the democratic mind, with its preference for universally generalizable rules, to grasp, for it requires the prudence and the recognition of particulars which come more naturally to aristocrats. However, because the soul is “indivisible”, we can say that habits and mores spill over between the domains of life. Our

²²² DA, 709-710, note u.

²²³ See, by contrast, Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Stefan Collini, (Cambridge: CUP, 2017), 94. “The maxims are, first, that the individual is not accountable to society for his actions, in so far as these concern the interests of no person but himself. Advice, instruction, persuasion, and avoidance by other people if thought necessary by them for their own good, are the only measures by which society can justifiably express its dislike or disapprobation of his conduct. Secondly, that for such actions as are prejudicial to the interests of others, the individual is accountable, and may be subjected either to social or to legal punishment, if society is of opinion that the one or the other is requisite for its protection.”

character as formed in one domain remains our character in other domains, even as we substitute one hat for another – mother for teacher, father for plumber, etc. We may uphold individual rights and recognize areas and domains of life in which the individual is rightfully authoritative on grounds of nature or natural law and subsidiarity, or of positive liberty and civil rights. We may also simultaneously recognize (without undermining that autonomy) that the actions taken in those capacities are never merely self-regarding in their consequences. For unlike in Hobbes, for whom humans are by nature asocial and selfish, for Tocqueville, we are both interested and social. Tocqueville's insistence on the importance of rights, and his connection of rights to both natural personal interest and to "divine" ideas, corresponds to this recognition that the common good is (rightly understood) not an aggregate or sum of individual goods, in which the minority party loses entirely a la simplistic Benthamite utilitarianism. The common good makes space for a variety of different kinds of goods, different kinds of interests, and incorporates them into a whole through a mixture of customs, mores, and law and through respect for the differentiated parts which make up the whole.

You would be led to believe that the ultimate consequence and necessary effect of democratic institutions is to mix citizens in private life as well as public life and to force them all to lead a common existence.

That is to understand in a very crude and very tyrannical way the equality that arises from democracy.

There is no social state or laws that can make men so similar that education, fortune, and tastes do not put some difference between them and if different men can sometimes find it in their interest to do the same things in common, you must believe they will never find their pleasure in doing so. So they will always, whatever you do, slip out of the hand of the legislator, and escaping in some way from the circle in which you try to enclose them, they will establish, alongside the great political society, small private societies, whose bond will be the similarity of conditions, habits and mores...

Each one of them readily recognizes all of his fellow citizens as his equals, but he receives only a very small number among his friends and guests.

That seems very natural to me. ...

It can never fail to be so; for you can change human institutions but not man.²²⁴ Tocqueville is not describing something like a minimal state à la Robert Nozick, where the minimal state is deemed necessary by religious, moral, and ethical pluralism and the many possibly conflicting kinds of lives and visions of the good that can coincide in modern democratic societies.²²⁵ Again, Tocquevillian political liberty depends on shared moral and dogmatic beliefs around topics the disagreement on which Nozick and other more contemporary liberals take as a given today.

So while Tocqueville's political theory aims at political liberty, it also implies – if vaguely -- a certain kind of life that is good and possible for man simply and that would be good and possible for man under democratic conditions more specifically, a vision of a good that goes beyond mere freedom or mere democratic self-government. (If this were not the case, his criticism of democratic despotism seems nonsensical.) However rare a position it may be, it is not one that has not been considered before: “For Tocqueville (as for Bellah), republicanism and religion should provide people with a notion of what freedom is *for*, a notion of what it means to lead a good life, a notion which goes beyond self-interest.”²²⁶ As democracy's spiritual director, he aims to convince readers (including readers hostile to democracy) that such a way of life – such a regime – can be good and aims therefore to woo them into choosing and pursuing that potential good – and not goods, like aristocracy, which are no longer available to them. However,

²²⁴ DA, 1069-1071.

²²⁵ For example, Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

²²⁶ Danoff, “Alexis de Tocqueville and Authority in America,” 298. Brian Danoff convincingly argues that Robert Putnam can be read as part of the Tocquevillian lineage as a democratic moralist, advancing utilitarian, empirical arguments about the interests of Americans. Despite the underlying ethical and normative commitments that seem to inspire Putnam's work, Danoff says it suffers from the limitations of democratic moralism, as it is incomplete without normative concepts that convey what conception of the good is in citizens' interest to pursue and thus what their freedom is *for*. Danoff suggests Putnam needs to be completed by ideas of moral authority and civic republicanism better found in Bellah and Sandel.

recognizing the weaknesses to which democracy may be vulnerable, he aims to instruct democracy in its true interests so to counterbalance its defects. For genuine well-being to be achieved, one must understand one's own interests well and act in accordance with those interests, which are both integral to and tied to the well-being and flourishing of the greater community in which he is a part. "Sentiments and ideas are renewed, the heart grows larger, and the human mind develops only by the reciprocal action of men on each other."²²⁷ That *intérêt bien entendu* would then be not only be a way of indirectly expressing and encouraging ideas of the good but would also possibly lead to a higher kind of good and the expansion of the heart is not only supported by the text as we have explored it. It is logically consistent with Tocqueville's project to help democrats understand themselves and their interests well and therefore to create good democratic social states.²²⁸ That it might open up possibilities for what he identifies as a specifically Christian notion of selfless virtue is, as we have seen, supported by and consistent with the text and his notes, with the moral tradition within which Tocqueville is working, and with the moral ideals that shaped the democratic social state itself. As he wrote Gobineau in 1843, "Our society is much more distanced from theology than from Christian philosophy."²²⁹

If there is an *intérêt bien entendu*, this implies an *intérêt mal entendu*. Tocqueville never uses the term, but we can ascertain its contents. For he indicates repeatedly, in his discussions of

²²⁷ DA, 900.

²²⁸ Readers today, like his readers in 1840, have only known democracy. This would suggest we are likewise prone to accept arguments based on interests and not complicated philosophical arguments about the nature and shape of the common good, about the virtues and vices necessary for a flourishing free democratic republican regime, about subsidiarity, or to endure highly theoretical defenses of rights. We are perhaps more inclined to accept social scientific, scientific and medical, or other data-driven arguments about what is in our interests as human beings to support various kinds of goals of human flourishing – productivity, relationship success, personal health maximization, etc. Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, which makes far fewer anthropological claims than Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, exemplifies this phenomenon, as does the health and wellness industry.

²²⁹ *Lettres Choisies*, 515-18, 533-36.

egotism, individualism, and the democratic excessive love of material well-being that threatens genuine well-being, what widespread *intérêt mal entendu* might look like: political life parched of the public virtues, private lives fully absorbed in the desire for security, the rich fabric of free associations of politics and civil society worn threadbare by the retreat of individualistic, even egotistical, atomized individuals who have become so enclosed in the solitude of their hearts they fail to see beyond their immanent concerns and beyond their immediate loved ones. As *intérêt bien entendu* depends on ideas and sentiments, *intérêt mal entendu* arises from incorrect or poor understandings – pantheism and intellectual materialism, for example -- and excessive love of this worldly prosperity – also a form of democratic materialism. It is this poorly understood interest, which individualism in a way encapsulates, that eventually contributes to the development of soft despotism. Tocqueville in fact introduces the specter of despotism in his chapter on individualism. “There is no vice of the human heart that pleases [despotism] as much as egoism” and a despot “easily pardons the governed for not loving him, provided that they do not love each other.”²³⁰ *Intérêt bien entendu* and the higher virtue (love) it can make possible through the reciprocal action of men upon one another are obstacles to despotism, just as egoism is its expedient. Now we turn to soft despotism and to the conditions for the disappearance of *intérêt bien entendu* under soft despotism.

²³⁰ DA, 889.

Chapter 2: *Intérêt bien entendu* and soft despotism's effects on democratic character and political society

In the preceding chapter, I articulated that one important and underappreciated feature of Tocqueville's account of *intérêt bien entendu* is its openness to virtue, specifically forms of what Tocqueville takes as distinctively (if also vaguely) Christian virtue. While other accounts of *intérêt bien entendu* have emphasized its echoes with traditions of republican or civic virtue, with bourgeois virtues, and with utilitarianism – some of these being compatible with and complementary to my account, others less so – I have argued that recovering this element of *intérêt bien entendu* is not only consistent with the text of *Democracy in America*. It is also consistent with Tocqueville's stated intentions to educate democracy in its true interests towards good (virtuous) ends. It is also consistent with his desire to reconcile political liberty and the Church, and, as he expressed to his friend Kergolay, "to emphasize the more immaterial aspects" of political economy, to "bring in ideas and feelings of morality as elements of prosperity and happiness, and "to try to rehabilitate spiritualism in politics and to make spiritualism popular by driving home its utility."¹ Self-interest, a fixture of the human condition, can not only be channeled by political institutions. Self-interest can also be, and in Tocqueville's view, *must also* be educated. This occurs through the political participation of citizens but also and principally through less overtly political spaces, through the "reciprocal action of men on one another" through which the sentiments, ideas, and the heart are enlarged rather than enclosed. *Intérêt bien entendu*, the meaning of which is "left ... ambiguous," is clearly a way by which democratic

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Oeuvres Complètes* XIII-1, pp. 361-362, letter to Kergolay in 1834.

hearts are linked and brought into communion and communication with one another towards a variety of common ends and what we might broadly call the common good.²

This emphasis on the importance of moral education is not completely unique to Tocqueville among liberals. However, it does render Tocqueville a “political liberal” with a tightly connected ethical and moral project that, depending on the definition of liberalism, can appear more or less “liberal.” The articulation and debate over such distinctions are ongoing which cannot, for reasons of space and scope, receive their due attention here.³ What we can say is that Tocqueville understood the inadequacy of political understandings of liberty when separated from what Lawler termed the “apolitical” understandings of liberty and the ends of freedom.⁴ In Mitchell’s terms, Tocqueville’s liberalism does not separate the political from the religious, ethical, and moral but embraces the circularity of cause-and-effect in the social realm as well as what Mitchell calls spill-over effects: “habits of thinking in one realm spillover onto another without regard to the borders that logic might wish to impose.”⁵ In Villa’s words, Tocqueville was not a moral pluralist even if he was an associational pluralist.⁶ For Tocqueville, a thriving social and political order is characterized by free republican political institutions and rights, by the intermediary powers and associations of civil society, by socially-grounded and

² Goldhammer, “Tocqueville, Associations, and the Law of 1834,” 78.

³ Helena Rosenblatt takes liberalism as principally an ethical project with a politics: a broad “ethical project” “centered on a set of core values: not just individual freedoms, but also generosity, tolerance, and political engagement, all of which were interrelated.” Rosenblatt, *The lost history of liberalism*, and Rosenblatt, “Response,” *H-Diplo Roundtable XXI-4: The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century*, 20 September 2019, <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT21-4>. See, on the call to return to a “political liberalism,” Selinger and Conti, “The lost history of political liberalism.”

⁴ Lawler, *The Restless Mind*, 3-4.

⁵ Mitchell, *Fragility*, 18-20.

⁶ Dana Villa, “Hegel, Tocqueville, and ‘Individualism.’” See also Dana Villa, *Teachers of the People: Political Education in Rousseau, Hegel, Tocqueville, and Mill*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

shared religious, moral, and ethical commitments, *and* by what I will refer to as the essential *porousness* of public, private, and intermediary spheres through which those commitments run.⁷ A social and political order absent those shared commitments, which spill over and seep through the porous boundaries of spheres, fails to be a society in any meaningful sense.⁸ This is one important consequence of what the previous chapter highlighted in the flow of the argument of Volume II: the influence of democracy on the intellect, the sentiments, and the mores, and consequently the influence of the democratized intellect, sentiments, and mores upon political society itself. What is private is not clearly or merely private. Relatedly, a social order that 1) undermines practice of and education in political liberty, and that 2) does not recognize and uphold salient distinctions among the diverse “societies” and **associations** that make up civil society and the “great political society,” is not a free political and social order.⁹ The facts of *porousness* and spill-over are not contrary to the existence of a political realm. Nor are porousness and spill-over contrary to the ability to distinguish between spheres of authority, such as the family, the township, the association, the state or department, or federal Union. Tocqueville emphasizes their distinctiveness without separating these spheres from one another in their sometimes hierarchical, sometimes circular interrelation.

Because the logic of democracy is to equalize, however, democracy will try to equalize these spheres of life, and regulate them, whether by collapsing them into one sphere, by separating them unduly them, or both. This is one aim of democratic despotism that Tocqueville

⁷ One consequence of this is that the public-private distinction does not map clearly onto distinctions of religion/ethics/morality vs politics. While the public sphere is clearly political, the public sphere is not clearly *not* religious, ethical, or moral.

⁸ A society is defined, in large part, by its common « ready-made beliefs. » DA, 711-716.

⁹ See DA, II.3.13.

previews as early as *Democracy* II.III.13, “How Equality Divides the Americans Naturally into a Multitude of Small Particular Societies.” In passages worth quoting at length, he argues that one necessary component of tyranny is the attempt to force a common, equal life on a political community or social state that, even with its commonly held “dogmatic beliefs” including a love of equality, admits by human nature of wide degrees of diversity and many forms of association.

You would be led to believe that the ultimate consequence and necessary effect of democratic institutions is to mix citizens in private life as well as in public life, and to force them all to lead a common existence.

That is to understand in a very crude and very tyrannical way the equality that arises from democracy.

There is no social state or laws that can make men so similar that education, fortune, and tastes do not put some difference between them, and if different men can sometimes find it in their interest to do the same things in common, you must believe they will never find their pleasure in doing so. So they will always, whatever you do, slip out of the hand of the legislator; and escaping in some way the *circle* in which you try to enclose them, they will establish, alongside the great political society, small private societies, whose bond will be the similarity of conditions, habits, and mores.¹⁰ [Italics added.]

This natural diversity is a diversity that the legislator will struggle to overcome entirely, even if the logic of democratic equality will overcome much of it on his behalf by sheer force of public opinion. As people become more similar, they will become both more inflamed by the inequalities that exist and will also cling to their differences as sources of “pride” -- a “very natural” human reaction under such conditions.¹¹

In democracies, where citizens never differ much from one another and are naturally so close that at each instant they can all blend into a common mass, a multitude of artificial and arbitrary classifications is created by the aid of which each man tries to set himself apart, for fear of being dragged despite himself into the crowd.

¹⁰ DA, 1068.

¹¹ DA, 1069.

It can never fail to be so; for you can change human institutions but not man. Whatever the general effort of a society to make citizens equal and similar, the particular pride of individuals will always try to escape from the level and will want to form somewhere an inequality from which he profits.¹²

Ancient despotism understood this truth about diversity, Tocqueville argues, because they faced the limits of human nature more clearly. (Democratic peoples, with their belief in human perfectibility and technological and industrial means of civilization, see the limits less clearly.) While the tyranny of the Caesars “weighted prodigiously on a few”, it was “violent and limited.”¹³ In other words, “the details of social life and of individual existence ordinarily escaped his control.”¹⁴ A dramatically different image from the “immense and tutelary power” above “an innumerable crowd of similar and equal men who spin about restlessly” and which “works willingly for their happiness but wants to be the unique agent for it and sole arbiter.”¹⁵

Tocqueville, in his masterful, often poetic, and metaphorical prose, regularly engages the language and images of circles, spheres, domains, and spaces. Such spatial language and imagery are sometimes meant to denote and signify literal, physical spaces, and their political jurisdictions. Sometimes it goes beyond the suggestion of physical place by metaphor or synecdoche. Examples abound in *Democracy*; few scholars have given this spatial element of Tocqueville’s political imagination focused and dedicated treatment studies of civil society will often invoke or build from it.¹⁶ For instance, the township, the “center of strong affections”: “The

¹² DA, 1070.

¹³ DA, 1247.

¹⁴ DA, 1246.

¹⁵ DA, 1249-50.

¹⁶ Of course, this spatial element of his theoretical imagination often arises through restlessness, which implies movement, and boundaries, even if they are constantly shifting boundaries. For some examples, see Mitchell, *Fragility*, and Agnès Antoine, “Democracy and Religion: Some Tocquevillian Perspectives,” in *Reading Tocqueville*,

New England town brings together two advantages that, wherever they are found, strongly excite the interest of men—namely, independence and power. It acts, it is true, within a circle that it cannot leave, but within that circle its movements are free.”¹⁷ Similarly, Tocqueville in Volume I describes American federalism and the system of checks and balances using the language of circles, domains, and spheres of action: after the Framers “enclosed the federal government within a clearly drawn circle of action, it was a matter of knowing how to make it work.” Whereas the King of France is “absolute master in the sphere of executive power,” the President “in his sphere, exercises only a limited sovereignty.”¹⁸ In a passage that does not mention but foreshadows *intérêt bien entendu*, we learn that “each person, in his sphere, takes an active part in the government of society.”¹⁹ Tocqueville also describes the home as a “domestic circle” which the American woman “cannot escape” but which “is, on the other hand, never forced to leave” and from which she reigns over mores, the basis of the political sphere. He will also speak of the occupational “spheres” in which men find themselves.²⁰

In other instances, Tocqueville’s spatial imagery refers less to anything that can be grounded or located in the concrete – be it townships, territories, or private spaces such as homes

ed. R. Geenens et al., (New York: Palgrave, 2007): 132- 141. See also Dana Villa, “Tocqueville and Civil Society,” in *Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, 216-244.

¹⁷ DA, 110-114.

¹⁸ DA, 207, 208.

¹⁹ DA, 384. “How is it that in the United States, where the inhabitants arrived yesterday on the soil that they occupy, where they brought neither customs, nor memories; where they meet for the first time without knowing each other; where, to put it in a word, the instinct for native land can hardly exist; how is it that each person is involved in the affairs of his town, of his district, and of the entire State as his very own? Because each person, in his sphere, takes an active part in the government of society.

The common man in the United States has understood the influence that general prosperity exercises over his own happiness, an idea so simple and yet so little known by the people. He has, moreover, become accustomed to regarding this prosperity as his work.”

²⁰ DA, 1062-1067.

or workplaces – than to the social, political, epistemological, spiritual, or metaphysical limits and bounds that organize and structure human life. “In America, the majority draws a formidable circle around thought.”²¹ Religions “must carefully draw the circle within which they claim to stop the human mind, and beyond that circle they must leave the mind entirely free to be abandoned to itself.”²² The “excessive taste for materialism” is “the fatal circle into which democratic nations are pushed. It is good that they see the danger and restrain themselves.”²³ “Providence has created humanity neither entirely independent nor completely slave. It traces around each man, it is true, a fatal circle out of which he cannot go; but within its vast limits, man is powerful and free; so are peoples.”²⁴ Likewise, the centralized, sovereign “new tutelary power” Tocqueville envisages as possessing an attractive centripetal force, “[extending] its arms over the whole of society,” its benevolent power undergirded by the sentiments of the people even though it “makes the use of free will less useful and rarer...[and] encloses the action of the will within a smaller space...”²⁵

This spatial element of Tocqueville’s thought has led some scholars like Wolin to describe Tocqueville as a liminal thinker who then wrote himself into *Democracy* as a liminal

²¹ DA, 416.

²² See also DA, 70. “In the moral world, therefore, everything is classified, coordinated, foreseen, decided in advance. In the political world, everything is agitated, contested, uncertain; in the one, passive though voluntary obedience; in the other, independence, scorn for experience and jealousy of all authority. Far from harming each other, these two tendencies, apparently so opposed, move in harmony and seem to offer mutual support. Religion sees in civil liberty a noble exercise of the faculties of man; in the political world, a field offered by the Creator to the efforts of intelligence. Free and powerful in its sphere, satisfied with the place reserved for it, religion knows that its dominion is that much better established because it rules only by its own strength and dominates hearts without other support.”

²³ DA, 957-958.

²⁴ DA, 1285.

²⁵ DA, 1252, 1251.

figure “between two worlds” beholding “a deep political rupture” he would “represent theoretically” and even “heal politically.”²⁶ Mitchell, somewhat differently, draws our attention to the importance of boundaries and limits in Tocqueville in his analysis of the “errant self.” “There must always be boundaries; where they do not exist in the material world, they must exist in the mind.”²⁷ However, the democratic soul and its regime suffer from a “boundary problem”: “For Tocqueville, the democratic soul *naturally* tends to draw its boundaries in the wrong place; and it is these incorrectly drawn boundaries that conduce toward tyranny.”²⁸

The spatial language of Tocqueville’s thought here, in the context of our examination of *intérêt bien entendu*, helps us to see more clearly one of the central points of this chapter, namely the disappearance of *intérêt bien entendu* and *its spaces* under soft despotism. This is perhaps a point so obvious to Tocqueville’s readers that the scholarship fails to remark on it. That is a shame; it tells us much by its absence. This is not to say the disappearance of interest, nor the disappearance of the tasks of civil society. Rather this is a disappearance of the conditions, spaces, and opportunities by which individuals would practice *intérêt bien entendu* and those virtues and practices to which *intérêt bien entendu* opens the heart and against which individualism and soft despotism “enclose” the heart. This is a reality Tocqueville points to quite clearly in a passage in Volume II Part II that we treated in the previous chapter but that now merits examination under this aspect. It reveals the way in which Tocqueville intimately connects social and political conditions to the conditions of the heart.

²⁶ Wolin, 130, 137-139.

²⁷ Mitchell, *Fragility*, 31.

²⁸ Ibid, 79, note 133.

They claim that as citizens become weaker and more incapable, the government must be made more skillful and more active, in order for society to carry out what individuals are no longer able to do. They believe they have answered everything by saying that. But I think they are mistaken.

A government could take the place of a few of the largest American associations, and within the Union several particular states have already tried to do so. But what political power would ever be able to be sufficient for the innumerable multitude of small enterprises that the American citizens carry out every day with the aid of the association?

It is easy to foresee that the time is coming when man will be less and less able to produce by himself alone the things most common and most necessary to his life. So the task of the social power will grow constantly, and its very efforts will make it greater every day. The more it puts itself in the place of associations, the more individuals, losing the idea of associating, will need it to come to their aid. These are causes and effects that engender each other without stopping. Will the public administration end up directing all the industries for which an isolated citizen cannot suffice? And if a moment finally arrives when, as a consequence of the extreme division of landed property, the land is infinitely divided, so that it can no longer be cultivated except by associations of farm workers, will the head of government have to leave the tiller of the State in order to come to hold the plow?

The morals and intelligence of a democratic people would run no lesser dangers than their trade and industry if the government came to take the place of associations everywhere.

Sentiments and ideas are renewed, the heart grows larger, and the human mind develops only by the reciprocal action of men on each other. ...

In democratic countries only the social power is naturally able to act in this way, but it is easy to see that its action is always insufficient and often dangerous.

A government can no more suffice for maintaining alone and for renewing the circulation of sentiments and ideas among a great people than for conducting all of the industrial enterprises. From the moment it tries to emerge from the political sphere in order to throw itself into the new path, it will exercise an unbearable tyranny, even without wanting to do so; for government only knows how to dictate precise rules; it imposes the sentiments and ideas that it favors, and it is always difficult to distinguish its counsels from its orders.²⁹

Soft despotism distinguishes itself in its attempt and historically unique capacity to equalize and regulate the spaces and spheres of human life, to render law and mores uniform in the name of democratic equality. Both in the aristocratic world *and* under the American democratic social

²⁹ DA, 900-901.

state as described in Volume I, these spheres heretofore operated according to rules and authorities proper to them without this necessarily amounting to injustice. Tocqueville, in his description of marriage, provides an articulation of this principle.

Nor have the Americans ever imagined that the consequence of democratic principles was to overturn marital authority and to introduce confusion of authority into the family. They thought that every association, in order to be efficacious, must have a head, and that the natural head of the conjugal association was the man. So they do not deny to the latter the right to direct his companion; and they believe that, in the small society of husband and wife, as in the great political society, the goal of democracy is to regulate necessary powers and to make them legitimate, and not to destroy all power.³⁰

He expresses similar principles in *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution* in commenting on the relationship between the Church and State and that the Catholic Church had its own internal regulatory principles and own unique ends distinct from those by which politics operated.

Tocqueville's criticism of the Church-State politics of both the Ancien Regime and of the revolutionaries was that both attempted to make the Church and State one in a manner disrespectful of the fact they were essentially different.³¹ In the American case, the aristocratic remainders of religion, rights, and legal precedent and the artful arrangement of the federal constitution meant that the spheres of civil society and intermediary powers were both subject to the "moral empire of the majority." Nevertheless they operated outside the centralized, administrative and technological apparatus of the State, leading Tocqueville during his first weeks in the United States to wonder if there was any government at all.³² Pantheism and democratic poetry, Quesnay's physiocracy, the socialisms of 1848, or the West's imaginings of

³⁰ DA, 1064.

³¹ ARR, 242 : « Pour pouvoir s'entendre avec elle, il eut fallu que de part et d'autre on eut reconnu que la société politique et la société religieuse, étant par nature essentiellement différentes, ne peuvent se régler par des principes semblables... »

³² Pierson, 185-188.

Chinese politics – all reflected the democratic mind’s preference for uniformity and equality even when such uniformity and equality may be unfitting or unjust.³³

Whether or not *intérêt bien entendu* is the “key doctrine” of Tocqueville’s political theory, it does reflect and exemplify the phenomena of spill-over, circularity, and porousness which are key to understanding Tocqueville’s thought.³⁴ The previous chapter explicated *intérêt bien entendu*’s orientation toward virtue, specifically a Christian virtue that overcomes the self through communion with others and the “love of God that makes men virtuous.” It also detailed *intérêt bien entendu*’s compatibility with utilitarian understandings of the good; utility, if it is well understood, leads to virtue. The previous chapter also stressed that Tocqueville models the democratic moralist he would have others be, using the language and framework of interest to bring democratic readers surreptitiously toward virtue, to lead them to open their hearts to

³³ On physiocrats as progenitors of socialism, see ARR, 249-256. “Ce pouvoir nouveau n’est pas sorti des institutions du moyen âge ; il n’en porte point l’empreinte ; au milieu de des erreurs, ils démêlent en lui certains bons penchants. Comme eux il a un gout naturel pour l’égalité des conditions et pour l’uniformité des règles ; autant qu’eux-mêmes il hait au fond du cœur tous les anciens pouvoirs qui sont nés de la féodalité ou qui tendent vers l’aristocratie... » (252.)

« L’Etat, suivant les économistes, n’a pas uniquement à commander à la nation, mais à la façonner d’une certaine manière ; c’est à lui de former l’esprit des citoyens suivant un certain modèle qu’il s’est proposé à l’avance ; son devoir est de le remplir de certaines idées et de fournir à leur cœur certains sentiments qu’il juge nécessaires. En réalité, il n’y a pas de limites à ses droits ni de bornes à ce qu’il peut faire ; il ne réforme pas seulement les hommes, il les transforme ; il ne tiendrait peut-être qu’à lui d’en faire d’autres ! ... Cet immense pouvoir social que les économistes imaginent n’est pas seulement plus grand qu’aucun de ceux qu’ils ont soulevés les yeux ; il en diffère encore par l’origine et le caractère. Il ne découle pas directement de Dieu ; il ne se rattache point à la tradition ; il est impersonnel ; il ne s’appelle plus au roi, mais l’Etat ; il n’est pas l’héritage d’une famille ; il est le produit et le représentant de tous, et doit faire plier le droit de chacun sous la volonté de tous » (253).

« On croit que les théories destructives qui sont désignées de nos jours sous le nom de *socialisme* sont d’origine récente ; c’est une erreur : ces théories sont contemporaines des premiers économistes. Tandis que ceux-ci employaient le gouvernement tout-puissant qu’ils rêvaient à changer les formes de la société, les autres s’emparaient en imagination du même pouvoir pour en ruiner les bases.

Lisez le *Code de la Nature* par Morelly, vous y trouverez avec toutes les doctrines des économistes sur la toute-puissance de l’Etat et sur ses droits illimités, plusieurs des théories politiques qui ont le plus effrayé la France dans ces derniers temps et que nous nous figurions avoir vu naître : la communauté de biens, le droit au travail, l’égalité absolue, l’uniformité en toutes choses, la régularité mécanique dans tous les mouvements des individus, la tyrannie réglementaire et l’absorption complète de la personnalité des citoyens dans le corps social » (254).

³⁴ Again, on it as the “key,” see George Anastaplo, “On the Central Doctrine of *Democracy in America*,” in *Interpreting Tocqueville’s “Democracy in America”*; Zetterbaum, *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy*.

transcend narrow self-interest of the kind we might associate with Hobbes and other anti-social liberal theories. It is for good reason, and with a justified sense of good humor, that Tocqueville can be called democracy's "spiritual director" working within "a long French moral tradition."³⁵ Democratic peoples' allergies to virtue can be overcome "if not directly," then "insensibly through habits" of mind and heart and the exhortations of their teachers and guides.³⁶

Personal interest is then not in and of itself vicious but is so only when *poorly understood*. When *bien entendu*, through conditions established principally by the moral precepts of Christianity and the art of association, it links the personal good that is one's self-interest to the general welfare or common good, and sees these two goods as compatible, collaborative, and complementary, and ultimately (if not in the short term, then in the long) non-rivalrous. When we understand *intérêt bien entendu* in this way, it is better understood not fundamentally as self-serving but as joining self to others. Interest well-understood does not enclose individuals in the solitude of their hearts; it opens their hearts to the interests of others in association and finally to the common good of their political community. As my analysis and that of Dana Villa makes clear, though we often associate civil society with Hegel, Tocqueville was "barely aware of Hegel and hardly shared his enthusiasm for the modern 'rational state.'"³⁷ It is in part for these reasons.

The aim of this chapter then is to explain how and why *intérêt bien entendu* disappears under conditions of soft despotism. In short, soft despotism phenomenologically crowds out the

³⁵ Elster, 49-52.

³⁶ DA, 921-922.

³⁷ Villa, "Tocqueville and Civil Society."

spaces in which *intérêt bien entendu* can be practiced and learned, in which one's personal interest is educated dynamically through ideas, habits of the heart, and social practices. Soft despotism also reflects the deterioration of the understanding of what is in one's interest and what the good is for a person as an individual and as a member of a community. It continues that deterioration by establishing both moral and structural political incentives for individuals to be individualistic, to close and harden their hearts against their neighbors.

In framing soft despotism and civil society in this way, I suggest something akin to a teleological reading of Tocquevillian freedom, in which freedom is understood as for an end that is a higher good, namely a specific vision of human flourishing.³⁸ This is a debated view but not without its adherents (as discussed in Chapter 1) who see in Tocqueville not only an implicit account of human nature but also accounts of the conditions for that nature's thriving.³⁹ As regimes, aristocracy and democracy each realize those conditions in partial fashion. Tocquevillian style participatory democracy, enriched by the aristocratic remainders of religion and association, realizes those *more fully* if not completely. Wolin even describes this participatory democracy as a utopia and democratic despotism analogously as dystopia.⁴⁰ Tocqueville, as an exacting prose stylist, looked to move his readers as much by logic as by

³⁸ To say teleological is not to say exclusively or straightforwardly Aristotelian.

³⁹ See Jech, "Man Simply." See also Frohnen, *Virtue and the Promise of Conservatism*. See also aforementioned works of Lawler, Mitchell, Mahoney. See also Michael Pakaluk, "Natural Law and Civil Society," In *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society*, ed. Will Kymlicka and Simone Chambers, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 131-148. Patrick Deneen in *Regime Change* offers a "postliberal" vision inspired by his reading of Tocqueville's normative political vision. In it, he highlights Tocqueville's own stress on the Puritan founding and the "beautiful definition of liberty" offered by Winthrop as "a moral and civil liberty that finds strength in union and that the mission of power itself is to protect; it is the liberty to do without fear all that is just and good" (DA, 68-69.) Patrick Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, (New York: Sentinel, 2023).

⁴⁰ See Wolin, 165-166. "Democracy includes an element of political utopianism, or more precisely, a utopia of the political."

literary and imagistic impressions that align our feelings as readers with his judgment.⁴¹

Nowhere is this clearer – perhaps with the exception of his writing on American slavery -- than in his description of the degradation of the person and citizen under soft despotism. Tocqueville sees in soft despotism not just an absence of *intérêt bien entendu*. He sees in it *intérêt mal entendu*, a distorted notion of the human good that renders men “nothing more than a flock of timid and industrious animals” and reduces citizens to “more than kings and less than men.”⁴²

This chapter advances in parts, as the prior chapter did, by accumulation. First, it selectively establishes context around Tocqueville’s composition of this his most theoretical part of *Democracy in America*. To examine the context is not to subsume Tocqueville’s “innovation,” as Pierre Royer-Collard put it, into context. In this case, historical contextualization deepens our understanding of soft despotism and the relationship between self-interest and bad governance in light of the July Monarchy and what Rahe calls the “French disease”: the democratic ailment of centralization, depoliticization, and severing of private from public interest.⁴³ I draw from his letters and the *Recollections*, as well as from *Democracy* and *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, to clarify what Tocqueville considered real consequences of individualism and egotism for the common good and political life itself. Soft despotism and the absence of *intérêt*

⁴¹ Christine Dunn Henderson, “‘Ideas for the Intellect and Emotions for the Heart’: The Literary Dimensions of Democracy in America,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, 253-277.

⁴² DA 1252, 1260.

⁴³ Rahe, 221-240. Rahe understands Tocqueville as seeing soft despotism as principally applying to and describing phenomena within France, as part of Tocqueville’s “muted polemic” to his own countrymen (222) and suggests that Americans “too contracted the French disease and among us today, under Democrats and Republicans alike, the malady advances at a quickening pace” and that “This development Alexis de Tocqueville did not foresee” (242.) That however is unclear. Even if, as Rahe argues, it would be a “grave error” to think of him as a sort of Anti-Federalist, and even if his concerns for America were more immediately about abolition and the future of the union than soft despotism, Tocqueville opens II.IV.6 by saying, “I had noticed during my stay in the United States that a democratic social state similar to that of the Americans could offer singular opportunities for the establishment of despotism, and I had seen on my return to Europe how most of our princes had already made use of the ideas, sentiments and needs that arose from that social state, in order to expand the circle of their power.” DA, 1245-6.

bien entendu take on flesh in Tocqueville's characterization of the July Monarchy in ways that are helpful and grounding for the remainder of this study.

In this argument by accumulation, I also briefly address a possible objection to my emphasis on the religious, specifically Christian, dimensions of *intérêt bien entendu* and soft despotism. Namely, one might object that Tocqueville understands Christian virtue and political virtue as not just distinct but as in conflict, and Christian virtue as “insufficiently political.” Treatments of Tocqueville's relationship with Catholicism commonly point to his frustrations with Catholic support of Napoleon III's (in Tocqueville's eyes, demagogic) rule as evidence of his alienation from Catholicism and Catholics specifically and Christianity more broadly. However, Tocqueville's critiques of French Catholicism in the latter years of his life reveal hope that French clergy and laypeople would not neglect politics *or* endorse despotism as part of so-called Christian virtue. Tocqueville's commitment to Christianity as the basis of modern moral philosophy did not mean he thought the ancients had nothing to teach moderns in about political virtue.⁴⁴ But it did not mean, *à la* Machiavelli and Rousseau, that he either considered Christianity fundamentally anti-political.⁴⁵ The American example of the spirit of religion and the spirit of liberty together seemed to provide evidence to him that religion, if distinct from politics, could be the “first” political institution; Christian virtue does not entail abnegating the public good. He in fact despairs for political liberty in a France where to be a Christian meant either retreating from politics and worldly interests or endorsing despotic rule. Scholars have

⁴⁴ *Lettres Choisies*, 515-18, 533-36.

⁴⁵ Dana Villa agrees that Tocqueville is not like Machiavelli or Rousseau in this way; his analysis differs from mine in significant ways, mostly that he does not seem to accept key elements of the Mitchell analysis which I accept and build upon. He is nevertheless very enlightening on this and other points. See Villa, “Tocqueville and Civil Society,” 216-244.

commented that Tocqueville is among the first “rallié” (à la Pope Leo XIII) urging Catholics not to abandon liberal democracy but to transform it and make it good by contributing to it.⁴⁶

This question of the nature of Christian virtue merits a slight digression in this chapter because soft despotism depends on depoliticization and the absence in citizens of both political virtue and forms of moral virtue (including *intérêt bien entendu*.) A retreat from politics into a purely “private” life reflects interest *poorly understood*. This retreat is encouraged by individualism and enables despotism. Democratic individualism is therefore analogous to accounts of Christian virtue that neglect responsibility for participation in the political common good.⁴⁷ A further consequence is (which I leave underdeveloped here) that a hard privatization of religious and moral questions by liberal theories, even out of or inspired by a due respect for the distinction of Church and State, is also comparable to democratic individualism. It hardens the boundaries between spheres that are properly nature porous and sets mores and laws at odds.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ See Kahan, *Tocqueville, Religion, and Democracy*, 154, and Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, 33, 37, 45, 47, 68, 69, 179. See also Emile Perreau-Saussine, *Catholicisme et démocratie : Une histoire de la pensée politique* (Paris : Gallimard, 2011), 142. See Pope Leo XIII, “Au Milieu des Sollicitudes,” February 16, 1892.

⁴⁷ One failing of treatments of Tocqueville’s engagement with nineteenth century Catholicism and Catholic thinkers is that they tend to lack adequate consideration of the spirit of Catholicism in the nineteenth century, the specific Catholicism Tocqueville encountered and alternatively praised and criticized. For example, it is hard to say whether Tocqueville was more than peripherally acquainted with scholasticism and Thomas Aquinas. Thomistic philosophy and theology had been out of fashion in Europe for centuries by the time Pope Leo XIII in 1879 authored “Aeterni Patris,” precipitating a Thomistic revival in France.

⁴⁸ Boyd makes the point that Tocqueville is perhaps too open in his affirmation of association and does not adequately consider the possibility of illiberal or antidemocratic associations. Boyd, “Introduction,” 24-30. Villa reads Tocqueville as “retaining and expanding the liberal ‘art of separation’” but also insists that today, “contemporary American discourse of civil society betrays a similar foreshortening and depoliticization. We are inclined to view this realm in accordance with a strict separation between society and government, *société civile et le monde politique*. This allows us to assert the basic Lockean-liberal lesson – that government should serve society, not vice versa – and to count the many blessings of limited government. But it also blinds us to the essential role civil society plays in creating a new kind of space for the public realm, in fostering the ‘habit of association’ and joint action so crucial to public-political life itself. This is to a large degree a willful blindness – one born of our desire to be free of the burdens, responsibilities and argument that characterize public life; one born of our desire to safeguard our *freedom from politics* as we best know how.” Villa, “Tocqueville and Civil Society,” 236, 238. Villa therefore admits that too strict a separation of private and moral from public and political is deleterious to freedom.

I then turn to the text of *Democracy* itself to explicate 1) the quality of mildness or softness that is natural to democracy and that alters the character of despotism; 2) the changing nature of political and social authority in the concentration of power and expansion of the Sovereign; 3) the incursion of the Sovereign into the activities and sphere of civil society; 4) the individualism that precipitates and is strengthened by soft despotism and that “encloses” the heart; and 5) the possible prophylactics Tocqueville prescribes in associations and rights.

Intérêt bien entendu, this lengthy explication will make clear, does not appear as a term in Volume II Part IV. Nor does he suggest it by describing its effects, as in other parts of *Democracy*. Rather, the overwhelming characteristic of democratic peoples under soft despotism is self-centeredness and, if not always hardness towards others, then indifference. The chapter then concludes by suggesting that the significant absence of *intérêt bien entendu* under soft despotism can also be understood as an absence of the conditions for and potential for love. As we learned in the previous chapter, *intérêt bien entendu* can lead to love, and “Sentiments and ideas are renewed, the heart grows larger and the human mind develops only by the reciprocal action of men on each other.”⁴⁹ We also learned that *intérêt bien entendu*, one of the means that allow men to “do without religion,” can lead men not only “back by a long detour towards faith.” However, though Tocqueville says so very clearly, rarely is it emphasized in the literature that soft despotism, in its gentle, mild stifling of civil society, also stifles love or the conditions for love. As we will see, despotism in fact depends on men *not* loving each other.⁵⁰ Tocqueville is neither a theologian nor a metaphysician nor a systematic Enlightenment liberal philosopher. He

⁴⁹ DA, 900-901.

⁵⁰ DA, 887-888.

is not generally counted as a natural law theorist or as a Christian thinker.⁵¹ But the logic of his position is well-articulated by Pope Benedict XVI, a stated admirer of Tocqueville's political theory: "When those responsible for the public good attune themselves to the natural human desire for self-governance based on subsidiarity, they leave space for individual responsibility and initiative, but most importantly, they leave space for *love*."⁵² Seymour Drescher argued that Tocqueville's theoretical appreciation for associational life derives in no small part from his personal experiences of fighting against a "mediocre and insensitive world" through personal spaces of loving friendships, marriage, and family.⁵³ It is a reasonable question whether attributing Tocqueville's high esteem for associations to a personal preference or quirk is either accurate or fair.⁵⁴ It is less undeniably the case that Tocqueville observed that space abhors a vacuum and will rush to fill it, not leave space for what may grow there. In our attention to the absence of *intérêt bien entendu*, we gain a distinctive insight into Tocqueville's thinking about

⁵¹ On this, Mary Ann Glendon would have to disagree. Mary Ann Glendon, "Alexis de Tocqueville," in *Great Christian Jurists in French History*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2019), 276–92. See also Pakaluk, "Natural Law and Civil Society."

⁵² Pope Benedict XVI, "Address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences," May 3, 2008. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080503_social-sciences.html. See, for Benedict's appreciation of Tocqueville's political thought, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Allocution du Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger à l'Académie des Sciences morales et politiques", Paris, 1992, <https://eglise.catholique.fr/sengager-dans-la-societe/laicite/372962-allocation-du-cardinal-joseph-ratzinger-a-lacademie-des-sciences-morales-et-politiques-paris-1992/>.

⁵³ Drescher, *Dilemmas of Democracy*, 46–49. Drescher: Tocqueville "regarded his marriage and his few lifelong friendships as fortresses of security against a mediocre and insensitive world... For anyone who so emphatically envisaged the social future as one of atomized masses facing a monolithic state, small-scale associations could hardly have been a more personal choice to fill the social vacuum. Projecting his own experience, Tocqueville could envision local government and small-scale association as the medium in which the artificiality of impersonal activity could be mitigated, in which one could perceive actors in terms of whole personalities rather than impersonal agents, and above all, where the individuality of one's own acts and one's own sense of identity could be heightened" (footnote 49, p.47). It is my opinion that to characterize Tocqueville's valuation of civil society as arising principally from Tocqueville's psycho-social needs misses the mark in a handful of ways. It is also unclear whether Tocqueville's deep capacity for intimate friendships was an affirmation of association rather than a tragic confirmation of democracy's ability to hollow out intermediary spaces in favor of the State and the family.

⁵⁴ Similarly, Wolin argues that Tocqueville's appreciation for intermediary associations arises from his nostalgia for *ancienneté*. Wolin, 430–453. See as a response to this point, Villa, "Tocqueville and Civil Society," 244, note 81.

the real and potential goods of human relationships in civil society, the space necessary for encounters that can preserve and “renew” a salutary, flourishing form of the democratic social state and in the face of new forms of tyranny, renew even goods of human civilization itself.⁵⁵

The morals and intelligence of a democratic people would run no lesser dangers than their trade and industry if the government came to take the place of associations everywhere.

Sentiments and ideas are renewed, the heart grows larger, and the human mind develops only by the reciprocal action of men on each other. ...

A government can no more suffice for maintaining alone and for renewing the circulation of sentiments and ideas among a great people than for conducting all of the industrial enterprises. From the moment it tries to emerge from the political sphere in order to throw itself into the new path, it will exercise an unbearable tyranny...⁵⁶

Self-Interest and the “General Physiognomy” of the July Monarchy

Tocqueville concludes Volume II with its Part IV, the theorization of soft despotism which is arguably his most purely theoretical work in *Democracy*, though he hesitated to give a name to this “new form” of a “new tyranny.”⁵⁷ It is in striking contrast to the political science and political sociology of *Democracy* Volume I. As Mélonio and others have documented, Volume I, though it claimed to “see further than the parties,” won Tocqueville many keen readers across the political spectrum. The first *Democracy* had established his reputation, its acclaim discernible not just in reviews but in the conversation and other texts which responded to

⁵⁵ On this point, see Mitchell, “It is not good for man to be alone.” See for example Rahe, 157-158. “In matters metaphysical and moral, he may well have been much closer to Pascal than he was to Aristotle. But in his appreciation for the dignity of political life, he had considerably more in common with the peripatetic than with the Jansenist sympathizer... If he contended that ‘in the long run political society cannot escape becoming the expression and image of civil society,’ it was only because, like Aristotle and the other practitioners of political science in classical antiquity, he recognized that there is more to the distribution and disposition of offices and honors within a *politaeia* than the mere working of constitutional mechanisms” (158.)

⁵⁶ DA, 900-901.

⁵⁷ Drafts, Yale, CVh, Pacquet 3, cahier 4, pp. 10-11, cited in Schleifer, 200.

it, thereby setting the stage for his political career.⁵⁸ By contrast, Volume II faltered. As Mill noted, it was the more philosophical, the more original, and the less easily deployed in the service of partisan politics of the two, offering a discomfiting critique not only of the possible direction of American democracy but of France as it democratized and adjusted to new political realities under the leadership of Guizot and the Doctrinaires.

As we approach what becomes of self-interest rightly understood under soft despotism, it is worth briefly considering how Tocqueville characterized the July Monarchy. Doing so adds flesh, color, and a special urgency from these reflections on his contemporary domestic politics to central themes of this chapter which he contemplated while completing *Democracy II*: private and public interest and the function of associations towards the general welfare; the mores, virtues and vices of citizens, elected officials, and public servants; and administrative and government centralization. It is notable that Tocqueville does not think of his fellow citizens as acting from *intérêt bien entendu* but rather from forms of selfishness.

Biographers note that it is difficult to trace the development of Volume II, though he had begun its work by April 1836.⁵⁹ It would not be published until April 24, 1840. Tocqueville left few notes in his papers, and the composition of Volume II was interrupted by a variety of distractions -- among them, travels to England and Switzerland, marriage, a first (unsuccessful)

⁵⁸ Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, 27-54. Mélonio notes also that French attention had turned somewhat away from America by 1840 and so Tocqueville's innovative style of theorizing in Volume II fell on ears already less inclined to be interested.

⁵⁹ Zunz, *The Man Who Understood Democracy*, 186. Brogan, 323. Brogan calls second volume of *Democracy* an "extremely personal" book (359) "shaped as much by personal neurosis as by logic and observation" (361), written with the "purpose" of "self-justification" (366), in which he "let himself drift into nostalgia for the lost world" (349) and that displays that he might not be a "new kind of liberal at all" but a "new kind of legitimist." In his criticism of democracy and egalitarianism, he "had drifted a long way, perhaps without quite realizing it, from the pro-democratic stance and what he hoped was the scientific impartiality of the 1835 volumes" (358).

1837 run for office, public writings on Algeria and other matters of policy meant to support his candidacy, his “Memoir on Pauperism,” the composition of an essay *Etat social et politique de la France avant et après 1789* on Mill’s request for the *London and Westminster Review*, a new 1838 edition of *On the Penitentiary System*, a *Mémoire sur l’influence du point de départ sur les sociétés* for the Académie des sciences morales et politiques which triggered his admission to that same academy in 1838, recurring bouts of sickness, even jury duty in Paris, house renovations, and an appointment on a committee whose meetings he never attended.⁶⁰ This is not to mention his eventual successful election to the Chamber of Deputies. Tocqueville, elected to the Chamber of Deputies upon running for a second time in 1839, found himself confronted by the internal politics of the July Monarchy as a participant, not as a mere observer.

These sometimes methodical, sometimes paused, sometimes frenetic attempts to finish this second volume overlapped therefore with the beginning of his running for office and his tenure as a politician in the Chamber of Deputies. Schleifer suggests Volume II Part IV was mostly written between July and October 1838, though Schleifer highlights a “somewhat puzzling outline” dated July 28, 1838, that is quite different from the published 1840 text. This is not entirely surprising. Large portions of the draft were thrown out in 1838 and until late 1839 when the manuscript was due to the publisher, Tocqueville was constantly rewriting and reworking his concepts. The initial plan for a two-chapter concluding part was eventually replaced by eight chapters from October 1838 to the fall of 1839.⁶¹ It seems likely he rewrote Volume II in light of disillusionment with July Monarchy politics, having realized perhaps that the “political meaning” of his work had changed in light of his new experiences, or that his new

⁶⁰ Zunz, *The Man Who Understood Democracy*, 186.

⁶¹ See also Nolla’s note to this effect in DA, 1189, note b.

experiences clarified and gave birth to new ideas.⁶² Therefore, Volume II, less grounded specifically in America and more about “the order of things” than the “things themselves,” addressed the forms the development of democracy might take in Europe, not just America.⁶³

This is particularly true of soft despotism which he understood as the culmination of his theory.⁶⁴ Previewing for his brother in July 1838 an outline for the final chapters of *Democracy*, Tocqueville wrote,

Then I indicate what special and accidental circumstances can hasten or retard this tendency, which leads me to show that the greater part of these circumstances do not exist in America and exist in Europe. So I get to speaking about Europe and showing by facts how all European governments centralize constantly; how the power of the State always grows and that of individuals always diminishes. That leads me to define the type of democratic despotism which could arrive in Europe, and finally to examine in a general way what the tendencies of legislation must be to struggle against this tendency of the social condition.⁶⁵

As an earlier April 1838 letter to Kergolay shows even more clearly, Tocqueville’s theorization of administrative centralization was tightly bound up in a critique of Doctrinaire politics and the nature of interest as a philosophical matter and as a matter of practical politics. “I am putting at this moment the finishing strokes on the penultimate chapter,” he told his friend. As he worked, he observed the events of domestic politics, prompting this further remark:

⁶² Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, 60. “In the spring of 1838, Tocqueville wrote a great chapter on the infrequency of revolutions under democracies, a chapter challenging Guizot, and he gave it in galley form to the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. Which shows us how central it was to his thinking. From July to October 1838, Tocqueville wrote his fourth section, on the political consequences of equality, which was truly a new treatment of questions touched on in 1835. It was in this unacknowledged rewriting that he noticed he had unconsciously changed the political meaning of the work, so much that from October 1838 to the end of 1839 he had to rewrite it all in a mass of fragments tirelessly recopied and modified in succession.”

⁶³ I borrow this apt application of Montesquieu to Tocqueville’s Volume II from Rahe, 153.

⁶⁴ See Schleifer, 203-236.

⁶⁵ Tocqueville to Edouard de Tocqueville, « Tocqueville, 10 July 1838, » OC, (Bt.), 7 :166-68, cited in Schleifer, 210.

I cannot tell you, my dear friend, the disgust I feel in watching the public men of our day traffic, according to the smallest interests of the moment, in things as serious and sacred to my eyes as principles. ... They frighten men sometimes and make me ask myself whether there are only interests in this world and whether what one takes for sentiments and ideas are not in fact interests that are acting and speaking.⁶⁶

What reassures him that this is not unusual for political life is the “indiscreet and gossipy Plutarch”; what offers him some consolation it is not always the case? Plato and the “great principles of the beautiful and the good, as well as the high and salutary theories of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul.”⁶⁷

For our purposes, his letters, political frustrations, and the *Recollections* of the 1848 Revolution offer concise representative examples of his views of July Monarchy politics from the inside, though we can glean his thinking elsewhere as well. Take for example his discussion in *Democracy* of democratic and aristocratic historians as political and historical actors – a topic that itself reflected on the successes and failings of the Doctrinaires.⁶⁸ An achievement of the

⁶⁶ Tocqueville to Kergolay, April 22, 1838, in *Selected Letters*, 127, 129.

It should be noted that Pierre Royer-Collard would later accuse Tocqueville of being self-serving and hypocritical in this regard. Jardin notes this was perhaps undeserved, reflective more of Tocqueville’s early political imprudence than of his increasing appreciation for practical considerations and political conciliation and compromise. See Jardin, 302-303. Mélonio comments also Tocqueville’s “moral protestations” were possibly just “cause for laughter” because of Tocqueville’s won concern with “maintaining his network of patronage” (61).

⁶⁷ Tocqueville to Kergolay, April 22, 1838, in *Selected Letters*, 130. See Wolin, 297, for an assessment of Tocqueville’s inspiration in Plato as an example of the “theorist bearing witness against those social and moral forces which had to be resisted” for a better politics. See also Mitchell, *Fragility*, on lessons drawn from Plato.

⁶⁸ DA, 853-860. Tocqueville had described democratic historians as “[attributing] almost no influence to the individual over the destiny of the species or to citizens over the fate of the people... they give great general causes to all the little particular facts”, whereas aristocratic historians “perceive first of all a very few principal actors who guide the whole play... they forget the rest.” A truer, more accurate manner of portraying historical causality and of the “particular action of the individual” in history would be to blend the methods of the aristocratic and democratic historian. This is to admit, on the one hand that “in no period” of history are the causes of history either “very general facts” or “very particular influences” but rather all events mix these two. It is also to admit, on the other, that general facts “explain more things” in democracy than aristocracy, while “particular influences are stronger and general causes weaker” under aristocracy. The greater explanatory power attributed to great forces in democratic ages does not make such determinism correct.

historian, to “elevate men’s souls” and not to “complete their prostration,” ought to be to convey to citizens that their virtuous or vicious actions, even if part of and subject to the great forces of history, do matter. “I am very convinced that in democratic nations themselves, the genius, the vices, or the virtues of certain individuals slow or hasten the natural course of the destiny of the people,” even if these causes are “more varied, more hidden, more complicated” and more difficult for democratic historians to discern. It is a rather simple but important conclusion: the vices and virtues -- the moral character -- of both ordinary democratic citizens and elites are causal within history, even if democratic history is more driven by forces than by individuals.

Therefore, good governance is not simply a matter of procedure and of republican institutions but of political and moral character and education.⁶⁹ That said, Tocqueville understood that in France the character of elites was significantly determinative, more determinative than in America. It could have been otherwise; in the *Ancien Regime*, Tocqueville describes the French medieval parish as like the New England township.⁷⁰ However, the development of royal absolutism had produced a centralized, elite administration which survived the Revolution and Napoleon into the Doctrinaires’ July Monarchy constitution, with its structure of property rights, suffrage, parliamentarism, and the civil service and administrative bureaucracy. All of these pointed towards the formation of a new “aristocracy” of the middle

⁶⁹ Selinger and Conti, when reviewing Rosenblatt’s *The Lost history of liberalism*, argue against her vision of liberalism as an “ethical project” obsessed with moral reform, in favor of liberalism as “a view about the nature and value of the set of basic political arrangements that we have come to call ‘representative government.’” Both Selinger’s work on Tocqueville, and Rosenblatt, emphasize (albeit in different ways) the concern of liberalism with moral improvement, against a view of liberalism as “a philosophy of selfishness.” Their review contains a large discussion of the politics of the July Monarchy and the Doctrinaires, including corruption, the nature of representation and parliamentarism, and the “aristocratic” nature of many French liberals. Selinger and Conti, “The lost history of political liberalism.” See also, relatedly, Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville*, and Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism*.

⁷⁰ ARR, 142.

class and the bourgeoisie, as championed by Guizot and the Doctrinaires. The determinative character of elites was among, other things, a starting point for Doctrinaire political thought.

Tocqueville's relationship with Guizot and the Doctrinaires – with the exception of Pierre Royer Collard -- was often tense if not always outright conflictual, and has been recently the subject of much excellent study.⁷¹ Though Tocqueville had eagerly attended Guizot's Paris lectures in the late 1820s in Paris, what began as a relationship of admiration had soured after the publication of the first *Democracy*, his 1836 essay for Mill's *Westminster Review*, and an 1838 article in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, all of which offered overt challenges to Guizot's politics.⁷² Rahe goes so far as to suggest that it was the Guizot vision, inspired by Turgot and the physiocrats, "that politics really would be reduced to rational administration by a class claiming expertise that haunted [Tocqueville]."⁷³ Tocqueville, however the Doctrinaires may have

⁷¹Their tense intellectual and political relationship is well-known. The classic on Guizot is Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le moment Guizot*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1985). However, other treatments include Aurelian Craiutu, *Liberalism under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires*, (Lanham, MD: 2003), 87-122. Also for an excellent, succinct study of Doctrinaire political thought and its influence on Tocqueville, particularly on the idea of democracy as a social state or social condition, see Craiutu, "Tocqueville and the Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires," *History of Political Thought*, 3 (1999): 456-493, and Craiutu, "Tocqueville's Dialogues," in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, 69-99. Also Francois Furet, "The Intellectual Origins of Tocqueville's Thought," *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, 7, (1995-6), 117-129. See also Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 93-102. Jaume takes the Doctrinaires and French counterrevolutionary sociological tradition to be so influential on Tocqueville that Tocqueville's own theory is essentially derivative and unoriginal. I side with Boyd and the contributors to the *Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America* when Boyd writes, "While many ideas and concepts found in *Democracy* were hardly original to Tocqueville, as we will see, it is almost surely not the case, as Lucien Jaume goes so far as to allege, that there is little new in Tocqueville's analysis of democracy." Boyd, "Introduction," *Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, 9. See also Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 9, 17, and for Jaume on the influence of the Doctrinaires, see all of Jaume but especially Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 1-95, 251-318.

⁷² See Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, 34, 37-38, 68-69, 85. Mélonio suggests that Tocqueville was unable to establish a party or movement in part due to Guizot's influence: "Tocqueville's political science found an audience only after Guizot's fall. Guizot had made the longevity of his rule the guarantor of his own legitimacy. When he fell, he demonstrated the correctness of Tocqueville's prophecy that had denounced the instability of a mixed aristocratic-democratic system" (49).

⁷³ Rahe, 144. See also Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, 93-102. Manent comments that the epistocratic style theorized by Guizot was not necessarily tied to his well-known "personal haughtiness" but helpfully reminds us of it.

described him, did not play the radical democrat advocating universal suffrage against Guizot's new aristocracy of a meritocratic, prosperous middle class "[sortie] du sein de la société" that would become the "realization de la société moderne."⁷⁴ Upon his election and appointment to a committee on electoral reform in 1839, Tocqueville declared himself against suffrage-widening measures advocated by the Left and thus was temporarily allied on the issue with Guizot, Thiers, de Rémusat, and other conservative Doctrinaires.⁷⁵ Throughout his political career, Tocqueville was often more focused on improving the workings of government and eliminating government corruption as a means to a better politics rather he was concerned with widening the suffrage. Tocqueville's political career would consequently include campaigns to minimize corruption.⁷⁶

Guizot was a strong advocate of pork-barrel legislation and the spoils system Tocqueville hated, alongside his strong dislike of the civil servant class who lived off the government. Zunz, 196-197.

⁷⁴ Guizot, *Origines du gouvernement représentatif*, t.1, p. 100-101, cited in Rosanvallon, 114. See Rosanvallon, 107-120.

⁷⁵ See Zunz, *The Man Who Understood Democracy*, 195-7. Zunz notes that Tocqueville in 1840 tried to promote legislation that would curtail deputies' ability to profit off or advance their civil service careers while deputies. He also notes (206) that in 1843, invited by Odileon Barrot to contribute six articles to *Le Siècle*, Tocqueville upheld the principles of 1789 against the spirit of 1793, and argued that fear of further revolution had produced a bourgeois government that argued for its own leadership and against civil liberties in the name of stability, whilst profiting off its own leadership. Tocqueville instead pointed the finger at the administrative apparatus of some 100,000 civil servants. Tocqueville, "Lettres sur la situation intérieure de la France," » OC III :2, 1000-101, 107-108, cited in Zunz, *The Man Who Understood Democracy*, 206.

⁷⁶ This campaign is the subject of a recent study by William Selinger. William Selinger, "Le grand mal de époque: Tocqueville on French Political Corruption," *History of European Ideas*, 42, 1 (2016): 73-94. Selinger, contra scholars (including Mélonio, Wolin, Ran Halévi, and Aurelian Craiutu) who treat Tocqueville's concern with corruption by "quickly [subordinating] it to other concerns" such as administrative centralization, bourgeois mediocrity, or a politics of moderation. According to Selinger, Tocqueville sought to professionalize the existing French bureaucracy: "Centralisation and equality of conditions could be combined with representative government without widespread political corruption, Tocqueville believed—and since he thought that both these processes were unstoppable in France, making them coincide in a less corrupt way was at the heart of his political agenda during the July Monarchy." Selinger, 74.

As William Selinger details, Tocqueville had to “work with what he had.”⁷⁷ His critique of corruption and his desires for reform earned him few friends and accusations of hypocrisy.⁷⁸

It was not a critique he readily abandoned, however politically difficult. It would emerge in his treatment of the *Ancien Regime*, in his discussions of the buying and selling of offices.⁷⁹ He maintained and expanded this critique in the *Recollections*, whose postmortem of the July Monarchy seemed to evince Guizot’s failures and vindicate Tocqueville’s views.⁸⁰ (The very successful tenth edition run of *Democracy* in March 1848 seemed to confirm Tocqueville’s victory further.⁸¹) The *Recollections* were not intended for publication. Published in 1893 by his grandnephew, it did not receive the prudential editorial attention which characterizes his other published works and speeches. As a result, the work is thoroughly interwoven with acute

⁷⁷ Selinger, 75. Selinger suggests this raises our awareness as readers of Tocqueville of the necessity of political prudence in “judging particular circumstances on their own terms”. On education and elite formation: Tocqueville is still concerned with the importance of elite formation and differentiates between the education fitting for elites – including classical study; see *Democracy* II.I.15 – and the practical and technical learning fitting for most democratic citizens. However, Tocqueville makes clear that America is, as a civilized nation, less inclined overall than others to literature yet is also remarkably literate. This is both as a matter of formal education – “There is scarcely a pioneer’s cabin where you do not find a few odd volumes of Shakespeare” (II.I.13) – as well because of their participatory democracy, including newspapers. See also II.II.17 on this point of the authority of elites in guiding and regulating mores.

⁷⁸ See Zunz, *The Man Who Understood Democracy*, 196-198. Guizot was in favor of pork-barrel legislation.

⁷⁹ Tocqueville, ARR, 169-188. « La plus grande différence qui se voit en cette matière entre les temps dont je parle et les nôtres, c’est qu’alors le gouvernement vendait les places, tandis qu’aujourd’hui il les donne ; pour les acquérir on ne fournit plus son argent ; on fait mieux, on se livre-soi-même. Séparé des paysans par la différence des lieux et plus encore du genre de vie, le bourgeois l’était le plus souvent aussi par l’*intérêt* » (184).

⁸⁰ Manent comments, speaking of Guizot, “The contrast between the oppressionist of the 1820s who analyzed so subtly the new relationship between society and government and the member of the government of the 1840s who appeared to be blind to the growing rift between the two, simply expresses chronologically an initial internal divide between Guizot the historian and Guizot the philosopher. The necessity for electoral reform that he so obstinately rejected seemed to him not a natural development of the representative idea but rather a residual symptom of the anarchy of the will inherited from the revolutionary period and maintained by the doctrine of liberal oppositionalism... The only guide to its action should be, not what society wants or seems to want, but what appears just and good to government itself, which concentrates and epitomizes the ‘capacities’ of good society.” Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, 102.

⁸¹ Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, 49.

political and social commentary and Tocqueville is arguably at his most bracing as a stylist, his most lively, judgmental, and critical in his portrayals of groups and individuals, including himself, and his most adept at portraying the relationship of actors and their virtues and vices, including egotism and self-interest, to the great historical forces around him. Tocqueville skewers his colleagues in the administration and Chamber of Deputies for their mobilization of government as a kind of industry for the welfare of the governors and those who, in Guizot's terms, "lend their firm and sincere support to policies that benefit the general interest [and who therefore] will reap the fruits of their own local interests."⁸² It echoes Tocqueville's characterization of soft despotism as the "...first of industrialists; it tends more and more to make itself the leader or rather the master of the others."⁸³ From the *Recollections*:

No sooner had this occurred than a marked lull ensued in every political passion, a universal shrinkage, and at the same time a rapid growth in public wealth. The spirit peculiar to the middle class became the general spirit of government... This spirit was active and industrious, often dishonest, generally orderly, but sometimes rash because of vanity and selfishness, timid by temperament, moderate in all things except a taste for well-being, and mediocre; a spirit that combined with the people or with aristocracy could do wonders but that by itself never produces anything except a government without either virtues or greatness. Mistress of all, as no aristocracy has ever been or ever will be, the middle class, which must be called the ruling class, entrenched in its power and afterwards in its selfishness, treated government like a private business, each member thinking of public affairs only insofar as they could be turned to his private profit, and in his petty prosperity easily forgetting the people.

Posterity, which sees only striking crimes and generally fails to notice smaller vices, will perhaps never know how far the government of its time toward the end took on the features

⁸² Tocqueville quoting Guizot, "Discussion sur les fonds secrets," March 2, 1842, OC III:2, 385, cited in Zunz, *The Man Who Understood Democracy*, 196-197. Tocqueville is not an unabashed advocate of bourgeois virtue or the mercantile spirit. See Boesche, *Strange Liberalism*, "Belittling Bourgeois Society," 71-93; Hirshman, 119-124; Steven Smith, "Tocqueville's America," *Modernity and Its Discontents* (New Haven, CT, 2016), 197-222; and Wolin, 350. See also Villa, "Tocqueville and Civil Society," 228-233, 242 notes 66-67. For Tocqueville as advocate of bourgeois virtue, see McCloskey, *The Bourgeois Virtues*, 31, 340; for a far better take, Barbeau, "Ethics in a Commercial Age."

⁸³ DA, 1237-8.

of a trading company whose every operation is directed to the benefit that its members may derive from it.⁸⁴

Individualism and egotism, such as he described in *Democracy* as the basest and crudest form of interest, seemed to him to have become the rule in French political affairs such that the res publica, responsible for the common good, resembled a private company. The politics of association in the July Monarchy made these concerns more pressing. Tocqueville's emphasis on associations (including their link to the freedom of ideas and freedom of the press) in *Democracy* was born not of – contrary to Drescher—any mere personal “caprice.”⁸⁵ Rather it was an “audacious if circumspectly formulated protest against a repressive policy.” Goldhammer documents that the associations Law of 1834, building on the 1810 penal code in response to rebellion in Lyon, banned a wide array of associations and required permission of associations over twenty members. This policy “the government insisted was essential to the restoration of order.” In *Democracy*, Tocqueville implicitly references the law by making references to groups of over twenty members. Therefore, whilst the July Monarchy encouraged enrichment and association, especially through trade, of particular groups and classes, it forbade such rights to others. The *Ancien Regime* provides further indication of Tocqueville's thinking about the implications of limiting association and thereby changing the space and interactions of men in the space of civil society:

In the sixteenth century, most of the corporate bodies I have been discussing already existed, but their members, after dispatching the affairs of their particular association among themselves, regularly joined with all the other inhabitants to consider the town's general interests. In the eighteenth century, such groups were almost entirely turned inward [rempliés sur eux-mêmes] because transactions involving town business had become rare

⁸⁴ Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 5. The contrast between France and America is a telling one; whereas Tocqueville also describes America as uniformly middle class, the American constitution at its various local, state, and federal levels operates more democratically. All male citizens above a certain age can vote; there are no property qualifications for suffrage. The government can be said to be representative and democratic in a fashion which July Monarchy France, approximately 200,000 men, or less than 1% of the population, had the vote.

⁸⁵ Goldhammer, “Tocqueville, Associations, and the Law of 1834.”

and were always handled by delegates. Hence, each of these little societies lived for itself alone, was concerned only with itself, and transacted no business that did not affect it directly.

Our fathers did not have the word *individualism* which we have forged for our own use, because in their day there was no such thing as an individual who did not belong to a group and could see himself as standing absolutely alone; yet each of the thousand small groups of which French society was composed thought only of itself. It was, if I may put it this way, a sort of collective individualism which prepared souls for the true individualism that we have come to know.⁸⁶

Though democratic individualism was yet to be fully born, the Ancien Regime had already encouraged a habit and practice of “collective individualism”: a group’s thinking only of its own interests in the absence of a collaborative space in which to relate its interests to those of others and the broader common good.⁸⁷

“In a political world thus composed and led,” Tocqueville wrote, “what was most lacking at the end was political life itself.”⁸⁸ Mélonio puts it starkly: Tocqueville wondered “what would become of the public good? The *res publica* was not so much abandoned as managed to the advantage of private interests.”⁸⁹ The 1848 Revolution seemed dramatic confirmation to Tocqueville that the bourgeois virtue of self-enrichment was not without its

⁸⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, ed. Jon Elster, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), 91. Henceforth Ancien Regime. Also ARR, 188.

⁸⁷ For a few studies of the Ancien Regime, see Jon Elster, “Tocqueville on 1789: Preconditions, Precipitants, Triggers,” in *Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, 49-80. See also Robert T. Gannett, Jr., “The Shifting Puzzles of Tocqueville’s *The Old Regime and the Revolution*,” in *Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, 188-215.

⁸⁸ *Recollections*, 9-10. He goes on: “As every matter was settled by the members of one class, in accordance with their interests and points of view, no battlefield could be found on which great parties could wage war. This particular homogeneity of position, interest, and consequently point of view which prevailed in what M. Guizot had called the *pays legal* deprived parliamentary debates of all originality, all reality, and all true passion.” Meanwhile, from the perspective of the people, “Some glaring instances of corruption, accidentally discovered, suggested that other scandals lay hidden everywhere and convinced the nation that the entire governing class was corrupt. So the nation conceived a quiet contempt for that class... in the lower [half of the country] an attentive observer could easily see from certain feverish and irregular symptoms that political life was beginning to find expression” (11).

⁸⁹ Mélonio, 61.

vices, in this case an egotism that turned the public good to private profit.⁹⁰ If governors had themselves acted as though “in the political world there are only interests, passions, ambitions, and no ideas,” no transcendent good, true, or beautiful, it is little surprise the “people have been led to believe” them and act based on their own personal interests against the government which they did not feel served the common good or their own personal interests.⁹¹ Revolution was, as Tocqueville predicted in January 1848, the eruption of the long dormant volcano.⁹²

The “general physiognomy” Tocqueville attributed to the July Monarchy bears some real resemblance to the democratic social state as described in sections of *Democracy* Volume II – the turn towards materialism, the mildness of mores, the development of a new industrial aristocracy, the pettiness of ambition, the pusillanimity of souls, the turn from warfare towards commerce and from revolution towards passivity and tranquility, the developing sciences of administration, centralization, and industrialization, such that the government became the “first industrialist.”⁹³ Rahe goes so far as to characterize soft despotism as a “French disease” that

⁹⁰ Guizot’s infamous “enrichesiez-vous!” “Enrich yourself!” became that for which he was most known, perhaps unfairly.

Tocqueville described himself as an “aristocrat by instinct” but a democrat by reflection. On Tocqueville’s aristocratic instincts against bourgeois virtue, see Jaume, *Tocqueville*, Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism*, Boesche, *Strange Liberalism*, 134-135, and Wolin, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds*.

⁹¹ Tocqueville, January 18, 1842, Beaumont’s OC, 374-388, cited in Jardin, 304. Mélonio, 61.

⁹² See also *Recollections*, 41. “This leads me to a reflection that has often come to my mind since: In France, a government is always wrong to base its support on the exclusive interests and selfish passions of a single class. Such a policy could only succeed where self-interest counts for more and vanity for less than with us... all things considered, the best way for a government of ours to keep itself in power is to rule well and especially to govern in the interests of everybody.”

⁹³ DA II.III.1, chapters 19, 21, 22, 26. Compare with *Recollections*, 10, where he himself admits that he thought “I was destined to live my life in a tranquil, enervated society. Indeed, anyone who had looked inside the structure of government would have thought that.” He explains the causality therefore of the 1848 Revolution as a continuation of the democratic principle and of materialistic philosophies against the “aristocratic” right to property (12-13). Because the right to participate in politics via suffrage has been limited to those with property, property rights will be contested, “breaking down the bases on which [society] now rests” (12). See also Tocqueville’s letters with Mill over the Crimean conflict of 1841. Tocqueville thought that war could be salutary for the French nation, preserve it from mediocrity, and revive a genuine concern for politics and for the public interest. The pro-war party in France he describes as loving war “for its own sake,” whereas the party of peace “has as its sole principle not the public

Tocqueville “did not foresee” spreading to the United States.⁹⁴ If the French, with their long history of administrative and government centralization, had long been on the route to soft despotism and already modeled some of its features, could such a development be changed or otherwise arrested?⁹⁵ A concern that will be the starting point for the *Ancien Regime and the Revolution*. As Selinger points out, it was an open question whether the French people could be educated and encouraged to practice something akin to *intérêt bien entendu*, and therefore to develop capacities necessary for political liberty, including associations.⁹⁶ Regardless, Tocqueville’s frustrations with the July Monarchy clarify and alert us to what is lacking under soft despotism and the drift towards it: the pursuit of a real general welfare, a common good, through participation in both “political life itself” and through *civil society*. This is a participation aided and encouraged by *intérêt bien entendu*. It is not clear – as discussed in the previous chapter – that *intérêt bien entendu* is fundamentally or principally about political or republican virtue. However, spillover and porousness entail that *intérêt bien entendu* necessarily shapes and

interest but the taste for material well-being and softness of heart. ... the greatest malady that threatens a people organized as we are is the gradual softening of mores, the abasement of mind, the mediocrity of tastes; that is where the greatest danger of the future lies. ... one cannot let this nation [France] take up easily the habit of sacrificing what it believes its grandeur to its repose, great matters to petty ones...” It is the loud “weakness and egoism” particular to the ruling middle class that tries to take the possibility of war off the table. Tocqueville to Mill, March 18, 1841, *Selected Letters*, 149-151.

⁹⁴ Rahe, 242. I address this in an earlier footnote, but it is worth reiterating here it hardly seems the case that Tocqueville considered soft despotism off the table for the Americans. “I had noticed during my stay in the United States that a democratic social state similar to that of the Americans could offer singular opportunities for the establishment of despotism, and I had seen on my return to Europe how most of our princes had already made use of the ideas, sentiments and needs that arose from that social state, in order to expand the circle of their power.” DA, 1245-6.

⁹⁵ A question posed by Seymour Drescher, taken up by Christine Dunn Henderson in her introduction to the “Memoir on Pauperism,” is whether or not Tocqueville sees soft despotism as inevitable. We will revisit this in the next chapter. Christine Dunn Henderson, “Introduction,” in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Memoirs on Pauperism and other writings*, ed., trans., Christine Dunn Henderson, (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021), xxix. We will later take up the suggestion of Delba Winthrop that “Tocqueville’s famous ‘soft despotism’ is little more than an aggravated version of the European welfare state.” Winthrop, “Rights, interests, and honor,” 204.

⁹⁶ Selinger, 91.

correlates to, perhaps even causes, certain forms of civic virtue. Concern for and participation in procuring the political common good opens the heart.

Intérêt bien entendu, virtue, and soft despotism

As presented in the final published text of *Democracy*, soft despotism emerges gradually from the transformation of the democratic regime in its intellect, sentiment, mores, and laws, *and* in the concomitant development of industrial and administrative science. The central claim of this chapter is that this reflects the undermining of and itself further undermines the conditions and intermediary spaces of common life where *intérêt bien entendu* is practiced, where encounters occur “face to face.” Consequently it also undermines *intérêt bien entendu* itself and the higher virtues – devotion, sacrifice, “the love of God that makes men virtuous” – it engenders. “Despotism can do without faith, but not liberty.”⁹⁷ Even if faith and despotism might be compatible, despotism thrives where love, sacrifice, and devotion are not:

Despotism, which, by its nature, is fearful, sees in the isolation of men the most certain guarantee of its own duration, and it ordinarily puts all its efforts into isolating them. There is no vice of the human heart that pleases it as much as egoism: a despot easily pardons the governed for not loving him, provided that they do not love each other. He does not ask them to help him lead the State; it is enough that they do not claim to run it themselves. Those who claim to unite their efforts in order to create common prosperity, he calls unruly and restless spirits; and, changing the natural meaning of words, he calls good citizens those who withdraw narrowly into themselves.⁹⁸

Definitions change rapidly in democratic ages and so despotism not only thrives in the absence of virtues such as love; it also changes what is defined as virtue and what should be honored and

⁹⁷ DA, 478.

⁹⁸ DA, 887-888.

esteemed in a citizen.⁹⁹ It changes what citizens understand to be in their interests and makes indifference to the common good a virtue.

Tocqueville is well-known for the account of individualism we treated in the previous chapter, where error in judgment about one's interests and about the relationship of the private to the common good prompts and encourages retreat from public life. However, this temptation to retreat is also one to which, under the right conditions, well-meaning Christians fall prey.

This may seem to contradict the arguments of this project. If *intérêt bien entendu* at its highest point approximates or touches Christian virtue, the "love of God that makes men virtuous," one might think Tocqueville thinks Christians would not close themselves off from the broader community and therefore neglect political life. This is not the case. Tocqueville demonstrated consistently, in *Democracy* as much as in private letters and other writings across his lifetime, that he desired a reconciliation between the French Catholic Church and the cause of political liberty. His "disillusionment" with and bitterness toward French Catholics flocking to Napoleon III has been stressed by Kahan and others as evidence of "near despair" at the state of the Church and of French politics and of increasing distance from the mainstream of the French

⁹⁹ DA, 829, 1095, note d, note e. Honor is conventional. It is what the moral authority of public opinion praises and blames, and Tocqueville distinguishes this from virtue itself, which is not on Tocqueville's view relative. This passage is discussed at length earlier but for the reader to be refreshed: "Let us never lose sight of the fact that honor is the ensemble of opinions relating to the judgment of human actions, in view of the glory or the shame that our fellows attach to them. This forms a radical difference between honor and virtue, apart from all the other differences" (note d).

"I fear that the outcome of my chapter is that true and false, just and unjust, good and evil, vice and virtue are only relative things depending on the perspective from which you see them, a result I would be very upset to reach for I believe it false; and in addition such an opinion would be in clear contradiction to the ensemble of my opinions." See also 1096, note e, in which Tocqueville differentiates, albeit vaguely and imprecisely, between interest, virtue and honor. On this point, Drescher agrees. "It is important to note that Tocqueville's ultimate standards for both judgment of and action against the state were placed in a realm beyond it, a realm of absolute religious and moral truths. But he was hesitant to invoke these ultimate principles when individual rights might be better protected by a continually alert citizenry." Drescher, *Tocqueville on England*, 10.

Catholic faithful.¹⁰⁰ He condemned what he considered hypocritical clergy who argued for freedom of education under the rubric of religious liberty but under the new empire, “today treat the Republic and freedom like mortal sins.”¹⁰¹ That so many clergy demonstrated an “attraction to servitude” and antipathy to liberal political institutions was a source of deep sadness and grief to him, so different was it from what he observed and admired in America.¹⁰²

However, Tocqueville’s criticisms of fellow citizens and French Catholics should not be taken as straightforward evidence that Tocqueville considered Christian virtue itself opposed to political liberty. His reflections on America underscore this (even if he sometimes doubted the depths of American belief.) In the French case, we can discern that Tocqueville criticizes views of so-called Christian virtue that are insufficiently political – that are insufficiently interested in the political common good. “Tocqueville does not want a political clergy but nor does he want a clergy indifferent to politics.”¹⁰³ His criticism of clerical and lay support for Napoleon III was matched by a concern for forms of Christian morality that minimized the importance of the political and this worldly-interests and that therefore rendered lay Christians “insuffisamment politiques.”¹⁰⁴ He observed this phenomenon vividly in his sister-in-law during the 1848

¹⁰⁰ See Kahan, *Tocqueville, Religion, and Democracy*, 167-172. See also on Tocqueville on Caesarism, Bonapartism, and similar threats to liberty, Melvin Richter, “Threats to Liberty in Democracies,” in *Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, 247-275. See also Schleifer, *The Making of Tocqueville’s Democracy in America*, 161-240, on the visions of democratic despotism that Tocqueville explored. Richter and Schleifer both argue that Tocqueville’s views of democratic despotism changed over time.

¹⁰¹ Tocqueville to Corcelle, May 13, 1852, OC, 15, 2:55-56, in Kahan, *Tocqueville, Religion, and Democracy*, 168.

¹⁰² Tocqueville to Edouard de Tocqueville, February 14, 1852, *Lettres choisies*, 1023-4, in Kahan, *Tocqueville, Religion, and Democracy*, 168.

¹⁰³ Kahan, *Tocqueville, Religion, and Democracy*, 171.

¹⁰⁴ This has led Emile Perreau-Saussine to describe Tocqueville as a Gallican : “D’un point de vue social, d’un point de vue politique, Tocqueville était moins opposé à l’Eglise catholique qu’il n’était disposé à la servir ; il se voulait française et catholique ; il était gallican » (132). However, he understands Tocqueville’s Gallicanism as a separation of the spiritual and the political, with the clergy upholding the importance of the political (131-132). One can make sense of this and of his seeming contradictory writings in *Democracy* that he would like to chain priests to the altar to prevent them from participating in politics as a stance that 1) Christians should not neglect

Revolution, criticizing her as a “respectable woman” and the “worst citizen.”¹⁰⁵ It was a concern he also disclosed to the liberal Catholic convert and influential salonnière Madame Swetchine, who had asked him to clarify his views on the clergy as presented in the *Ancien Regime and the Revolution*.¹⁰⁶ In an exchange with her over September and October 1856, Tocqueville advanced several arguments. First, there is a private morality, concerning obligations of family, and a public morality, the “duties which every citizen has towards his country and the human society to which he belongs. Am I mistaken in believing the clergy of our time is very preoccupied with the first portion of morality and very little with the second?”¹⁰⁷ Tocqueville follows this with a discussion of women’s influence (fitting in a letter to Swetchine) over public and private morality. He cites his “saintly” grandmother who had taught her son, Tocqueville’s father, the importance of Christian virtue and “that a man owes himself to his homeland... that God

politics, nor should their clergy but 2) there ought to be a separation of the political and spiritual authorities. Perreau-Saussine goes on to say that Tocqueville « est favorable à la séparation de l’Eglise et de l’Etat, qui protège la religion de la corruption et qui renforce l’autorité spirituelle de l’Eglise, » for religion was a way to limit liberty in a salutary way, without destroying it (133-4). Perreau-Saussine suggests that Tocqueville (here Perreau-Saussine and Mitchell sound similar) understood that “souvent grâce à l’autorité de la révélation [...] on peut éviter l’autoritarisme politique » (136), and « une société libérale a encore besoin de vertu » more than can be provided by the liberal state itself (137). Therefore, unlike the ultramontanists who “comptaient sur Rome” for the aspirations they shared with Gallicans to “protéger la liberté de l’Eglise contre un Etat qui lui était devenu étranger, et maintenir cet Etat dans l’orbite de la Chrétienté, » those « de l’école tocquevillienne partagent ces aspirations mais sans compter sur Rome » (139). Tocqueville’s so-called Gallicanism therefore boils down, in Perreau-Saussine’s estimation, to a strong valuation of the political. Perreau-Saussine, 131-139.

Another view of this by Seymour Drescher is the argument that “He might affirm that the Gospel had introduced an element of charity into the realm of morality and politics, something ‘entirely different from what had preceded it’ but he thought Christianity and contemporary French Catholicism neglected the ‘public virtues’” (13). Though I would criticize this characterization in parts, Drescher at least recognizes that Tocqueville offered a specific criticism of his contemporary French Catholics. Drescher, *Tocqueville and England*, 13.

Compare with Galston who argues Tocqueville’s is “not a functionalist argument at all” but rather “as substantive argument” about the truth of the “Christianity of the Gospels” (Galston, 500). William Galston, “Tocqueville on liberalism and religion,” and Zuckert 1981 and 2014.

¹⁰⁵ *Recollections*, 39-40. “Characteristically, my sister-in-law had lost her head.”

¹⁰⁶ I am grateful to Kahan for highlighting the first part of this exchange in Kahan, *Tocqueville, Religion, and Democracy*, 170.

¹⁰⁷ Letter to Swetchine, 10 September 1856, *Selected Letters*, 338, in Kahan, *Tocqueville, Religion, and Democracy*, 170.

demands of him that he always be ready to consecrate, if need be, his time, his fortune, and even his life to the service of the state and the king.”¹⁰⁸

Having drawn distinctions between public and private obligations and political and Christian virtue, Tocqueville returns to the porousness of religion and politics and the necessity of the religious grounding of politics. If trends within French Catholicism were to produce “insufficiently political” Christians, their insufficient attention to politics would be an abnegation of responsibility for the genuine interests of this worldly life. This supports tyranny.

Je ne demande point sans doute aux prêtres de faire aux hommes dont l’éducation leur est confiée ou sur lesquels ils exercent une influence... je ne le demande pas de faire à ceux-ci un devoir de conscience d’être favorables à la république ou à la monarchie. Mais j’avoue que je voudrais qu’ils leur disent plus souvent qu’en même temps qu’ils sont chrétiens ils appartiennent à l’une de ces grandes associations humaines que Dieu a établies sans doute pour rendre plus visibles et plus sensibles les liens qui doivent attacher les individus les uns aux autres, associations qui se nomment des peuples et dont le territoire s’appelle la Patrie. Je désirerais qu’ils fissent pénétrer plus avant dans les âmes que chacun se doit à cet être collectif avant de s’appartenir à soi-même. Qu’à l’égard de cet être-là, il n’est pas permis de tomber dans l’indifférence.¹⁰⁹

Indifference to the fate of the country, he goes on, should not be made into “a sort of lax virtue which enervates some of the most noble instincts which have been given to us.”¹¹⁰

A year later in another letter, he similarly confessed to Kergolay that he had:

... always, in petto, considered a book like *The Imitation of Christ*, for example, when considered other than as instruction intended for the cloistral life, as supremely immoral. It is not healthy to detach oneself from the earth, from its interests, from its concerns, even from its pleasures, when they are honest, to the extent the author teaches; and those who live according to what they read in such a book cannot fail to lose everything that constitutes public virtues in acquiring certain private virtues. A certain preoccupation with religious truth which does not go to the point of absorbing thought in the other world has

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Letter to Swetchine, 20 October 1856, *OC*, t. XV, t. II, p. 296-7, in Perreau-Saussine, 141-142.

¹¹⁰ Letter to Swetchine, 20 October 1856, in Kahan, *Tocqueville, Religion, and Democracy*, 171.

therefore always seemed to me the state that conforms best to human morality in all its forms.¹¹¹

It is easy to read this statement as a criticism of Christianity and Catholicism specifically tout court. The *Imitation of Christ*, one of the most popular and most translated Christian texts, was written in 1427 from the depths of monastic life by Thomas a Kempis. In 1824, it was translated with great success from Latin by Félicité de Lamennais. For Tocqueville to offer a criticism of living too much according to *The Imitation of Christ* is not a clear criticism of religion or Catholicism, or a claim that Christian virtue is essentially opposed to public virtues.¹¹² It is to critique a popular strain of French Catholic thought in his day and to argue there is “danger even in the best passions when they become ardent and exclusive.” A religious passion that drives humans to shun, retreat from, or even despise this world “creates the most useless or most

¹¹¹ Letter to Kergolay, August 4, 1857, in *Selected Letters*, 357.

Thomas a Kempis is mentioned once in the notes on *Democracy* in the chapter on honor; Tocqueville indicates that on “February 11” of an unspecified year, he had the following reflection:

“Of all religions, the one that has most considered the human species in its unity and has had most in view in its laws the general needs of humanity, leaving aside social state, laws, times, and places, is the Christian religion. So Christian peoples have always been and will always be very constrained in using honor whatever honor may be. It is [what(ed.)] has been the weakness of Christianity in certain periods and among certain peoples, but that is also what has established its general strength and assures its perpetuity./

This reflection came to me today, 11 February, while reading the *Imitation*. This book was written amid all the prejudices of honor of the Middle Ages and in the country where honor reigned most despotically, and the book combats them all. It is true that Thomas d’A [Thomas Kempis (ed.)] sometimes, according to me, forgets the general principles of Christianity in order to start at the particular duties of the religious state and on this point, you could say he combats the notions of aristocratic honor with those of monastic honor.” DA, 1115, note y. Tocqueville seems to have not spent much time with Aquinas if he confused Aquinas with a Kempis.

¹¹² See Robert S. Miola, *Early Modern Catholicism: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 285-287. On Lamennais’ underappreciated influence on Tocqueville, see Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 72-75, and Craiutu, “Tocqueville’s Dialogues”.

As for one further example of the reach of both Kempis and Lamennais, from later in the nineteenth century: Saint Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897), a Doctor of the Catholic Church whose autobiography was published as *Story of a Soul*, was thoroughly devoted to and inspired by *The Imitation of Christ* and mentions the text repeatedly in her autobiography. “I was nourished for a long time on the ‘pure flour’ contained in The Imitation of Christ; this being the only book which did me any good for as yet I had not discovered the treasures hidden in the Gospels. I knew almost all the chapters of my beloved Imitation by heart. This little book never parted company with me... This book had been lent to Papa by my dear Carmelites, and contrary to custom (I didn’t read Papa’s books) I asked to read it. This reading was one of the greatest graces in my life.” Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, trans. John Clarke, OCD, (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1976,) 102.

dangerous citizens.”¹¹³ It makes such Christians not unlike individualistic men under soft despotism, “a stranger to the destiny of all [their fellow countrymen] ... [he is] next to them but he does not see them... if he still has a family, you can at least say he no longer has a country.”¹¹⁴ He concedes in his notes on *Democracy* that retreat might be possible and even admirable for the rare “Saint Jerome.” But he considers it inadvisable and even immoral *for most men* for it neglects an abnegation of genuine interests and moral duties *in this world* to neighbor and fellow citizens.¹¹⁵ As we observed in the last chapter, the man who proves himself capable of the highest virtue, the “love of God that makes men virtuous,” still retains self-interest, but it is as “small and legitimate as possible.” On his view, a proper religious ethic does not neglect this world and its interests. It incorporates them and respects the scope and authority of politics itself and the importance of the material world.¹¹⁶

In this pattern of thought, Tocqueville perhaps unwittingly echoes Fenelon, the seventeenth century French archbishop and author of *Telemachus*, among other texts. Fenelon, known for his possible dalliance with quietism as well as his hatred of Jansenism, makes for a somewhat strange bedfellow with Tocqueville, at least superficially. However, Fenelon’s doctrine of pure love has notable similarities to Tocqueville’s account of interest, *intérêt bien entendu* leading to higher virtuous love, and the relationship between this-worldly and other-worldly interests and duties. They also have a shared, principled opposition to absolutism, and

¹¹³ Letter to Kergolay, August 4, 1857, in *Selected Letters*, 357.

¹¹⁴ DA, 1250. Here, as Paul Rahe suggests, Tocqueville is more like the classical political theorists than like Pascal. See Rahe, 156-158.

¹¹⁵ DA, 960 note j. “For if each of these two opposite roads can be suitable for some men, this middle road is the only one that can be suitable for humanity. Can we not find a path between Heliogabalus and Saint Jerome?”

¹¹⁶ DA, 960-961 note j. He would “show that in the very interest of the soul the body must prosper... I would search for this intermediate path between Saint Jerome and Heliogabalus that will always be the great route of humanity.”

their intellectual products each address head-on ways in which governing authorities (in Tocqueville's case, ordinary self-governing democratic citizens, in Fenelon's case the monarch) might be educated according to virtue and their true interests. Fenelon considered a wholly purified love of God the highest life; this was a life he considered possible for the saints but not for kings and governors.¹¹⁷ The highest life is, in a sense, non-accessible to kings and political leaders, for Christian kings and governing authorities neglect their moral duties when they fail to have an interest in procuring and shepherding the political common good. Tocqueville is, in a similar spirit, democracy's "spiritual director," urging democratic men towards faith and Christians not to abandon their real interests in political life.¹¹⁸

Much more could be said to develop and extend this point, which is admittedly a slight detour. However, it is a detour that allows us to view the main spectacle with greater clarity. (It is also a promissory note towards the next chapter and future study of Tocqueville's engagement with the Catholicism of his time.) To those arguments that *intérêt bien entendu* could not be "religious in orientation," in Mitchell's language, *because* Tocqueville criticizes many of his

¹¹⁷ Fenelon held that while a pure love of God, devoid of self-interest or concern for this world, might be possible for the saints, it would not be advisable or morally upstanding for kings, whose "true glory" consists in uniting his self-interest to that of his people, in service to them. The life of a pure love, devoid of interest, is for a prince or a king, incompatible with politics and his moral obligations. If to the king falls the duties of justice, it is to Christ and his representatives that love falls. Ryan Hanley notes that Fenelon makes the life of perfection one of "complete transcendence of self-love and complete embrace of pure love... motivated entirely by a desire to live in accord with God's will, and independent of the concern for human glory that Fénelon thinks characteristic of philosophy and politics alike." The "gnostic" who lives a life of perfection lives in a way "distinct" from those, either philosophers or politicians, who must engage this world, as well as from "those animated by ordinary faith," for whom beatitude is an "interested and imperfect motive, which is not true virtue." Tocqueville's emphasis on the political makes his thought very different from that of Fenelon, for whom the highest life was the service of God. Yet Tocqueville seems to borrow or replicate some of the structure of Fenelon's thought here where it concerns self-interest rightly understood, while democratizing Fenelon's thought about the moral and political responsibility of sovereigns. See Hanley, *The Political Philosophy of Fénelon*.

¹¹⁸ Late in life, Tocqueville frequented Catholic circles in which social reform through associations and reconstructed civil society was an aim. See on this topic, hugely neglected at least in Anglophone literature, J-B. Duroselle, *Les débuts de Catholicisme Social en France* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1951).

contemporary Christians for insufficient political virtue, this detour offers an important clarification.¹¹⁹ Tocqueville's assessments of his contemporary Catholics demonstrate, consistent with his declarations to this point in *Democracy*, that he considers a concern for the political common good -- whatever real distinctions we can draw between the Earthly and Heavenly Cities and between Church and State -- compatible with both interest rightly understood *and* Christian virtue rightly understood. It also provides a concrete illustration of Tocqueville's thinking about when Christian virtue is, to his mind, *poorly understood*. As the saying goes, grace builds upon nature; so too Christian virtue properly understood adds to and builds upon man's social and political nature, not undermine it. Like individualism, Christian virtue poorly understood manifests in a retreat from politics that engenders despotism. The Gospel commandment to love God and love neighbor as yourself does not spell or churn out concrete political principles. However, the reciprocal action of men upon one another, guided by *intérêt bien entendu* and the high moral ideal of Christian love to which it is related -- "the love of God that makes men virtuous" -- is essential for the participatory politics that characterizes a flourishing democratic social state.¹²⁰ Despotism, soft or hard, thrives where both love of

¹¹⁹ Mitchell, *Fragility*, 24, note 63 and 190, note 96.

¹²⁰ Carson Holloway makes the argument that Tocqueville's normative political vision is compatible with religions beyond Christianity: "Tocqueville, then, emphasizes the need to preserve Christianity within existing democracies not because that Christianity is the only religion from which democracy can benefit but because Christianity is America and Europe's ancestral religion, and he fears that under modern democratic conditions religious faith, once lost, will be difficult to revive or replace." He is certainly correct that Christianity is America and Europe's heritage and rightly ought to be defended. However, he bases this broader claim on only one brief passage in which Tocqueville describes what all positive religions do, namely raise the sights of men, and impose on him some obligations towards mankind. This would also describe Islam, but Tocqueville is hardly keen on Islam and considers it incompatible with political liberty and therefore, in Holloway's words, with "a healthy democracy." Nor is Tocqueville keen on a Unitarian-style philosophical atheism replacing Christianity. Elsewhere in the article, Holloway addresses well Tocqueville's view of democracy's roots in Christianity but in reaching this conclusion, Holloway overstates his case. Carson Holloway, "Religion in Democracy in America," *Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, 327-346. See Kahan, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Religion*, 94-116, 182-194, for Tocqueville on the possible (generally poor) substitutes for Christian religion, including pantheism, Islam, and Hinduism.

neighbor and love of the political community turn to crude egotism or self-centered indifference to the common good, where gathering together is no longer considered desirable or possible, and the spaces of gathering and acting together towards a common end are no longer available.¹²¹

Soft despotism itself

Finally, having both prepared and cleared the ground, we turn to the text, to Tocqueville's arguments about the evolution of democratic ideas, sentiments, and mores that leads finally to the presentation of soft despotism itself. *Democracy* Volume II Part IV follows a discussion of the influence of democracy on the intellect (Part I), the sentiments (Part II), and mores (Part III). Tocqueville's argument accumulates in such a way as to emphasize that soft despotism is not monocausal. Rather it is the product of complex interweaving and reinforcing phenomena that together work to produce a political regime that, despite its elections and regular invocations of democratic processes and norms, is more oppressive than free – and yet, because it is in community with the evolving ideas, sentiments, and mores of the people, it has a legitimate claim to rule. In Chapter 1, we considered at length Parts I and II on the intellect and the sentiments. Here, we begin the exegesis of soft despotism with what makes soft or democratic despotism particularly distinctive: its softness and mildness.

Democratic softness

Part III on the “action of equality on mores and reaction of mores on equality” begins from the proposition that mores become milder as conditions equalize.¹²² This mildness or softness, sometimes expressed as a kind of flexibility, comes to characterize most, if not all,

¹²¹ See on these themes Mitchell, “It Is Not Good for Man to Be Alone,” 268–84.

¹²² DA, 986, note a, 987.

democratic mores and institutions. Of particular interest to Tocqueville are those mores such as honor and patriotism, and those institutions such as business and mercantile activity, the marriage and the family, industry, and the army and warfare, in which there exist distinct inequalities and differences from which arise codes of manners. The equality of conditions, by softening these inequalities, does not succeed in eliminating them. but by transforming them, can make democratic humanity seem like a “different humanity.”¹²³

This quality of softness or mildness is what differentiates soft despotism from ancient despotism and the “rule of one man” as understood classically, so it is worth unpacking briefly.¹²⁴ Tocqueville presents to his reader the example of Madame de Sevigny, whose “cruel banter” about the fate of peasants revolting over the introduction of a new tax in 1675 exemplified the “mutual insensitivity” of classes under aristocracy to the sufferings of the other classes. Tocqueville would not have his readers understand her and her type as wholly insensible to the plight of others.¹²⁵ But he would have readers understand that the democratic person, who sees and conceives of himself as equal to and equally vulnerable as every other person, is far more sensitive and more sensitive to more things than the aristocratic person. This is not a matter of intelligence but of formation. Cicero, he reminds us, was a great intellect, Stoic, and cosmopolitan who nevertheless failed to appreciate the humanity (and therefore alleviate the suffering) of non-Romans. By contrast, the imagination of the democratic person “immediately

¹²³ DA, 1282. “There are certain vices and certain virtues that were attached to the constitution of aristocratic nations and that are so contrary to the genius of the new peoples that you cannot introduce those vices and virtues among them. There are good tendencies and bad instincts that were foreign to the first that are natural to the second; ideas that occur by themselves to the imagination of the first and that the mind of the second rejects. They are like two distinct humanities, each of which has its particular advantages and disadvantages, its good and its evil which are its own.”

¹²⁴ See a brief treatment of this in Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, 111-112.

¹²⁵ DA, 991-992.

puts him in [the] place” of a suffering individual, and wishes the person would feel no pain. If this is, as Tocqueville seems to suggest, a form of egoism, it is a humane one. “Men rarely sacrifice themselves for each other; but they show a general compassion for all members of the human species... when without hurting themselves very much, they can relieve the sufferings of others, they take pleasure in doing so...”¹²⁶ Tocqueville draws his remaining examples from the criminal justice system of America, with which he and Beaumont became so familiar, and concludes by gesturing to the role of commerce in softening mores among different democratic peoples. Though the English “seem to want to preserve carefully in their penal legislation the bloody traces of the Middle Ages,” Americans have “almost made the death penalty disappear.”¹²⁷ Even in their harsh treatment of slaves, which is justified by claims of moral inequality and actual legal inequality, they are “less harsh” than in the European colonies. As peoples therefore become more equal, and peoples see more similarity between themselves and foreigners – as Cicero and the Romans failed to see between citizens of the Republic and non-citizens -- the “law of nations becomes milder.”¹²⁸

This mildness, softness, or humanitarian spirit has many effects. We will discuss three: humanitarian, but also despotic, reforms of criminal justice; acts of mutual assistance, predicated

¹²⁶ DA, 993. A fruitful comparison could be done between Adam Smith’s impartial spectator in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and Tocqueville’s description here of the workings of the democratic mind. Is it possible that Smith’s impartial spectator is a creation of democracy, on Tocqueville’s view, rather than a normative description of the workings of the natural human mind? Ryan Hanley has drawn parallels between Tocqueville and Adam Smith. See Ryan Patrick Hanley, “Tocqueville and the Philosophy of the Enlightenment,” in *Cambridge Companion to Democracy*, 47-68. Mitchell also juxtaposes Smith and Tocqueville, commenting that “Politics helps to form the soul capable of rationally participating in the economy” and that Tocqueville was not interested in a rewrite of the *Wealth of Nations* but concerned himself with the “pre-conditions” of rationality that Smith took for granted. See Mitchell, *Fragility of Freedom*, 1-5, 10, 40 note 1, 41 note 2, 74-75, 133, 115-120, 157. See also Jimena Hurtado, “Adam Smith and Alexis de Tocqueville on the division of labour,” *The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 26, 6 (2019): 1187–1211.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ DA, 994. Nolla and Schleifer put it in April 1838, Brogan in January 1838. Brogan, 324.

on equal vulnerability; and transformations of honor, work, and warfare. Each of these forms of democratic softness contribute essential traits to soft despotism. Tocqueville, as he indicates in the notes for Part IV, builds directly upon these chapters.¹²⁹

First, democratic softness motivates a kind of oppressive quality in the criminal justice system which it justifies (or otherwise obscures) with reference to moral reform as a goal of punishment. Tocqueville began work on these chapters of Volume III in early 1838, by which point he and Beaumont had decided to issue a second edition of *On the Penitentiary System*, then released later that year. For this new edition Tocqueville penned a new preface that stressed the decreasing use of the death penalty in America and that more fully endorsed the Philadelphia system of total solitary confinement over the Auburn system of workshops.¹³⁰ There is an irony to the fact that Tocqueville – in what Roger Boesche called a “most consistently dark and ignored” “corner of Tocqueville’s thought” -- came to endorse a form of criminal justice that bears striking similarities to soft despotism in aiming to isolate, transform, and mold the prisoner according to the demands of society.¹³¹ It was a major anxiety of both the Americans and the

¹²⁹ DA, 1187, note a.

¹³⁰ In 1838, the ministry asked local department councils for their opinions on criminal justice reform and a friend of Tocqueville’s, having asked and received a written opinion from Tocqueville on the matter, published it in a newspaper on September 30, 1838. Tocqueville’s renewed concern with criminal justice overlaps also – as it does in this chapter on democratic mores – with the efforts to emancipate and final emancipation of slaves in the French colonies. See Jardin, 306-307.

See Zunz, *The Man Who Understood Democracy*, 182-184, and Jardin 307. Nolla and Schleifer put it in April 1838, Brogan in January 1838. Brogan, 324.

¹³¹ See Roger Boesche, “The Prison: Tocqueville’s Model for Despotism,” in *Tocqueville’s Road Map: Methodology, Liberalism, Revolution, and Despotism*, ed. Roger Boesche (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), 550. See also, for an excellent analysis, Richard Avramenko and Robert Gingerich, “Democratic Dystopia: Tocqueville and the American Penitentiary System,” *Polity*, 46, 1, (2014): 56-80. Avramenko and Gingerich nicely pick up on a thread we have been exploring here, namely that “The solipsistic faith of the penitentiary, which attempts to cultivate virtue, subverts what Tocqueville calls the “magnificent expression” (expression magnifique) of Christianity, which bends the will outward from private interests to the public good of one’s fellows” (67). On Tocqueville and Foucault, see Wolin, 384: the similarities between the two mean that “any subsequent reading of *The Penitentiary System* is inevitably post-Foucauldian.”

French whether prisons would become bastions of “wickedness” and “moral contagion,” rather than opportunities for moral reform. On this basis a consensus emerged that either complete silence or complete isolation was necessary to prevent prisoners’ association and communication.¹³² In these prisons, any association came with the ever-constant surveillance of the wardens. The right to freedom of association becomes permissions in prison (a startling parallel to Tocqueville’s fears for freedom of association under the July Monarchy). As a consequence, Tocqueville noted there is “more equality in the prison than in society” because each prisoner is equal and separate.¹³³ Even all sentences are the same – there is no death penalty – and vary only in length. Unlike the custom in many French penitentiaries at the time, American prisoners receive no small payment or *pécule* for their labor as a means of interesting them in their (forced) labor at the service of the common good. The prisoners’ work serves and reflects the dictates of the political community alone. “If equality in liberty depends upon the voluntary association of individuals, the result of the systematic elimination of all association in solitude and silence is a perverse permutation of equality—equality in servitude.”¹³⁴ The relative mildness of a prison system centered around work, isolation, and hoped for moral reform exemplified the first flowerings of a benevolent soft despotism that is justified with reference to democratic institutions and mores.¹³⁵ Just as soft despotism will assume the veil and language of

¹³² This echoes contemporary concerns about what we might call the “dark side” of Tocquevillian civil society and associations. See for example, Rogers M. Smith, “Democracy in America in the twenty-first century: New challenges of diversity and inequality,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, 409-429.

¹³³ Beaumont and Tocqueville, *The Penitentiary System*, 32. See also Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy and Social Reform*, 128.

¹³⁴ Avramenko and Gingrich, 71, 72, for a good analysis of this, including Tocqueville’s own hatred of solitude. Also Mitchell, “It Is Not Good for Man to Be Alone,” 268–84.

¹³⁵ Wolin describes Elam Lynds, the warden and founder of Sing Sing, as possessing “clearly despotic tendencies,” though Tocqueville also makes clear that he represents both this potential despotism and the spirit of democratic social reform. Wolin, 403. Avramenko and Gingrich, 77.

democracy, democratic mildness hides a harshness and inhumaneness beneath it that is a fitting rival to Madame de Sevigne's callousness.

Second, mildness encourages habits of mutual assistance, even what we might call random acts of kindness, which are distinct from the action of civil society. Softness in mores arises from equal feelings of weakness and insecurity, from the special democratic capacity to imagine oneself in the place of another person. As in the previous chapter, Hobbes offered a helpful contrast with Tocqueville here. In Hobbes's state of nature, conditions of equality among men exacerbate insecurity and therefore contribute to warfare. For Tocqueville, however, and his naturally social human beings,

Equality of conditions, at the same time that it makes men feel their independence, shows them their weakness; they are free, but exposed to a thousand accidents, and experience does not take long to teach them that although they do not habitually need the help of others, some moment almost always occurs when they cannot do without that help.

... everyone feels subject to the same weakness and to the same dangers, and their interest, as well as their sympathy, makes it a law for them to lend each other mutual assistance as needed. ...

In democracies where great services are scarcely accorded, good offices are rendered constantly. It is rare that a man appears devoted to service, but all are willing to help.¹³⁶

Tocqueville emphasizes that this pity or sympathy is "not contrary" to democratic individualism. It helps to "spontaneously" break the atomization and solitude of individualism through general feelings of vulnerability and insecurity *that also* promote individualistic behaviors.¹³⁷ Feelings of insecurity and human vulnerability increase as people become more equal; they feel the need for

¹³⁶ DA, 1006.

¹³⁷ It is significant for our examination of *interet bien entendu* that Tocqueville uses here as examples "spontaneous" and emergent events as the sites and occasions for this pity, "unforeseen accidents," and other dangers that, qualifying as emergencies, call out of Americans and Europeans alike altruistic behavior consistent with their sympathy and their interest as a kind of "law... to lend each other mutual assistance". *Interet bien entendu* is not the same of this interest or sympathy.

assistance more sharply because they are more equal.¹³⁸ As a consequence, democrats embrace an ethic of mutual assistance – though practically speaking, each individual is less inclined to act out of duty toward any other person.¹³⁹ The logic here is similar to the logic that differentiates the aristocratic from the democratic family: the democratic family is more natural and sympathetic because it is more equal. At the same time, the ties between family members are weaker, the result of affection alone, whereas the aristocratic family is strictly bound by legal duties and obligations. The gentler, more affectionate mores and relaxation of legal norms do not necessarily correspond to a stronger practice of care and responsibility towards others.

Third, the mildness of mores changes the nature of honor and therefore of ambition. Honor being the “ensemble of opinions relating to the judgment of human actions in view of the glory or shame that our fellows attach to them,” i.e. what men “praise and blame” and not what is good or evil in an “absolute way,” it is strictly customary.”¹⁴⁰ In rich passages we can only gloss here, Tocqueville contrasts democratic and aristocratic honor. Because of the instability of fortunes and the general equality of conditions, under democracy honor is less well-defined and “necessarily less powerful.” The exception is honor from public opinion, which is powerful, and often capricious and arbitrary.¹⁴¹ Through America and old aristocratic Europe each prize courage, Americans call a “noble and estimable ambition” – ambition for wealth through industry– “what our fathers of the Middle Ages named servile cupidity; in the same way the American gives the name of blind and barbaric fury to the conquering fervor and warrior spirit

¹³⁸ DA, 1005. ... “if some great unexpected misfortune strikes a family, the pursues of a thousand strangers open without difficulty; modest but very numerous gifts come to the aid of the family’s misery.”

¹³⁹ One could describe this as a form of virtue-signaling democratic peoples feel compassion deeply for their fellow men and yet are less themselves as individuals inclined to take concrete action from a clear sense of moral duty.

¹⁴⁰ DA, 1095-6, note d.

¹⁴¹ DA, 1108, 1110.

that threw our fathers into new battles every day.”¹⁴² Aristocratic honor is defined by military courage and fidelity to one’s lord and one’s dependents.¹⁴³

This new democratic honor permeates both public and private institutions and their mores. Tocqueville draws our attention to two: Industry and administration. He earlier argued that Americans are drawn to industrial occupations, and that the restless turbulence of American fortunes forgives sins such as bankruptcy while shaming leisure, idleness, or a failure to obtain work. His comments here echo his observations of place-hunting in the July Monarchy, writing that place-hunting in the administration of government becomes a primary pursuit for democratic citizens who are without “hope of improving their lot by themselves.” In this way, government administration becomes an honorable and stable substitute for even more honorable careers in industry. Public service therefore lends itself to becoming a channel for material ambition, each administrator’s domain becoming a rent-seeking “patrimony.” Tocqueville stops short of describing this “universal and excessive desire for public office” as a “great social evil.” However, he indicates that a government –he specifically says a “large, centralized monarchy” like the July Monarchy -- dominated by such persons “puts its life in danger.”¹⁴⁴ In the pursuit of

¹⁴² DA, 1103.

¹⁴³ DA, 1099, 1100.

¹⁴⁴ DA, 1130-1132. Tocqueville seems to predict what something that be compared to what is commonly colloquially called the “deep state” in describing an administrative apparatus that comes to function as a “permanent opposition.” The entire passage is worth placing here for reference: “But if, at the same time that ranks are becoming equal, enlightenment remains incomplete or spirits timid, or commerce and industry, hampered in their development, offer only difficult and slow means to make a fortune, citizens, losing hope of improving their lot by themselves, rush tumultuously toward the head of the State and ask his help. To make themselves more comfortable at the expense of the public treasury seems to them to be, if not the only path open to them, at least, the easiest path and the one most open to all for leaving a condition that is no longer enough for them. The search for positions becomes the most popular of all industries. It must be so, above all, in large, centralized monarchies, in which the number of paid officials is immense, and the existence of the office holders is adequately secure, so that no one loses hope of obtaining a post there and of enjoying it peacefully like a patrimony.

these industrial, enriching bourgeois ambitions by which to gain security and honor in the eyes of their peers, their souls become “soft”, like a mediocre “bourgeois pot of soup.”¹⁴⁵

This affects foreign policy as it affects domestic politics and administration.¹⁴⁶ Great revolutions, whether intellectual or political, become rare. So too does warfare; nations become more similar through the march of democracy and *doux commerce*.¹⁴⁷ Democratic people love the peace and stability that are the conditions of their material well-being. War seems less politically possible, less politically desirable, less politically justifiable when nations are more equal. It is on this note, invoking the examples of Machiavelli’s *Prince* and Napoleon, that Tocqueville concludes that the softness of democratic people disinclines them to defend their

I will not say that this universal and excessive desire for public office is a great social evil; that it destroys, within each citizen, the spirit of independence and spreads throughout the entire body of the nation a venal and servile temper; that it suffocates the manly virtues; nor will I make the observation that an industry of this type creates only an unproductive activity and agitates the country without making it fruitful: all of that is easily understood. But I want to remark that the government that favors such a tendency risks its tranquility and puts its very life in great danger.

I know that, in a time like ours, when we see the love and respect that was formerly attached to power being gradually extinguished, it can appear necessary to those governing to bind each man more tightly by his interest, and that it seems easy to them to use his very passions to keep him in order and in silence; but it cannot be so for long, and what can appear for a certain period as a cause of strength becomes assuredly in the long run a great cause of trouble and of weakness.

Among democratic peoples, as among all others, the number of public posts ends by having limits; but among these same peoples, the number of ambitious men has no limits; the number increases constantly, by a gradual and irresistible movement, as conditions become equal; the number reaches its limit only when men are lacking.

So when ambition has no outlet except the administration alone, the government necessarily ends by encountering a permanent opposition; for its task is to satisfy with limited means, desires that multiply without limits. You have to be well aware that, of all the peoples of this world, the one most difficult to contain and to lead is a people of place seekers. Whatever the efforts made by its leaders, they can never satisfy such a people, and you must always fear that it will finally overturn the constitution of the country and change the face of the State, solely for the need to open up positions.”

¹⁴⁵ DA, 1121, note j, also 1125. Tocqueville adds in the notes on this chapter “A word that M. Thiers said to me one day in 1837 must not be lost from view: the bourgeois do great things when they are not led in a bourgeois way” (*Rubish*, 2), 1126, note q. On the “bourgeois pot of soup,” Tocqueville to Beaumont, August 9, 1840, *Selected Letters*, 143.

¹⁴⁶ This comes across in his letters on foreign policy in 1840 and 1841 to Beaumont, Pierre Royer-Collard, and John Stuart Mill. See *Selected Letters*, 142-147, 149-152.

¹⁴⁷ DA, 1179.

homeland and liberties.¹⁴⁸ Democratic, humanitarian softness depoliticizes. It makes democratic citizens ambivalent and indifferent to the “passion and habit of liberty” and “political spirit.”

Taking a step back from the text, we can make a few broad observations. Democratic softness’s correction to the austerity of aristocratic mores notwithstanding, this softness involves (as mentioned in the previous chapter) both an expansion and a contraction of the heart. The capacity for feeling similar to and therefore as vulnerable as others expands; the desire not to see others unduly suffer likewise expands. It is difficult to consider this morally undesirable. It is also the case that as individualism expands, the distance grows between individuals and among the bodies through which they act in common. Each person being similarly vulnerable, each person is perceived as similarly strong or weak, capable, or incapable of rising to the occasion in lending aid or assistance. No one therefore is uniquely responsible for anyone else, no one required or expected to step in or step up to solve a problem or advance a cause. This is essentially the logic of the collective action problem. The expansions of equality and of compassion will perversely contribute to a vacuum in a sphere once occupied by the “reciprocal action of men upon one another.” However, the tasks, activities, and duties of civil society – helping neighbors, providing for the poor, education, parenting – these do not disappear just because citizens refrain from them, and nature abhors a vacuum.

¹⁴⁸ DA, 1184-1186. On civil war, “Men who live in democratic countries do not naturally have the military spirit; they sometimes take it on themselves when dragged, despite themselves, onto the fields of battle. But to rise up by himself, in a body, and to expose himself willingly to the miseries that war and above all civil war bring, is a choice that the man of democracies does not make. Only the most adventurous citizens agree to throw themselves into such a risk; the mass of the population remains immobile. ... In democratic countries, the moral power of the majority is immense, and the material forces at its disposal are out of proportion with those that, at first, it is possible to unite against it. The party in the majority’s seat, which speaks in its name and uses its power, triumphs therefore, in one moment and without difficulty, over all particular resistances. It does not even allow them the time to be born; it crushes it in germ” (1185). Cf. in Part IV on soft despotism: “it rarely forces action, but it constantly opposes your acting; it does not destroy, it prevents birth; it does not tyrannize, it hinders, it represses, it enervates, it extinguishes, it stupefies...” DA, 1252.

Despotism reimaged

Thus, when Tocqueville finally arrives at Volume II Part IV, he has set up the following image for his readers of the character of democratic peoples: Democrats love general and uniform ideas more than either highly abstract, demanding forms or particular and detailed explications. They love equality more than liberty, and material security over spiritual goods. They feel their own weakness and see the weaknesses of others; they desire that those weaknesses be redressed but they do feel they have sufficient time to see to their own interests, let alone those of others. Little surprise then that such citizens willingly embrace a State that maintains their equality, defends their security, and takes responsibility for the insecurity of their fellow citizens, alleviating citizens of their responsibility of providing and caring for one another. Unlike in early liberal contract theories, in Tocqueville's presentation of soft despotism, there is no clear moment of citizens contracting to change democratic norms and institutions into democratically despotic norms and institutions. It is perhaps better described as an emergent phenomenon. Yet there is something analogous between the social contract and the exchange between citizens and State in the transition to soft despotism. Citizens view this new rule as necessary and protective of their interests; whether or not they contract it, they will and accept it.

Part IV, "Of the Influence that Democratic Ideas and Sentiments Exercise on Political Society," is the shortest of *Democracy*. It consists of seven chapters developing the theory of soft despotism and a concluding chapter that, taking the perspective of God, parallels the "Introduction" of Volume I. The argument famously proceeds as follows:

- 1) "Equality produces in fact two tendencies: one leads men directly to independence and can push them suddenly as far as anarchy; the other leads them by a longer, more secret, but surer road toward servitude."¹⁴⁹
- 2) Democratic peoples have a preference for concentration and centralization of power, for they delight in "simple and general ideas", from which the "idea of a unique and central power" and that of "uniform legislation" emerge.¹⁵⁰ That sovereign central power "can and must, by itself and on a uniform plan, administer all matters and all men."¹⁵¹ This describes both citizens of France and European nations who are "most hostile to popular forms," as well as those Americans and Europeans who "think all authority must come immediately from the people."¹⁵²
- 3) That the sentiments of democratic peoples – their enduring passion for equality, above all -- support this intellectual movement towards monism and uniformity. "... their natural inclination is to abandon the care of [public] affairs to the sole visible and permanent representation of collective interests, which is the State... Private life is so active in democratic times, so agitated, so full of desires, of work, that hardly any energy or leisure is left to any man for political life."¹⁵³ Though democrats hate the "agents" of the central power, "they always love the power itself."¹⁵⁴ Centralization therefore is the "natural government," whereas local liberty is always a "product of art."
- 4) The process of centralization depends on: the manner in which equality comes to be established – making the paths of America, France, or the despotisms of Egypt and the Middle East distinctive examples – the contingent and accidental factors, such as war, emergencies, or "great enterprises", that demand the powerful execution and coordination possible by a centralized authority; and the "origins" and "inclinations" of the sovereign himself.¹⁵⁵ The more democratic the origin of the sovereign, the more easily attracted the State is toward centralization. "The first and in a way only necessary condition for arriving at centralization of the public power in a democratic society is to love equality or to make people believe you do. Thus the science of

¹⁴⁹ DA, 1193.

¹⁵⁰ DA, 1195.

¹⁵¹ DA, 1198.

¹⁵² DA, 1197-8, note j. In these passages in the published text, Tocqueville sometimes seems to describe America, other times European states, when he speaks of the State.

¹⁵³ DA, 1201. Recall that Tocqueville described that political life had "died" in the July Monarchy by the time of the 1848 Revolution.

¹⁵⁴ DA, 1205.

¹⁵⁵ DA, 1215, 1216.

despotism, formerly so complicated, is simplified; it is reduced, so to speak to a single principle.”¹⁵⁶

- 5) In Europe, centralization proceeds as it does in America but with a variety of other “secondary and accidental causes” such that each “step they take towards equality brings them closer to despotism.”¹⁵⁷ Tocqueville details the process by which the State brings the diverse, overlapping and intersecting but distinctive spheres of civil life and non-centralized authority within its umbrella; we shall return to this.
- 6) Given the above, there is a new type of “despotism” democracies – both American and European -- have to fear, distinct from the absolute sovereign of antiquity whose tyranny was “violent and limited” rather than “extensive” and “mild,” “[degrading] men without tormenting them.”¹⁵⁸ This new “despotism” – though Tocqueville hesitates to give this old name to a new phenomenon – is characterized by a gentle, humane, paternalistic oppression that “encloses the action of the will within a smaller space and little by little steals from each citizen even the use of himself.”¹⁵⁹
- 7) That the proper response is not “a matter of reconstructing an aristocratic society but of making liberty emerge from the democratic society in which God makes us live.”¹⁶⁰
- 8) In conclusion, God wills democracy and equality and “The nations of today cannot make conditions among them not be equal, but it depends on them whether equality leads to servitude or liberty, to enlightenment or barbarism, to prosperity or misery.”¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ DA, 1220.

¹⁵⁷ DA, 1221.

¹⁵⁸ DA, 1247-9.

¹⁵⁹ DA, 1251. Tocqueville at several points speaks to his uncertainty about using the word despotism to describe this new phenomenon. “This word *despotism* is unfortunate because its old meaning does not exactly correspond to the new meaning that I want to give it” (*Rubish*, 2), DA, 1125, note b. See also DA, 1248: “So I think the type of oppression by which democratic peoples are threatened will resemble nothing of what preceded in the world; our contemporaries cannot find the image of it in their memories. I seek in vain myself for an expression that exactly reproduces the idea that I am forming of it and includes it; [<the thing that I want to speak about is new, and men have not yet created the expression which must portray it.>] the old words of despotism and of tyranny do not work. The thing is new so I must try to define it since I cannot name it.”

See also DA, 1249, note c: “The despotism that I fear for the generations to come has no precedent in the world and lacks a name. I will call it administrative despotism for lack of anything better.”

Nolla draws comparisons between Tocqueville’s difficulty here and Montesquieu’s claim in the foreword of the *Spirit of the Laws* that “I had new ideas; it was very necessary to find new words, or to give new meanings to old ones.” DA, 1249, note c.

¹⁶⁰ DA, 1264.

¹⁶¹ DA, 1285.

Pierre Manent makes a trenchant observation that nicely elucidates the connection of soft despotism with both the July Monarchy and the early liberal contract tradition. “If Tocqueville so fiercely criticized administrative centralization, the scourge common to both the old and new French regime, it was not because it wronged the French as individuals. It was because centralization confirmed and confined them in their secular role as individuals avid for security and enjoyment.”¹⁶² These new roles were downstream not of classical or Christian anthropology but of a individualistic liberal anthropology that necessitates a “third party” to reconcile anti-social, bellicose, property-seeking individuals.¹⁶³ In this third framework, the only interest that needs to be well understood for reconciliation through a third party is material interest, or the interest in avoiding death. (Again we observe the specter of Hobbes.) Furthermore, where a Tocquevillian interest rightly understood reconciles individuals to each other through spontaneous, diverse, numerous personal encounters and through participation in society towards a common good of a free and flourishing social state, a third-party arrangement does not require that reciprocity and its inefficient human messiness. It can do it with more ease, uniformity, and security, all of which insecure democratic people esteem. *Intérêt bien entendu* seems neither desired, encouraged, or needed under soft despotism.

To examine this absence of *intérêt bien entendu*, we will focus first on Tocqueville’s description of the changes democratic political and social authority; the resulting alterations and transformations of civil society; and then return to the individualism that both precipitates and anticipates this transformation of the democratic social state.

¹⁶² Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, 107.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, 109.

Concentration, centralization, and the expansion of the State

Tocqueville begins Part IV with Chapter 1's claim that equality favors free institutions but does not guarantee them. He deliberately mirrors the structure of Volume II in arguing that democratic ideas (Chapter 2) and sentiments (Chapter 3) each favor the concentration of power. The centripetal force of power depends in large part on the difficulty of the democratic intellect in perceiving forms and even conceiving the "idea of secondary powers, placed between the sovereign and subjects."¹⁶⁴ "In politics, moreover, as in philosophy and religion, the minds of democratic peoples receive simple and general ideas with delight. They are repulsed by complicated systems" – including checks and balances – "and they are pleased to imagine a great nation all of whose citizens resemble a single model and are directed by a single power."¹⁶⁵ This applies equally to the laws, which must, to be equal in the eyes of the democratic citizen, be uniform. This seems to them the "first condition of good government." The privileges of feudal law are not conceivable to Americans and become increasingly unthinkable to Europeans.¹⁶⁶ While federalism preserves some rights of localities against central government, generally Tocqueville says democratic men will believe the social power has "no limits" and "has the right to do everything." Tocqueville accuses both utopian socialists like the Saint-Simonians, mentioned in his notes, and the Doctrinaires of thinking in this manner when he says this "revolution" is "more advanced" in France than "any other people of Europe." Despite the many

¹⁶⁴ DA, 1195.

¹⁶⁵ DA, 1195.

¹⁶⁶ DA, 1197. "The Americans believe that in each state, social power must emanate directly from the people; but once this power is constituted, they imagine, so to speak, no limits for it; they readily recognize it has the right to do everything. As for the particular privileges granted to cities, to families, or to individuals, they have lost even the idea. Their minds have never foreseen that the same law could not be applied uniformly to all the parts of the same state and all the men who inhabit it."

issues that divide the parties of European countries, “When you listen attentively to the voices of our different parties, you will see there is not one of them that does not adopt [these opinions].”¹⁶⁷ They all fundamentally possess the same manner of thinking; “All conceive the government in the image of a unique, simple, providential and creative power.”

Nor do the sentiments offer a check to the developing consensus about the nature of social power and its concentration in centralized government.

[Men who inhabit democratic countries] never, except with effort, tear themselves away from their particular affairs in order to occupy themselves with common affairs; their natural inclination is to abandon the care of these affairs to the sole visible and permanent representative of collective interests, which is the State.

Not only do they not naturally have the taste for occupying themselves with public matters, but also they often lack time to do so. Private life is so active in democratic times, so agitated, so full of desires, of work, that hardly any energy or leisure is left to any man for political life.¹⁶⁸

The love of material well-being is so great but property so unstable that public tranquility is “often the only political passion that these people retain.” The citizen, again feeling that strange mixture of prideful independence and shameful vulnerability, sees that “he cannot expect [help] from any of his equals, since they are all powerless and cold” and turns upward “toward this immense being that alone rises up amidst the universal decline.”¹⁶⁹ What Tocqueville merely implied earlier is now stated outright: Since it is “in the nature of every government to want

¹⁶⁷ DA, 1198. See also 1199: “So the men of today are much less divided than you imagine; they argue constantly in order to know into which hands sovereignty will be placed; but they easily agree about the duties and about the rights of sovereignty. All conceive the government in the image of a unique, simple, providential, and creative power.”

¹⁶⁸ DA, 1201.

¹⁶⁹ DA, 1202.

gradually to enlarge its sphere,” the government responds willingly to this need of its citizens, who “[envisage] it as the sole and necessary support for individual weakness.”¹⁷⁰

In an especially dark turn, Tocqueville imagines that this newfound dependence on the State does not produce hatred of the master, but rather hatred of the privileges, inequalities, and other distinctions that enable a fellow citizen not to depend on this new master.¹⁷¹ “The sovereign, necessarily and without dispute above all citizens, does not excite the envy of any one of them, and each one believes that all the prerogatives that he concedes to the sovereign are taken away from his equals.”¹⁷² Equality in mutual obedience and atomized dependence on the sovereign is preferable to obedience to a “neighbor who is his equal.”¹⁷³ This is far from Aristotelian rule and far from Tocqueville’s positive democratic vision. Yet it can be called a democratic regime nonetheless. The government and its citizens have a “community of sentiments” that legitimizes and excuses, if not every exercise of power, the grounds, nature, and aims of the power itself.¹⁷⁴ This fact of equality and security provides an impression of freedom and non-domination. Jech frames the subsequent problem helpfully: “There is a great difference

¹⁷⁰ DA, 1201, note 1, 1202.

¹⁷¹ Tocqueville functionally offers a proof in favor of the viability of the Hobbesian Leviathan or the Rousseauian social contract in this psycho-social argument as to how citizens could be led to willingly, obediently, and democratically alienate their rights to the potentially despotic sovereign.

¹⁷² DA, 1203-4. “This finally makes understandable what often occurs among democratic peoples, where you see men, who endure superiors with such difficulty, patiently suffer a master, and appear proud and servile at the same time. The hatred that men bring to privilege increases as privileges become rarer and smaller... This immortal and more and more burning hatred, which animates democratic peoples against the least privileges, singularly favors the gradual concentration of all political rights in the hands of the sole representative of the State. The sovereign, necessarily and without dispute above all citizens, does not excite the envy of any one of them, and each one believes that all the prerogatives that he concedes to the sovereign are taken away from his equals.”

¹⁷³ DA, 1204. “The man of democratic centuries obeys only with an extreme repugnance his neighbor who is his equal; he refuses to acknowledge in him an enlightenment superior to his own; he mistrusts his neighbor’s justice and regards his power with jealousy; he fears and despises him; he loves to make him feel at every instant the common dependence that they both have on the same master.”

¹⁷⁴ DA, 1204-5.

between a free citizen comfortable with responsibility for important matters and someone who, like a valorized associate professor who lacks any share in university governance, is merely safe and well administered.”¹⁷⁵

Tocqueville does not consider these developments “invincible”; he declares his “principal goal in writing this book has been to combat them” through countervailing ideas, sentiments, mores, and by the legislative and political “art.”¹⁷⁶ Countervailing influences include, in the American case, the English heritage of liberties, and the religion and mores of the people.

It is easy, when men are similar, to establish a unique and omnipotent government; instincts are sufficient. But men need a great deal of intelligence, science, and art, in order to organize and maintain, in the same circumstances, secondary powers, and in order to create, amid the independence and individual weakness of citizens, free associations able to struggle against tyranny without destroying order. ¹⁷⁷

Such conditions do not exist in France. This makes concentration of power both likely and attractive, especially to those with some talent and intelligence.

So among a nation that is ignorant as well as democratic, a prodigious difference between the intellectual capacity of the sovereign power and that of each one of its subjects cannot fail to manifest itself. The former ends by easily concentrating all powers in its hands. The

¹⁷⁵ If political liberty is principally a matter of non-domination or no arbitrary rule of any one citizen by any other, this would seem potentially compatible with something like soft despotism, which is why democratic people accept it as compatible with their equality. For Tocqueville, the political liberty of a citizen is both positive and negative. For one of the few attempts to put Tocqueville and Pettit in conversation, see Alexander Jech, “What has Athens to do with Rome? Tocqueville and the New Republicanism,” *American Political Thought* 6 (Fall 2017): 550-573.

¹⁷⁶ DA, 1201.

¹⁷⁷ DA, 1213. “It is easy, when men are similar, to establish a unique and omnipotent government; instincts are sufficient. But men need a great deal of intelligence, science, and art, in order to organize and maintain, in the same circumstances, secondary powers, and in order to create, amid the independence and individual weakness of citizens, free associations able to struggle against tyranny without destroying order.” Also DA, 1209. Napoleon cannot be “blamed for having concentrated in his hands alone all administrative power” for it “came to him by themselves.” Tocqueville foreshadows *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*.

administrative power of the State expands constantly, because only the State is skillful enough to administer.¹⁷⁸

Tocqueville comments in his notes that decentralization can be either “instinctive, blind, full of prejudices, devoid of rules... born from the desire of small localities to be independent,” or “reasoned, enlightened, and knows its limits.”¹⁷⁹ Decentralization can be literally and figuratively parochial. It can also be principled and, as in America, rely on the understanding and widespread participation of citizens. Centralization makes no such demand.

A closer focus: The new sovereign and its reach into civil society and individual lives

As a result, the “great enterprises” that politics occasionally requires accrues political power to the centralized authority and justifies that power. Tocqueville makes an important concession: “I do not deny that a centralized social force is able to execute easily, in a given time and at a determined point, great enterprises.”¹⁸⁰ Under conditions of emergency and necessity, such centralization of power and its exercise become the most legitimate.

It bears repeating, however, that this concentration of power seems and *becomes* necessary in part because of the scale of the enterprise *but also* because of the perception that ordinary persons either individually or through association are incapable or ill-positioned to take on the responsibility. A national standing army can, as a united entity, achieve goods that a well-

¹⁷⁸ DA, 1213. The full passage: “However uncivilized a democratic people may be, the central power that directs it is never completely without enlightenment, because it easily attracts what little enlightenment there is in the country, and because, as needed, it goes outside to seek it. So among a nation that is ignorant as well as democratic, a prodigious difference between the intellectual capacity of the sovereign power and that of each one of its subjects cannot fail to manifest itself. The former ends by easily concentrating all powers in its hands. The administrative power of the State expands constantly, because only the State is skillful enough to administer.”

¹⁷⁹ DA, 113, note m. Baden, August 14, 1836.

¹⁸⁰ DA, 1215.

regulated local militia cannot. But the absence of a well-regulated local militia, or of a culture of citizens' self-defense through voluntary association, also makes a standing army and police power more necessary in the event of crisis.¹⁸¹

Exigencies of war, trade, and even commerce therefore are not the only instigators. The desire for well-being, without a habit of association, is just as crucial. Tocqueville dedicates a chapter to European sovereigns' incursion into the spaces of secondary powers.¹⁸² This incursion is distinctly advanced, almost taken for granted, in Europe because the revolutions have "shaken or destroyed secondary powers" still potent in America.¹⁸³

What I want to note is that all these diverse rights that in our time have been successively taken away from all classes, corporations, men, have not served to raise new secondary powers on a more democratic foundation [as in America] but have been concentrated on all sides in the hands of the sovereign. Everywhere the State arrives more and more at directing by itself the least citizen and at alone leading each one of them in the least affairs.¹⁸⁴

Though Tocqueville did not read Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution* until preparing his *Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, here he makes observations that echo Burke. Against the Jacobin appropriation of monasteries, convents, and other titles held by the First Estate, Burke articulated a defense of Church property that is often read as a straightforward defense of the right to hold private property.¹⁸⁵ However, that defense has richer theological, philosophical, and

¹⁸¹ This is a classic point made by libertarians, not unreasonably though it can be taken to extremes. See for one example Chris Coyne and Abigail Hall, *Tyranny Comes Home: The Domestic Fate of U.S. Militarism*, (California: Stanford University Press, 2018).

¹⁸² DA, 1215.

¹⁸³ DA, 1222.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, (New York: Penguin, 2004), 210, 260-261, 271-274.

historical roots. Monasteries, convents, cathedrals, churches, and other Church property, whether held by religious orders independent of centralized Church authority or by the Church directly, were secondary powers par excellence. From the beginning of Western monasticism, through its medieval renewal down to the revolutionary era, monasteries, convents, and lay orders and confraternities exemplified not just the right to private property but also freedom of association. They were, in an important sense, the original free, voluntary associations. They not only worshipped God but extended their charity through corporal acts of mercy in education, hospitals, poor relief, and multitude other local functions.¹⁸⁶ Against this backdrop, Tocqueville's description of the assimilation of intermediary powers to the infrastructure and regulation of the State becomes clearer in its implications:

Nearly all the charitable establishments of old Europe were in the hands of individuals or of corporations; they have all more or less fallen into dependence on the sovereign, and in several countries, they are governed by the sovereign. It is the State that has undertaken almost alone to give bread to those who are hungry, relief and a refuge to the sick, work to those without it; it has made itself almost the unique repairer of all miseries.

Education as well as charity has become a national affair among most of the peoples of today. The State receives and often takes the child from the arms of its mother in order to entrust it to its agents; it is the State that takes charge of inspiring sentiments in each generation and providing each generation with ideas. Uniformity reigns in studies as in all the rest; there diversity like liberty, disappears each day.¹⁸⁷

Again, like Burke's argument, Tocqueville's argument here is not only about the dangers of a Sovereign state destabilizing individual and corporate property rights. (Tocqueville does advance

¹⁸⁶ See Carlos Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016). This is a point we will return to in the following chapter and that is repeatedly made in histories of the Reformation and early modern period. The welfare state emerged as a response to the breakdown of the Catholic infrastructure of associational, monastic, and corporate life in Protestant countries as the nation-state grew and as the prior systems of poor relief were disestablished.

¹⁸⁷ DA, 1223.

such an argument about wills and bequests in a footnote.¹⁸⁸) It more fundamentally concerns the spaces of intermediary powers and the activities proper to them which the State now claims either directly or indirectly through power to suppress, authorize, or regulate according to its uniform, egalitarian principles. Tocqueville had once described Americans as “[ruling] the American political world as God rules the universe... the cause and end of all things.” Now Tocqueville portrays the State in its “creative” and “providential” capacity as godlike and as replacing functions of the Church, the historical and quintessential association; the state “alone gives bread to those who are hungry, relief and a refuge to the sick, work to those without it; it has made itself almost the unique repairer of all miseries.”¹⁸⁹

That Tocqueville highlights education is also significant. To mention education under the July Monarchy was to invoke debates over *la liberté d’enseignement*, or the ability of parents and localities to determine the schools (public or private, religious or secular) their children might attend, and the ability of the Catholic Church to educate students without state intervention, a right indicated in the 1830 Charte and guaranteed at the primary level in the Guizot Law of 1833 but subject to ongoing controversy.¹⁹⁰ “Education was important in

¹⁸⁸ Evoking his early discussion in Volume I of the abolition of primogeniture and its role in shaping the democratic social state in America, Tocqueville adds in the rare footnote to the published text that, unlike in the Middle Ages where the “power to make out your own will had, so to speak, no limits,” allowing a man immense latitude in distributing his goods upon his death, now a “very narrow circle is drawn” that circumscribes a man’s ability to “distribute your patrimony among your children... After having dictated the entire life, [the State] still wants to regulate the final act.” DA, 1222-1223, note 1.

¹⁸⁹ DA, 97, 1223. Winthrop, “Rights, interests, and honor,” 204.

¹⁹⁰ See for an excellent summary of this Kahan, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Religion*, 153-160. The Guizot Law of 1833 provided for independent parochial schools and publicly funded primary education which localities could elect to have the Church run. However, there remained legal barriers to Church-run secondary and university education, leading the Catholic Church to argue throughout the 1830s and especially 1840s for “freedom of education”. Kahan emphasizes that Tocqueville attempted to carve out an unsuccessful middle path, though Toloudis emphasizes that Tocqueville sided with the Church even in his moderate approach. Nicolas Toloudis, “Tocqueville’s Guizot Moment,” *French Politics, Culture, and Society*, 28, 3 (2010): 1-22.

nineteenth century French politics, because it called into question the legitimate reach of the secular state in matters of deep cultural importance for the French people and because it revived the ongoing battles between secular and ecclesiastical authority in the public sphere.”¹⁹¹ By invoking education, Tocqueville makes clear that he sees in this phenomenon of soft despotism the present reality of encroachment of government into the Church.¹⁹² France’s Gallican, Ancien Regime, and revolutionary history had made encroachments of Church into State and State into church not uncommon in French history.¹⁹³ Yet Tocqueville observes a difference in degree and in kind due to administrative science and the new democratic social state. “... among all the Christian nations of today, Catholic as well as Protestant, religion is threatened with falling into the hands of the government... more and more [sovereigns] are taking hold of the will of the one who explains dogma.”¹⁹⁴ Giving the priest a salary directly from the government, they “make him one of their officials and often one of their servants and with him they penetrate to the deepest recesses of the soul of each man.”¹⁹⁵ Functionally the State infiltrates the Church’s work of education, inspiring ideas and desires, teaching and regulating dogmas.

¹⁹¹ Toloudis, 18-19.

¹⁹² DA, 470. See also DA, 961-962. “If it is easy to see that, particularly in times of democracy, it is important to make spiritual opinions reign, it is not easy to say what those who govern democratic peoples must do for those opinions to reign. I do not believe in the prosperity any more than in the duration of official philosophies, and as for State religions, I have always thought that if sometimes they could temporarily serve the interests of political power, they always sooner or later become fatal to the Church. ... So what means remain for authority to lead men back toward spiritualistic opinions or keep them in the religion that suggests these opinions? What I am going to say is going to do me harm in the eyes of politicians. I believe that the only effective means that governments can use to honor the dogma of the immortality of the soul is to act each day as if they believed it themselves; and I think that it is only by conforming scrupulously to religious morality in great affairs that they can claim to teach citizens to know, love and respect religious morality in little affairs.”

¹⁹³ DA, 1223, note e.

¹⁹⁴ DA, 1223.

¹⁹⁵ DA, 1224.

The State therefore assumes many of the characteristics and activities historically proper to the Church in France – activities that in America tended to fall under civil society. Invocations of the “nanny state” or “Providential State” are so familiar today as a criticism of welfare they have have been functionally deprived of deep meaning. Winthrop’s witty description of soft despotism as “little more than an aggravated version of the European welfare state” almost undersells the historical and theoretical significance of that fact.¹⁹⁶ For Tocqueville observes is at stake here is not only a set of tasks to be accomplished but the way these tasks ought to be accomplished, by which actors, on what grounds of authority, in which spheres of life, with what externalities. Again, Tocqueville previewed this set of concerns in his discussion of individualism in Part II: “Sentiments and ideas are renewed, the heart grows larger and the human mind develops only by the reciprocal action of men on each other,” and the government that “tries to emerge from the political sphere” to rule over all spheres of life “will exercise an unbearable tyranny, even without wanting to do so; for government only knows how to dictate precise rules; it imposes the sentiments and ideas that it favors, and it is always difficult to distinguish its counsels from its orders.”¹⁹⁷

When Tocqueville later discusses industry, he further develops this thread:

Among democratic peoples it is only by association that the resistance of citizens to the central power can come about; consequently the latter never sees associations that are not under its control except with disfavor; and what is very worth noting is that among democratic peoples, citizens often envisage these same associations, which they need so

¹⁹⁶ Winthrop, “Rights, interests, and honor,” 204.

¹⁹⁷ DA, 900-901. Again, the Hobbesian sovereign is an apt comparison to soft despotism; the Hobbesian sovereign does not permit rival authorities. The Sovereign is providential, creative, monolithic, the author of words, laws, definitions, ideas, and causes. It defines doctrine. Associations, whether the Church or the organizations of civil society, must be authorized and regulated. Democratic despotism depends on individuals not understanding themselves as capable of action together.

much, with a secret sentiment of fear and jealousy... citizens are not far from considering as dangerous privileges the free use that each association makes of its natural powers. ...

Among all the peoples of Europe, there are certain associations that can be formed only after the State has examined their statutes and authorized their existence. Among several, efforts are being made to this rule to all associations. You see easily where the success of such an undertaking would lead.

If the sovereign power had once the general right to authorize, on certain conditions, associations of all types, it would not take long to claim that of overseeing and directing them, so that the associations would not be able to evade the rule that it had imposed on them. In this way, the State, after making all those who desire to associate dependent on it, would make all those who have associated dependent as well, that is to say, nearly all the men who are alive today.¹⁹⁸

The new industrial aristocracy, to which Tocqueville dedicated a chapter in Volume II Part II, has distinctive class interests and ability to generate association. The industrial class, “after having been the exceptional class, it threatens to become the principal class, and so to speak, the sole class.” Therefore the industrial class is like a secondary power, a potential rival to centralized state authority. Rather than rival the Sovereign, industry allies with it. Industry is a permitted and encouraged association because it furthers the ends of the Sovereign. The developing needs of the nation – in the form of mines, roads, canals, ports, and other “great enterprises” of a “semi-public nature” undertaken for often legitimate reasons of public welfare – justify the intimate relationship between industrial associations and the sovereign. The sovereign power “becomes the greatest industrialist... It is not only the first of industrialists; it tends more and more to make itself the leader or rather the master of the others.”¹⁹⁹ Therefore, not even the seemingly free associations of the market are immune to the lure of the expanding sphere of the

¹⁹⁸ DA, 1249.

¹⁹⁹ DA, 1237-8.

State's prerogatives.²⁰⁰ Industry, rather than being a source of and defender of the liberties of secondary powers, "carries despotism within it, and despotism expands naturally as it develops."²⁰¹ These are striking echoes of his comments on the July Monarchy, where government took on "the features of a trading company whose every operation is directed to the benefit that its members may derive from it."²⁰²

It remains theoretically possible however, even with the Sovereign's regulation of secondary powers and assimilation of its tasks, that it would leave *individuals* space for thought and action, that it would circumscribe and regulate only *groups* of individuals, as in the Law of 1834. Tocqueville argues otherwise.

Not only has the power of the sovereign expanded, as we have just seen, into the entire sphere of old powers; this is no longer enough to satisfy it; it overflows that sphere on all sides and spreads out over the domain that until now has been reserved to individual independence. A multitude of actions which formerly escaped from the control of society has been subjected to it today and their number increases constantly.²⁰³

Wills and last testaments, savings funds, and other financial innovations aimed at helping the poor amass savings Tocqueville offers as examples of the sovereign power "not [limiting] itself to directing public fortunes" but also "[getting] into private fortunes," as a citizen's "steward and cashier" as well as "tutor" or "guide."²⁰⁴ This warning against public administration which "penetrates more than formerly into private affairs... regulates in its own way more actions and

²⁰⁰ This element is underexamined in Behr and Storr, who claim that Tocqueville was "mostly silent on how commercial life might support or undermine associational life." See Rachel K. Behr and Virgil Henry Storr, « Tocquevillian association and the market, » in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, 278-304.

²⁰¹ DA, 1232, 1234.

²⁰² Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 5. DA, 1233.

²⁰³ DA, 1224.

²⁰⁴ DA, 1228, 1226.

smaller actions, and every day establishes itself more and more beside, around and above each individual in order to assist him, advise him, and constrain him” reveals Tocqueville at perhaps his most libertarian. However I suggest we understand Tocqueville’s concerns not as crudely libertarian. His objections are somewhat more complex. He objects to 1) the extension of systems of uniform, minute, egalitarian rules promulgated by and enforced by the sovereign power across a diversity of types of associations and organizations; 2) the usurpation of other forms of authority that this entails; and 3) the loss of liberty, diversity, and scope for human activity and the “reciprocal action of men upon one another” that results. In other words, there is a possibly unwitting pattern of “natural law reasoning” about civil society in his objections.²⁰⁵ In his analysis of democratic marriage, Tocqueville had argued that democracy is not necessarily incompatible with hierarchy nor with recognition of distinctive modes and levels of authority:

Nor have the Americans ever imagined that the consequence of democratic principles was to overturn marital authority and to introduce confusion of authority into the family. They thought that every association, in order to be efficacious, must have a head, and that the natural head of the conjugal association was the man. So they do not deny to the latter the right to direct his companion; and they believe that, in the small society of husband and wife, as in the great political society, the goal of democracy is to regulate necessary powers and to make them legitimate, and not to destroy all power.²⁰⁶

“Small private societies” and smaller forms of association, the most basic being the family, naturally occur within the “great political society.” To assume that all modes and forms of association must be regulated according to the same principles in a “common existence” is to “understand in a very crude and very tyrannical way the equality that arises from democracy.”²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ On this see Pakaluk, 131-135, 143-147. Pakaluk draws from Tocqueville and helpfully distinguishes between natural law theories of civil society and lines of reasoning about the goods of civil society that, even if not fully flushed out, have strong similarities to natural law theory.

²⁰⁶ DA, 1064.

²⁰⁷ DA, 1068.

Democracy does render its citizens increasingly similar, strengthening the case for the justice of a highly detailed egalitarianism in law and administration. But this is a product of the democratic social state; it does not necessarily correspond to nature or justice rightly understood. The revolution that reinforces power in the center undermines both the *liberty* and *authority* of individuals, families, groups, and other bodies to exercise the autonomy and authority proper to a given sphere of action. It is inconsistent with John Winthrop's "beautiful definition of liberty."²⁰⁸

An individualistic despotism: Each one, alone

As we have seen, most of the groundwork to soft despotism has been laid by the time Tocqueville finally attempts and fails to name the phenomenon in Chapter 6, "What type of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear." As Schleifer notes, Tocqueville provides the reader multiple images-- a "gallery" -- of despotisms throughout *Democracy*, from the tyranny of the majority to the prison, slavery and racial prejudice, and occasional suggestions of military despotisms.²⁰⁹ These visions are complementary; soft despotism represents the culmination and accumulation of the effects of democracy on the intellect, sentiments, and mores on the democratic regime. The formal elements of the American constitution matter little because this new despotism can "clothe itself in outward forms of liberty and rule in the name of the people," even justify itself by "appealing to the sovereignty of the people."²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ DA, 1242-3. For the John Winthrop quotation, DA, 68-69.

²⁰⁹ Schleifer, *The Making of Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, 161-237.

²¹⁰ DA, 230, 236. It remains a puzzle and ambiguity of the theory the degree to which the people retain sovereignty; for under the mild yet stifling yoke of this despotism and its agents, on the one hand, they are at once "more than kings and less than men" and yet, its continued existence depends on the "community of sentiments" and desires for well-being between the governors and the governed.

Tocqueville has already described the incursion of the State into education, the Church, and the family, fundamental spheres of moral formation. What is distinctive in Chapter 6 is his description of the psychological, spiritual, and moral effects of soft despotism – a “mixture of college, seminary, regiment” -- on individuals.²¹¹ Since Tocqueville says he “cannot name” or define this new phenomenon easily, he instead paints a “tableau” and invites the reader to envision with him what might be. It is all the more moving for its literary qualities as he tries to align the judgment and sympathies of the reader.²¹²

I want to imagine under what new features despotism could present itself to the world; I see an innumerable crowd of similar and equal men who spin around restlessly, in order to gain small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each one of them, withdrawn apart, is like a stranger to the destiny of all the others; his children and particular friends form for him the entire human species; as for the remainder of his fellow citizens, he is next to them but he does not see them; he touches them without feeling them; he exists in himself and for himself alone, and if he still has a family, you can at least say he no longer has a country.²¹³

Not only does democratic individualism enclose men “in the “solitude of their own hearts.”²¹⁴ They are sightless and senseless -- unless it regards small, vulgar, material pleasures. They spin in their circles without engaging or touching their neighbors, blind to all but “blind instincts” and close family and friends.²¹⁵ One could say they develop blinders that obscure their vision of the

²¹¹ DA 1247, note d.

²¹² For Tocqueville’s literary style, see Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 193-247. See Henderson, “‘Ideas for the Intellect and Emotions for the Heart’: The Literary Dimensions of Democracy in America,” 253-277. Wolin emphasizes this visual element of his theoretical style. “Little if any attention has been given to what might be called the theoretical aura surrounding his journey.” Wolin, 34-36, 92-93, 98-101.

²¹³ DA, 1250. Tocqueville intends this to recall “word for word” the passages in the chapter on individualism. See note h.

²¹⁴ DA, 884. “Thus, not only does democracy make each man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants from him and separates him from his contemporaries; it constantly leads him back toward himself alone and threatens finally to enclose him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.”

²¹⁵ Tocqueville uses the word “blind” or “blindly” thirteen times in Volume II, often but not always in contrast to “enlightened.” He uses it, as he uses many words, unsystematically, sometimes to refer to “blind passions” or “blind interests” or “blind instincts,” in a pejorative sense, other times to “blind devotions” in a more positive sense. (For

activities of life beyond their immanent and immediate concerns. Individualism both distances individual spheres and makes the boundary between them relationship-repellent.²¹⁶ Over time, the boundary hardens, enclosing individuals in the “solitude” of their hearts. By contrast, *intérêt bien entendu* opens the heart and enlarges the sphere of one’s interests; it makes the boundaries porous and interests one another in the interests, good, and happiness of others.

Theoretically, it is possible that within that individual sphere, within the constraints of material self-interest, an individual will remain free. Tocqueville suggests otherwise. Over time, the interior space of free will within that bounded space even contracts.

Above these men arises an immense and tutelary power that alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyment and of looking after their fate. It is absolute, detailed, regulated, far-sighted, and mild [doux or soft]. It would resemble paternal power if like it, it had as a goal to prepare men for manhood; but on the contrary it seeks only to fix them irrevocably in childhood; it likes the citizens to enjoy themselves provided they only think about enjoying themselves. It works willingly for their happiness but it wants to be the unique agent for it and sole arbiter; it attends to their security, provides for their needs, facilitates their pleasures, conducts their principal affairs, directs their industry, settles their estates, divides their inheritances; how can it not remove entirely from them the trouble to think and the difficulty of living?

This is how it makes use of the free will less useful and rarer each day; how it *encloses* [italics added] the action of the will within a smaller space and little by little steals from each citizen even the use of himself.²¹⁷

example, blind devotions have an aspect of virtue about them, belonging to the aristocratic mind, whereas “enlightened” devotions are perhaps stronger for having been reasoned through, but are calculating and in that way, less to be admired.) On the role of light and Jansenist plays on *clair/obscur*; see Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 159-189.

²¹⁶ Different spheres of authority, while distinct, are often porous at the edges, and in some cases purposefully so, admitting influence from other spheres and influencing them in turn. These spheres are bounded but not completely walled off. Atomization is the hardening of those circumferences such that they both repel influence and prevent communication between itself and others.

²¹⁷ DA, 1250-1.

The shrinking space for the exercise of personal free will reflects the encroaching influence of the state but it is only possible because of the resignation of individuals and their attraction to being relieved of the difficulties of thinking and living.²¹⁸ Causality runs both ways.

Tocqueville offers another image, not of restlessly spinning atomized men, but of men who “one by one” are “molded” by the hands of the Sovereign, who “extends its arms over the entire society.” The sovereign “rarely forces action but it constantly opposes your acting; it does not destroy, it prevents birth; it does not tyrannize, it hinders, it represses, it enervates, it extinguishes, it stupefies” and ends by turning nations into “[flocks] of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd.”²¹⁹ This clarifies the nature of the transformation of the will; the will is not broken but it is bent to a new mold. This entails new definitions of virtue:

... a despot easily pardons the governed for not loving him, provided that they do not love each other. He does not ask them to help him lead the State; it is enough that they do not claim to run it themselves. Those who claim to unite their efforts in order to create common prosperity, he calls unruly and restless spirits; and, changing the natural meaning of words, he calls good citizens those who withdraw narrowly into themselves.²²⁰

Tocqueville suggests it is possible to retain a semblance of “individual intervention... in the most important affairs” whilst “[suppressing]” individual action in the “small and particular ones.”²²¹

In other words, the people may remain free to express themselves politically through regular elections; this becomes a proxy for individual freedom. However, that is not an accurate

²¹⁸ Mansfield makes the point that though Tocqueville often claimed to scorn metaphysics, he used the language of free will “not haphazardly” and even “mindfully” as he built an “alternative position” to “harmful and mistaken” materialist and fatalist views of the human person. Mansfield, “Intimations of Philosophy,” 210.

²¹⁹ DA, 1252.

²²⁰ DA, 887-888.

²²¹ DA, 1258.

barometer. A more apt measure? The degree of exercise of free will and authority in those subsidiary spheres -- individual, family, locality – over which individuals properly speaking have authority: “I would for my part be led to believe liberty less necessary in the great things than in the least [ones] if I thought that the one could ever be assured without possessing the other.” It is after all in the township where he considers man happiest and most capable of working towards *intérêt bien entendu* and the happiness of others.

In general the New England towns have a happy existence. Their government suits their taste and is their choice as well. ...

The inhabitant of New England is attached to his town, because it is strong and independent; he is interested in it, because he participates in its leadership; he loves it, because he has nothing to complain about in his lot. In the town he places his ambition and his future; he joins in each of the incidents of town life; in this limited sphere, accessible to him, he tries his hand at governing society. He becomes accustomed to the forms without which liberty proceeds only by revolutions, is infused with their spirit, acquires a taste for order, understands the harmony of powers, and finally gathers clear and practical ideas about the nature of his duties as well as the extent of his rights.²²²

This is not an argument unique to America and the New England township. The liberty of towns is rare, precious, and contingent, but the town is not.²²³ Even the French once possessed vibrant townships : “Transportée d’un seul coup loin de la féodalité et maitresse absolue d’elle-même, la paroisse rurale du moyen âge est devenue le *township* de la Nouvelle-Angleterre.”²²⁴ Town society “exists ... among all peoples” and “Without town institutions, a nation can pretend to have a free government, but it does not possess the spirit of liberty.”²²⁵ It is thus the lack of

²²² DA, 113-114.

²²³ See also Rahe, 157-158, on Tocqueville’s relationship with Aristotle.

²²⁴ ARR, 142.

²²⁵ Compare also with DA, 102-103: “The strength of free peoples resides in the town, however. Town institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to knowledge; they put it within the grasp of the people; they give them a taste of its peaceful practice and accustom them to its use. Without town institutions, a nation can pretend to have a free government, but it does not possess the spirit of liberty. Temporary passions, momentary interests, the chance of

subsidiarity and of what Tocqueville considers the correct notions of liberty and authority that is the measure of the new despotism.²²⁶ By wrongful ideas of their interest and a “corrupt” liberty, men become “more than kings and less than men,” a “herd of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd.”

It is not that, without soft despotism, social power and authority would not be exercised in such a way as to constrain ideas, sentiments, or mores. Tocqueville’s arguments about the dogma of the sovereignty of the people, the moral empire of the majority, the necessity of dogmatically held and widely shared belief, and the importance of religion as democracy’s “first” political institution indicate otherwise. It is the nature and manner of the imposition of social authority that he interrogates. Though he names the mixed regime a “chimera,” and points to the undivided sovereignty of the people as the foundational principle of the American democratic social state, social authority exists and is exercised in diverse ways both by nature – the family, the township, natural human diversity as represented in associations -- and by art – the Federal constitution – according to the sphere and its activities. The “true notion of democratic progress” recognizes the need for associations to “have a head” and that “in the great political society, the goal of democracy is to regulate necessary powers and to make them legitimate, and not to destroy all power.”²²⁷ This is the province of the aristocratic lawyerly mind, whose love of rights and legal distinctions cuts against democratic love of general ideas and egalitarian rules equality.

circumstances can give it the external forms of independence; but despotism, driven back into the interior of the social body, reappears sooner or later at the surface.”

²²⁶ DA, 68-69. On the Puritans, see Mitchell, “Tocqueville’s Puritans.” For articulations of Tocquevillian liberty against Millian liberty, Gustafson, “A Tocquevillian Marketplace of Ideas? Spiritualism and Materialism in Tocqueville’s Liberalism.” See also Yarbrough, “Tocqueville on the Needs of the Soul.”

²²⁷ DA, 1064.

The democratic mind is, however, “lazy.”²²⁸ The proliferation of egalitarian legislation and uniform rules applied across individuals and spheres is a direct result. Therefore, the centralization and uniformity of the Sovereign change *how* social authority shapes ideas, sentiments, and mores, not *that it does*. That a social power is the “arbiter” of happiness is not the innovation. The innovation is that the social power is centralized and administrated and that the social power is not just the arbiter but the “unique agent” of men’s interests:

Subjection in small affairs manifests itself every day and makes itself felt indiscriminately by all citizens. It does not drive them to despair; but it thwarts them constantly and leads them to relinquish the use of their will. It thus extinguishes their spirit little by little, and enervates their souls; while the obedience that is due only in a small number of very grave, but very rare circumstances, displays servitude only now and then, and makes it weigh only on certain men. In vain will you charge these same citizens, whom you have made so dependent on the central power, with choosing from time to time the representatives of this power; this use so important, but so short and so rare, of their free will, will not prevent them from losing little by little the ability to think, to feel and to act by themselves, and from thus falling gradually below the level of humanity.²²⁹

Tocqueville invokes principles of civic republicanism by insisting that men who have “entirely given up the habit of directing themselves” cannot be expected to “succeed in choosing well those who will lead them; it cannot be believed that a liberal, energetic, and wise government can ever come out of the vote of a people of servants.”²³⁰ Again, the arguments from spillover and porousness are at work: The capacity of democratic citizens to act as political agents is intimately

²²⁸ DA, 758. “The mind is obsessed by the idea of unity, looking for it in all directions, and, when it believes unity has been found, it embraces it and rests there. Not only does the human mind come to discover in the world only one creation and one creator, this first division of things still bothers it, and it readily tries to enlarge and to simplify its thought by containing God and the universe in a single whole. If I find a philosophical system according to which the things material and immaterial, visible and invisible that the world contains are no longer considered except as the various parts of an immense being that alone remains eternal amid the continual change and incessant transformation of everything that composes it, I will have no difficulty concluding that such a system, although it destroys human individuality, or rather because it destroys it, will have secret charms for men who live in democracy; all their intellectual habits prepare them for conceiving it and set them on the path to adopt it. It naturally attracts their imagination and fixes it; it feeds the pride of their mind and flatters its laziness.”

²²⁹ DA, 1259.

²³⁰ DA, 1260.

tied to their ability to act as moral agents. Where ancient despotism restricted political liberty with great cruelty, new despotism removes the hard edge of despotism just as it removes the hard edges of political life and the need of “thinking and feeling.” Those hard edges not only provide a moral and political education in boundaries and limits; they provide education *in feeling*. It is one of the more striking claims of Tocqueville’s theory that democratic men gain compassion for the whole of humanity while also losing *feeling*. A metaphor is helpful here: It is not only that they lose the muscle memory of political responsibility and the voluntary “reciprocal action of men on one another.” Their muscles atrophy: neuropathy and nervous degeneration set in, dulling the pride of a citizen and the love of one’s own.

One logical end to this might include the undermining even of the most intimate and most natural of spheres, the family. Surprisingly, Tocqueville fails to raise this directly as a possibility. Why? Tocqueville thinks democracy emphasizes and strengthens the natural affections of the family whilst undoing the conventional and legal character of the aristocratic family.²³¹ He considers this a salutary development. The more natural character of the democratic family makes it more affectionate. Even under soft despotism, individuals retain the sphere of their family and closest friends, though they lose their neighbors and countrymen. However, one might critique Tocqueville for failing to follow some of his own conclusions. If soft despotism can bend and mold the individual will, and prohibit and encourage certain forms of social organization, why the household should be exempt from this is unclear. For, to use his words against him, “The State receives and often takes the child from the arms of its mother in order to entrust it to its agents; it is the State that takes charge of inspiring sentiments in each generation

²³¹ DA, 1031-1040.

and providing each generation with ideas.”²³² The family’s autonomy as an institution is not only far more unstable under democracy, having been stripped of much of its aristocratic legal and corporate character. It also seems likely, per Tocqueville’s own logic, that soft despotism’s technological and bureaucratic apparatus will reach into the family.²³³

Solutions?

The vices and “imbecility” of the governed therefore work with the technological advances of administrative and industrial science to produce this particular form of dominion by which persons lose “some of the principal attributes of humanity.”²³⁴ Tocqueville tells us in his notes that he thinks the United States has thus far “avoided” many of these democratic dangers, granting “immense rights to society” while still leaving the individual “a great *security* and a great *independence*.”²³⁵ It is therefore from the American example and their English patrimony that Tocqueville draws remedies for the “disease whose growth and spread he models”²³⁶ Against those – the Doctrinaires come to mind – who would “want to attract and keep authority within a single class” and who “will fail,” Tocqueville suggests that legislators take equality seriously as

²³² DA, 1223.

²³³ Some works on Tocqueville and the family include: Laura Janara, “Democracy’s Family Values: Alexis de Tocqueville on Anxiety, Fear, and Desire,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 34, 3 (2001): 551-578; William Mathie, “God, Woman, and Morality: The Democratic Family in the New Political Science of Alexis de Tocqueville,” *The Review of Politics* 57, 1 (1995): 7-30; Reiji Matsumoto, “Tocqueville on the Family,” *Tocqueville Review* 8 (1986-1987): 127-152; F.L. Morton, “Sexual Equality and the Family in Tocqueville’s ‘Democracy in America,’” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 17, 2 (1984): 309-24 ; Delba Winthrop, “Tocqueville’s American Woman and ‘The True Conception of Democratic Progress,’” *Political Theory*, 14, 2 (1986): 239-261; Dorothea Wolfson, “Tocqueville on liberalism’s liberation of women,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 25, 4 (1996): 203-207.

²³⁴ DA, 1262.

²³⁵ DA, 1259, note v.

²³⁶ It is Rahe who uses the language “French disease.” See Rahe, 221-240. See Drescher, “Democracy, Civil Society and Antislavery in Tocquevillian Perspective,” for another example.

the foundational “first principle and as symbol” and to “appear as friends of equality.”²³⁷ It is not a “matter of reconstructing an aristocratic society” by locating authority within one class, such as Guizot’s *pays légal*, but of ensuring liberty within the egalitarian society God has granted.

Though the scope of individual liberty will necessarily be smaller, and all individuals necessarily smaller and weaker in democratic ages, protections can and must be introduced for the intermediary and subsidiary spheres of authority no less important than the Sovereign power for being subsidiary. These protections may be against the natural inclinations of democracy whilst being supports of human nature simply.

Tocqueville’s intervention does not contest the sovereignty of the people.²³⁸ Instead he refuses a despotic monism in the name of the general welfare; his vision of the democratic will is expressed through the multiplicity and diversity of human institutions formal and informal, natural, and artificial, political, and civil. Associations, localities, and provincial assemblies of the sort found in the American states still represent the democratic will, even if the democratic mind is frustrated by its fragmentation. Associations, in which “simple citizens by associating together can constitute ... in a word, aristocratic persons,” are as “enlightened and powerful [citizens] whom you cannot bend at will or oppress in the shadow.”²³⁹ By bringing together “naturally isolated,” weak, and easily “trampled” democratic individuals, they build up social power and reconstitute for a democratic age the links that once existed between peasant and lord, among lords, among serfs, or among members of corporations and estates.²⁴⁰ By leaving this

²³⁷ DA, 1263-4.

²³⁸ DA, 411-412. “The government called mixed has always seemed to me a chimera. Truly speaking, there is no mixed government (in the sense that is given to this term), because, in each society, you eventually discover a principle of action that dominates all the others.”

²³⁹ DA, 1268-9.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

space deliberately open, the legislator encourages “gathering together” in the space in-between the wholly private sphere of individual and family and the wholly public sphere of the assembly.²⁴¹ Such “gathering together” teaches *intérêt bien entendu*.

Tocqueville also advocates a strong judiciary as a prophylactic. Associations and the judiciary are intimately connected to and require an appreciation of forms and understanding and respect for rights as forms.²⁴² Political liberty in the democratic age depends on holding in productive tension that “authority and liberty, individualism and social force are needed at the very same time. The whole question is to decide the limits of these two things.”²⁴³ Hence, Tocqueville’s injunction to the legislator:

To fix for the social power extensive, but visible and immobile limits; to give to individuals certain rights and to guarantee to them the uncontested enjoyment of these rights; to preserve for the individual the little of independence, of strength and of originality that remain to him; to raise him up beside society and sustain him in the face of it: such seems to me to be the first goal of the legislator in the age we are entering.²⁴⁴

The meaning of the absence of *intérêt bien entendu*

For a concept considered “key” to Tocqueville’s political theory, it is a striking fact that in his theorization of soft despotism, *intérêt bien entendu* disappears. It simply drops out.

Tocqueville does not mention or discuss it in the text and its notes. So while it may indeed be key

²⁴¹ Mitchell, “It is not good for man to be alone,” 280-281.

²⁴² To revisit what was broached in the earlier chapter, contra the argument Marx will later maintain in “On the Jewish Question,” for Tocqueville rights serve as much to distinguish individuals as to unite them in shared appreciation of rights as the property of citizens and in a shared understanding of their interests. Recall Tocqueville’s plea to readers in DA, 391: ““Don’t you see that religions are growing weaker and that the divine notion of rights is disappearing? Don’t you find that mores are becoming corrupted and that, with them, the moral notion of rights is fading away?”

²⁴³ DA, 709-710, note u.

²⁴⁴ DA, 1275.

to understanding his normative and positive theorization of the American democratic social state, if it is key to soft despotism, it is key by its absence.

This is worth dwelling upon as this chapter has done. By an accumulation of historical and exegetical evidence, in light of the relationship in Tocqueville's thought between interest and virtue, specifically Christian virtue, and between the spheres and domains of life, the task of this chapter has been to set up and then unpack Tocqueville's account of soft despotism and show the moral and political consequences of the disappearance of *intérêt bien entendu*. Its disappearance reflects changes both in the structure of and experience of social and political life itself and in the moral character of democratic people in private and public.

We observed in the previous chapter that Tocqueville works out, even if ambiguously and by intimation, a concept of *intérêt bien entendu* not as contrary to the Christian moral tradition but in light of it, downstream of it, even leading to it or back to it. It may be true, as Stauffer suggests, that Tocqueville's audience's "modern moral outlook" makes *intérêt bien entendu* seem necessary because devotion is weak and that it *still* "fails to provide a rationale for devotion; it opposes it and undermines it." (We cannot examine that proposition in any depth here though it would be worth exploring with abundant reference to social scientific studies of the sort neo-Tocquevillians conduct.²⁴⁵) However, Tocqueville holds that the proper education of man's interests – "the means to a certain point allow men to do without religion" -- lead not only to higher forms of self-interest and even to virtue but it also leads men back "by a long detour

²⁴⁵ Stauffer, 772. If as Stauffer suggests *intérêt bien entendu* fails to encourage devotion or undermines it, that may suggest, among other lines of thought, that Tocqueville was unsuccessful in using interest as a route towards virtue or that interest had so eclipsed other considerations in practical morality that the game was lost.

towards faith.”²⁴⁶ In Mitchell’s words, Christianity itself offers “a training in self-interest rightly understood”; what is good, well-understood, in worldly terms will comport for Tocqueville with what is good in the “economy of salvation.”²⁴⁷

Hence the importance of the spillover and porousness between the spheres of human life and circles of human action to which Tocqueville repeatedly draws our attention.²⁴⁸ “Enclosure” does not always denote a negative development. It depends on what is enclosed and the nature of the boundary. The human intellect must be bounded rightly or else it plunges the person in doubt and “if he does not have faith, he must serve, and if he is free, he must believe.”²⁴⁹ “Enclosure” is never so threatening as when the heart is enclosed by individualism, preventing him from “gathering together” with others and linking his ends to common action.²⁵⁰ This heart is not only enclosed, it is *remplié*, curved and turned in on itself.²⁵¹

Because personal interest is “fixed” in the heart, self-interest itself does not disappear under soft despotism. Soft despotism is legitimized because it serves the self-interest of democratic citizens by providing material security and public tranquility whilst maintaining some democratic political forms. However, this reflects, on Tocqueville’s view, democratic self-interest *wrongly* understood. How each man ought to understand his self-interest is not an

²⁴⁶ DA, 968.

²⁴⁷ Mitchell, *Fragility*, 24, note 63 and 190, note 96.

²⁴⁸ For example, *renfermer* and its variations are found no less than 18 times in *Democracy* Volume II.

²⁴⁹ DA, 744, 745. “Such a state cannot fail to enervate souls; it slackens the motivating forces of will and prepares citizens for servitude ... I doubt that man can ever bear complete religious independence and full political liberty... if he does not have faith, he must serve, and if he is free, he must believe.”

²⁵⁰ DA, 884.

²⁵¹ *Ancien Regime*, 91. ARR, 188. “... such groups were almost entirely turned inward [rempliés sur eux-mêmes] ... each of these little societies lived for itself alone, was concerned only with itself, and transacted no business that did not affect it directly.”

essentially democratic question. It is a perennial, enduring question about human nature and its fulfillment. What the democratic social state changes is the manner, terms, and language in which this question is asked. Tocqueville announces as much; it is not that virtue no longer exists in democracies. It is rather that it is taught through interest and because democracies lack stable intellectual authorities, the definition of man's interest "remains to be known."²⁵² Soft despotism requires and thrives upon a desiccated, degraded, if tempting, vision of human nature and what is in man's interest. Hobbes took his contract theory as describing men as they truly were and could be, inside and outside the social contract. By contrast, Tocqueville, looking at America and observing its democratic social state, imagines *a process* by which that materialistic vision of man and politics *becomes* as real as possible.²⁵³

As Goldhammer observes, Tocqueville seems to have left *intérêt bien entendu* deliberately vague yet "on one point, at least, he was absolutely clear: associations are essential to achieving the 'proper understanding' required to check the ravages of unmitigated self-interest. Indeed, proper understanding involves an admixture of what at first might seem the opposite of self-interest, namely, sacrifice: not 'self-sacrifice on a grand scale' as in aristocratic societies 'but . . . small sacrifices every day.'"²⁵⁴ What we see observe in noticing the disappearance of *intérêt bien entendu* under soft despotism is the 1) loss of an enlightened understanding of human self-interest, replaced by materialism and individualism; 2) the

²⁵² DA, 923.

²⁵³ One could say that Tocqueville, who like Rousseau cites Hobbes's "Homo puer robustus [est]," engages in a critique of Hobbes loosely echoing Rousseau's critique that Hobbes did not go back far enough toward nature to observe man's natural goodness. Hobbes and Tocqueville both see the citizen under the Sovereign power as fundamentally transformed relative to the state of nature and non-despotic democracy, though for Tocqueville that transformation only occurs as a result of a previous transformation in ideas of human anthropology. See DA, 391, for Tocqueville's invocation of Hobbes. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Major Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. trans., John T. Scott, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 81-82.

²⁵⁴ Goldhammer, "Tocqueville, Associations, and the Law of 1834," 78.

evaporation and eventual disappearance of conditions and opportunities under which that enlightened understanding can be realized and actualized in practices and the “habits of the heart”; and 3) the loss of spaces, spheres and domains where democratic individuals through the “reciprocal action of men on one another” cultivate *intérêt bien entendu* and the higher virtues, oriented by Christian morality, towards which it may lead. As the democratic heart contracts, the space of civil society -- in which ideas, sentiments, and reciprocal action of men on one another bring them into closer fellowship and mutual dependence independent of the State –contracts and the State expands to take on the activities, tasks, and obligations associations in civil society once fulfilled. The State often does not do so maliciously. It often does so benevolently, on the basis of claims of justice and equality to which the democratic age is particularly sensitive, and on the grounds that the infrastructure of civil society is not equal to the task. That we will turn to in the next chapter in the context of the “Memoir on Pauperism” and the political realities of social policy in the July Monarchy and industrial revolution.

For now, however let us observe that Tocqueville, observing the egotistical politics of the July Monarchy and comparing it with America, theorizes a softly, democratically despotic regime in which not only certain forms of association and relationship but also certain kinds of *virtues*, both private and public, become increasingly not only impossible but also inconceivable. In this way, Stauffer’s points are well taken but this disappearance of virtue is not necessarily because of *intérêt bien entendu* as a moral theory itself.

Despotism, which, by its nature, is fearful, sees in the isolation of men the most certain guarantee of its own duration, and it ordinarily puts all its efforts into isolating them. There is no vice of the human heart that pleases it as much as egoism: *a despot easily pardons the governed for not loving him, provided that they do not love each other*. He does not ask them to help him lead the State; it is enough that they do not claim to run it themselves. Those who claim to unite their efforts in order to create common prosperity,

he calls unruly and restless spirits; and, changing the natural meaning of words, he calls *good citizens those who withdraw narrowly into themselves.*²⁵⁵ (Italics added.)

It is because the “face to face” encounter under soft despotism becomes increasingly rare and men, their nature distorted, increasingly do not seek it. Such face-to-face encounter “alone, [Tocqueville] thought, could renew a civilization.”²⁵⁶ The beginning of this chapter invoked Pope Benedict and it is helpful to do so again here: “When those responsible for the public good attune themselves to the natural human desire for self-governance based on subsidiarity, they leave space for individual responsibility and initiative, but most importantly, they leave space for *love*.”²⁵⁷ This is underscored by the findings of the last chapter: *intérêt bien entendu*, as a way by which civil society develops and humans cooperate and associate, can lead to higher virtue such as the “love of God that makes men virtuous.” Despotism therefore is not only in favor of egotism; it isolates persons and closes them in themselves. Soft despotism is against the face-to-face encounter, against the virtues of love and care for one’s neighbors towards which *intérêt bien entendu* can build in that free space. One can make the argument (which we will encounter again) that justice is increased in a political community by extending the scope and responsibility of the State, that the virtue of solidarity grows by binding citizens to one another through shared political institutions. It is an argument worth weighing and not incorrect tout court. However, it remains for Tocqueville that expansion of the State manifests in citizens not as more justice or virtue but as a laziness and indifference towards one’s fellow citizens regardless of its redefinition as public virtue by the governors. The principles of spillover and porousness,

²⁵⁵ DA, 887-888.

²⁵⁶ Mitchell, “It is not good for man to be alone,” 278.

²⁵⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, “Address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences.”

as I have invoked and developed them, mean definitionally that what is private is never merely or purely private, what is public never relegated to the public square alone. The virtues and the private or public spaces of their cultivation are never separate from each other.

Might it be possible that *intérêt bien entendu* and the “reciprocal action of men upon one another” are insufficient for well-being in modern democratic states, thus necessitating a welfare state if not soft despotism? On the one hand, the argument we have made here suggests that:

A government can no more suffice for maintaining alone and for renewing the circulation of sentiments and ideas among a great people than for conducting all of the industrial enterprises. From the moment it tries to emerge from the political sphere in order to throw itself into the new path, it will exercise an unbearable tyranny, even without wanting to do so; for government only knows how to dictate precise rules; it imposes the sentiments and ideas that it favors, and it is always difficult to distinguish its counsels from its orders.²⁵⁸

On the other hand, administrative centralization of the kind soft despotism employs is accepted because of its capacity to undertake great projects, to respond to the miseries of the poor and act on a grand scale to respond to social and political crises. It was a live and open question to Tocqueville whether the French, whose path had long been one of administrative centralization against association, subsidiarity, and political liberties, could be educated in something akin to *intérêt bien entendu* and could build and sustain the practices, habits, and virtues that a vibrant civil society requires and that would make centralization unnecessary.²⁵⁹ Where it concerned religion, the French too had taken a path that, unlike the Americans, viewed its Catholic and Christian moral inheritance with in a spirit of contention rather than consensus, if not with outright hostility. So, is the “reciprocal action of men upon one another” enough? The social question will challenge Tocqueville on this question. In so doing, it leads him to reflect further on thorny theoretical issues -- the relationship between *intérêt bien entendu* and charity, and

²⁵⁸ DA, 900-901.

²⁵⁹ Selinger, 91.

therefore on charity and justice, and on the virtues and forms of subsidiarity and solidarity—as well as on prudential practical questions of a statesman. How to think about and practically pursue human well-being in a democratic age without sacrificing liberty or failing to “leave space for love” is where we turn next.

Chapter 3: Charity, welfare, and putting theory into practice

In the last chapter, we explored Tocqueville's theorization of soft despotism in light of the striking absence of *intérêt bien entendu*, the understandings of which abound because Tocqueville seemed to have left the concept deliberately vague in the published text. As I stressed in Chapter 1, that vagueness admits of many understandings, one of which – *intérêt bien entendu* as leading to Christian virtue – puts in refreshing and new perspective his vision of the flourishing democratic social state and the moral and political dangers of soft despotism.

This chapter, unlike the previous two, does not center its analysis on the canonical *Democracy in America*. Rather, the focus of this chapter falls upon Tocqueville's less well-known but no less interesting and insightful writings on social policy. The last chapter left us with a characterization of soft despotism as undermining the spaces and conditions of civil society and therefore of *intérêt bien entendu*, and as consequently, of the virtues to which *intérêt bien entendu* may lead, specifically forms of love and care among citizens and neighbors. Is this inevitable? And is this in some way desirable if it produces greater equality and reduces human vulnerability? Does this not expand the scope of political solidarity, justice, and what we might call democratic well-being? This chapter looks to respond to these questions by examining Tocqueville's account of charity in his writings on social reform and welfare, given that *intérêt bien entendu* can lead to virtue approximating Christian charity – “the love of God that makes men virtuous” – and given that soft despotism sees in civil society, voluntary associations, and their related virtues of *intérêt bien entendu* and charity intermediary powers to be policed.

Tocqueville is interested not only in the best but in the best possible under specific human conditions and constraints. He grounded his masterpieces of political theory in the real places, cultures, histories, laws, and traditions of America and France rather than write abstract treatises

in the tradition of liberalism's founders. His writings on social policy enhance this element of his thought and therefore are less philosophical, more prudential, and political. The live nineteenth-century issue of welfare, of public versus private charity and the status of the poor in a democratic or democratizing social state required Tocqueville to respond to the arguments from vulnerability, benevolence, and equality that justify soft despotism. In Delba Winthrop's words, soft despotism can resemble "an aggravated version of the European welfare state."¹ These arguments make powerful cases for welfare policies when the emergent industrial aristocracy failed to see themselves as morally obligated to their workers.² In *Democracy* Volume II, Tocqueville identified the new "axioms of industrial science "and their consequences as essential preoccupations for the legislator. He theorized that the new industrial aristocracy has no sense of moral obligations to its workers and the industrialized poor, and "after impoverishing and brutalizing the men it uses, delivers them in times of crisis to public charity to be fed." Under these circumstances, "there is no true bond between the poor and the rich."³ Soft despotism is a product and a cause of humans becoming "less than men." It is to be avoided. But even if it does make humans "less than men," is it right that men should live in industrial poverty, amid "flowed muddy and fetid water which the works of industry have dyed with a thousand colors...the Styx of this new hell"?⁴ Is not soft despotism preferable to such deep poverty?

¹ Winthrop, "Rights, interests, and honor," 204.

² DA, 980-985. See on Tocqueville's writings on English and Irish poverty: Brogan, 235- 252, 282-311; Drescher, *Tocqueville and England*; Michael Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy and Social Reform*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 150-153; Jeremy Jennings, *Travels with Tocqueville Beyond America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022); Richard Swedberg, *Tocqueville's Political Economy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 126-136; Zunz, *The Man Who Understood Democracy*, 133-161.

³ DA, 984.

⁴ Tocqueville cited in Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy and Social Reform*, 151. See Jennings, *Travels with Tocqueville Beyond America*, 130-168, 329-383.

This chapter therefore examines the thorny, live question for Tocqueville of how to respond in justice to the challenges posed by a phenomenon such as pauperism without either leading to soft despotism or otherwise making impossible the *intérêt bien entendu*, charity, and associational life – the encounter between persons –which is the substance of a truly human life. The chapter proceeds in ten parts. It examines Tocqueville’s idea of well-being before proceeding to his accounts of the poor and of poverty, of pauperism, and of charity, with the help of his engagement with the political economy of his day. It ends with his evaluation of a limited welfare he calls “Christian charity applied to politics.” Tocqueville is not a perfectibilist, not a believer in human perfectibility, and this fact permeates his theory and his translation of theory into practice. The chapter, in focusing on the thorny question of welfare, allows us to think about the relationship between Tocqueville the thinker and Tocqueville the statesman whose desire to “instruct democracy” exists within the constraints of human, political realities. We set the table for the main meal with this as a preliminary.

Tocqueville the thinker-statesman

Scholarship has of late increasingly turned to Tocqueville’s practice of politics. That area is no longer the exclusive province of historians of political thought but rather a space which readers of Tocqueville can mine for insights into the relationship between theory and action and for additional philosophical perspective.⁵ Seymour Drescher, in assessing Tocqueville’s

⁵ Ewa Atanassow offers a good example of this. Ewa Atanassow, *Tocqueville’s Dilemmas: Sovereignty, Nationalism, and Globalization*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022.) Atanassow provides an excellent articulation of this way of approaching Tocqueville’s theory and practice. “Tocqueville’s work, moreover, is instructive for its substance as well as its approach. The tension between the universal and particular – my main object of investigation – was not only at the center of Tocqueville’s analytical concerns, it also informed his methodology. Attuned, as behooves a philosopher, to the logic of ideas and to humanity’s universal conundrums, Tocqueville also drew on the spirit and methods of social science (which he helped to advance) and inquired into the circumstances that would make modern society hospitable to freedom. His purpose, in short, was not merely to comprehend and describe but also to foster democracy and inform political practice” (12).

appreciation of the English, comments that Tocqueville “rejected the separation of acts and ideas.”⁶ In Wolin’s words, the “contrary tugs between the two ideals” of the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* “would importantly define Tocqueville’s quest for identity.”⁷ Tocqueville “lived his life at the intersection of thought and action,” though unlike Lincoln or Churchill, he might be better called a “thinker-statesman” rather than a “statesman-thinker.”⁸ Though it is Tocqueville’s theory that has lasted from the nineteenth century to our own, not without the help of significant revivals in France and in America, Tocqueville had long hoped that his career as a statesman would be his most enduring legacy.⁹ Though he was certainly ambitious for himself, his family history and his own personal attachment to the “ancient aristocratic conception of liberty” made a desire to enter into politics deeper and more purposeful than the ambitions of a twenty-something young man might otherwise suggest.¹⁰ Tocqueville sought to be a statesman, following his great-grandfather Malesherbes: “I am the grandson of M. de Malesherbes; Malesherbes defended the people before the King, and the King before the people... His is a double example which I have not forgotten and shall never forget.”¹¹ In 1829, as he and

⁶ Drescher, *Tocqueville and England*, 1-2.

⁷ Wolin, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds*, 76-77. On Tocqueville’s desire for a “political life,” see, among others, Atanassow, *Tocqueville’s Dilemmas*; Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, 1-148, Zunz, *The Man Who Understood Democracy*, 162-257.

⁸ Mahoney, *The Statesman as Thinker*.

⁹ On the history of Tocqueville’s reception, especially revivals, among many articles, see Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, 189-213, Richard Boyd, “Tocqueville’s Conservatism and Conservatism’s Tocqueville,” in *Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, 133-156, Robert T. Gannett, Jr, “Tocqueville and the Political Left in America: Heeding a Call for Decisive Action,” in *Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, 157-177.

¹⁰ Pierre Manent, “Tocqueville, Political Philosopher,” » *Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, 108-120.

¹¹ Quoted in Larry Siedentop, *Tocqueville*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4. Though Malesherbes could not claim a lineage comparable to that of the Comtes of Tocqueville on Tocqueville’s father’s side, this man exemplified *noblesse oblige* and “true aristocracy” based on “quality of motives rather than prejudices of caste.”

Beaumont began to study together, a voyage to America scarcely a thought on the horizon, he wrote, “We must fit ourselves for political life” through study of history and philosophy.

I know more of the events themselves, but with regards to their causes, to the means furnished by men to those who have influenced them for the last two hundred years; to the state of different nations before and after the outbreak of the revolutions and afterwards; their classification, manners and instincts; their present resources, the distribution and causes of these resources... all of this I am ignorant; and to this, everything else is a mere introduction.¹²

Tocqueville went on to say that the study of “general history is useful only in respect of the light it throws on human nature, and as a preparation” for life in politics and service to the nation.

With some “good historical work [that] might still come of our joint endeavors,” the ambitious twenty-four-year-old told Beaumont, “It is the politician we must build up in ourselves.”¹³

He was to be sorely disappointed, both by the July Monarchy itself as well as his own failures, as we explored briefly in the previous chapter. Yet from his 1839 election on, “His statements on political activity ... indicate his disgust with the workings of a particular political system, not the lessening of his faith in the exalted place of genuine political life,” which he would continually defend.¹⁴ In April 1852, at the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, his recent tenure as Foreign Minister and Napoleon III’s coup still smarting, he spoke on the difference between the study of politics and the activity of politics itself. Against those who might suggest that morality can be studied but politics, which concerns many contingent facts, cannot be made a “science” (and that “simple good sense” would be of better use to a prince than

¹²Alexis de Tocqueville, *Memoir, Letters, and Remains of Alexis de Tocqueville*, (London: Macmillan, 1861), <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2435>, 439-440.

¹³ AT to Beaumont, 1829, cited in Zunz, *The Man Who Understood Democracy*, 35. I address this in my MA dissertation. Sarah Gustafson, “History, Handmaiden to Political Life: Tocqueville’s Challenge to Democratic mentality and the Historian-Politician in Nineteenth Century France,” MA diss., Queen Mary University of London, 2015.

¹⁴ On this see Drescher, *Tocqueville and England*, 1-6.

“theories and maxims formed while studying philosophy and history,”) Tocqueville defends the integrity of the study of politics. It is the study of the whole of the “conduct of societies,” “an immense space extending from philosophy to the elementary studies of civil justice,” from the “general to the particular... from pure theory to written laws and to facts.”¹⁵ But this is a science distinct from the art of governing:

There are two parts of politics that must not be confused, one fixed and the other in motion.

The first, founded on the very nature of man, on his interests, on his faculties, on his needs as revealed by philosophy and history, on his instincts, which change their objects according to the times without changing their nature, and which are as immortal as his race; the first, I say, teaches us what laws are best adapted to the general and permanent condition of humanity.

All this is the science.¹⁶

By contrast the “art of government,” the “practical and militant politics that struggles against the difficulties of each day, adapting to the variety of incidents, providing for the passing needs of the moment, and calling to its aid the ephemeral passions of contemporaries,” makes demands of the statesman for which the study of the science can ill prepare him. The “art of writing” and “habits of mind” that aid contemplation and “[give] them the taste for the fine, the delicate, the ingenious, the original,” can make innovative thinkers; however, this “prepares them poorly for the government of men and management of human affairs,” which often depends on the passions and “course commonplaces.” His own personal disappointments in mind, Tocqueville affirmed that “practice is often removed from theory” and that “to excel in one is no reason at all to

¹⁵ He lists Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, and Rousseau as examples of those who consider it “this way” and are “divided into very distinct groups each of which can be examined separately.” By contrast, others like Grotius and Pufendorf consider international law; those like Beccaria and Smith “confine themselves to a single part of the vast subject they embrace,” such as criminal justice or political economy, while each country also has its great jurists. Alexis de Tocqueville, “Speech To The Academy Of Moral & Political Sciences”, April 3, 1852, <https://archive.org/details/TocquevilleSpeechToTheAcademyOfMoralPoliticalSciencesAnnual.April31852/page/n1/mode/2up>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

succeed in the other.” No matter how intimate the relationship between ideas and action might be, the distinction makes all the difference. The French Revolution itself demonstrated the possible closeness between ideas and political action, though Tocqueville notes those who led the Revolution were only theoreticians “who had never taken the least part in public affairs.”¹⁷ Fitting thoughts for a man who observed that those with the longest practice of rights make the best use of them – not those with the best theory of rights.¹⁸

I introduce this chapter with Tocqueville’s reflections about theory and practice because this chapter addresses Tocqueville’s writings that do both or somehow lay in between theory and practice. The famous introduction to *Democracy* clearly stated its goal as the development of a “new political science... for a world entirely new,”

To instruct democracy, to revive its beliefs if possible, to purify its mores, to regulate its movements, to substitute little by little the science of public affairs for its inexperience, knowledge of its true interests for its blind instincts; to adapt its government to times and places; to modify it according to circumstances and men; such is the first of duties imposed today on those who lead society.¹⁹

Democracy in America and his French political writings share this aim of making democracy good, or making a particular democracy its best possible, and of contributing to a democratic well-being that upholds human well-being. Tocqueville perceived clearly that politics permits the articulation of the ideal but also necessarily includes trade-offs and tensions that arise from concrete circumstances and constraints. “I am so sure that everything in this world has its limit that to not see the limit of something seems to me to be the most certain sign of weakness of the

¹⁷ Ibid. See also ARR, 232-235.

¹⁸ DA, 391-3.

¹⁹ DA, 16.

human mind.”²⁰ “... humanity has made great progress and that it can still make more progress” but exists within “impassable limits.”²¹ As Lawler notes, this awareness of human imperfection set him against the paradoxically misanthropic radical idealism “characteristic of Tocqueville’s late historical time” that would “reduce” human life to inhumane “systematic theory” and by so doing, try to perfect it.²² Tocqueville’s work social policy translated his appreciation of the distinctions of theory and practice and the philosophical awareness of limits into a practical approach to politics. Tocqueville had to, in Selinger’s terms, “work with what he had” and without abandoning ideals, “[judge] particular circumstances on their own terms,” handle the “the tension between the universal and particular” and find a way to balance his immoderate theoretical mind with practical political moderation.²³ The pursuit of well-being in a democratic age necessitates not strict ideological rigidity or the imposition of one’s ideas on the raw matter of human life, but prudence, flexibility, and responsiveness towards circumstances as given

Well-being as a Tocquevillian concept

The English language benefits in some respects and loses in others from the term “welfare,” which denotes both concepts of well-being as well as the social and political institutions of the welfare state. In French, in which welfare often goes by *aide sociale*, *assistance sociale*, or in Tocqueville’s day, *charité légale*. the French terms speak as much to welfare’s history as to the concept of well-being that undergirds it.

²⁰ DA, 760, note d. This note is on the chapter “How Equality Suggests to the Americans the Idea of the Indefinite Perfectibility of Man.”

²¹ DA, 760.

²² See Lawler, *The Restless Mind*, 1-9, 11-50, on socialism and pantheism. Lawler gives voice to this element of Tocqueville’s thought when he articulated that for Tocqueville, “all that is distinctively human begins” with the fact of human liberty and the “restless mind,” which is sometimes to say a diseased or fevered mind.

²³ Selinger, 75. Atanassow, 12. See also Craiutu, « Tocqueville’s Paradoxical Moderation. »

The concept of well-being, *bien-être*, however, threads itself through *Democracy in America*, and will be relevant for our examination not only of Tocqueville on the nature of poverty but of his hesitations and concerns about the aims and incentives of *charité légale*. Well-being is most prominent in Volume II Part II, where Tocqueville traces the “influence of democracy on the sentiments;” well-being emerges as that after which democratic people restlessly seek as an *end*. What distinguishes democratic people is that they come to think of well-being as principally material. Therefore, *material* well-being becomes their end and the whole of well-being rather than as one part.²⁴ “The passion for material wellbeing is not always exclusive but it is general,” an “essentially... middle class” passion, the “national and dominant taste” which sweeps everything along in its wake,” encouraged by the instability of the democratic social state.²⁵ Notwithstanding Tocqueville’s hatred of democratic materialism, he recognizes the possibility of an “honest materialism” that is not virtuous but it is steady. Under the right conditions, it encourages a regularity of behavior that is virtuous insofar as it is steady. It “would not corrupt souls but would soften them and end by silently relaxing all their springs of action” – a description of the cumulative power of honest materialism that echoes the description of soft despotism’s effects.²⁶ As religion trends towards pantheism, the democratic soul gradually comes to think, act, and feel *as though* the passion for material well-being *will produce*

²⁴ DA, 931.

²⁵ DA, 934.

²⁶ DA, 957; 11, 937. See 935, note b. Nolla and Schleifer connect Tocqueville’s discussion of honest materialism to this letter he wrote November 8, 1831: “These men call themselves virtuous; I deny it. They are *steady*, that is all I am able to say in their favor.”

spiritual well-being. This is not an illogical thought. Spillover and porousness confirm that the material and spiritual are tied; habits of the one naturally spillover into and permeate the other.²⁷

But to understand well-being as exclusively material is to misunderstand reality, from Tocqueville's view. Part of the task that falls to the legislator in these times therefore is to lead the materialistic mind to think beyond the immanent horizon.²⁸

But while man takes pleasure in this honest and legitimate pursuit of well-being, it is to be feared that in the end he may lose the use of his most sublime faculties, and that by wanting to improve everything around him, he may in the end degrade himself. The danger is there and nowhere else.

So legislators in democracies and all honest and enlightened men who live in democracies must apply themselves without respite to lifting up souls and keeping them pointed toward heaven. It is necessary that all those who are interested in the future of democratic societies unite, and that all in concert make continual efforts to spread within these societies the taste for the infinite, the sentiment for the grand and the love for non-material pleasures.²⁹

One cannot just "enlarge your soul like your house," but one can keep the democratic soul from sinking beneath the level of the properly human.³⁰ "*Human* life ... is neither lived nor can it be understood as a wholly immanent affair."³¹

Just as Tocqueville expects "individual interest to become more than ever the principal, if not the sole motivating force of the actions of men" in democracy and "how each man will understand his individual interest remains to be known," it is also an open question how well-

²⁷ DA, 960. "The heart of man is more vast than you suppose; it can at the same time enclose the taste for the good things of the earth and the love of the good things of heaven; sometimes the heart seems to give itself madly to one of the two; but it never goes for a long time without thinking of the other."

²⁸ DA, 968.

²⁹ DA, 957.

³⁰ DA, 1089-1092. This remark echoes Augustine in his *Confessions*. "The house of my soul is too small for you to come in. May it be enlarged by you. It is in ruins; restore it. In your eyes it has offensive features, I admit it, I know it, but who will clean it?" Other translations sound even more like Tocqueville than the Chadwick. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 6.

³¹ Mitchell, *Fragility*, 156-158.

being will be understood in a democratic social state.³² Tocqueville literature boasts much on aristocratic liberty, human grandeur, and restlessness and anxiety, but very little on well-being beyond its relationship to material prosperity and acquisitiveness. One reason for this may be the argument that Tocqueville considers well-being to be a *democratic* preoccupation or a democratic category. The aristocratic mind does seem to care less for “well-being” than for greatness.³³ That “well-being” is purely democratic is not implausible. His concluding evaluation of democracy provides an image of well-being as democratic:

I see that the good and the bad are distributed equally enough in the world. Great wealth disappears; the number of small fortunes increases; desires and enjoyments multiply; there is no more extraordinary prosperity or irreversible poverty. ...

Souls are not energetic; but mores are mild and legislation humane. If little great devotion, few very high, very brilliant, and very pure virtues are found, habits are steady, violence is rare and cruelty almost unknown. The lives of men become longer and their property more secure. Life is not very ornate, but very comfortable and very peaceful. There are few very delicate and very coarse pleasures, little courtesy in manners and little brutality in tastes.³⁴

This “saddens and chills him” because democratic “well-being” is a different “well-being” from aristocratic well-being. But “Who knows if in the eyes of God,” this new vision is not better?³⁵

It is natural to believe that what most satisfies the sight of this creator and preserver of men, is not the singular prosperity of a few, but the greatest well-being of all... Equality is perhaps less elevated; but it is more just, and its justice makes its grandeur and its beauty.³⁶

³² DA, 923.

³³ See, for selected discussions of Tocqueville on human grandeur, of which there are many: Joseph Aulis, “The People and the Great: Tocqueville and Machiavelli on the Art of Being Free,” in *Liberty, Equality, Democracy*; Vince Bagnulo, “Making Democracy Great Again...or Not: Alexis de Tocqueville on Why Greatness in Democratic Society Requires Justice,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 49, 3 (2020): 181-190; Gianna Englert, “Tocqueville’s Politics of Grandeur,” *Political Theory*, 50, 3 (2022): 477-503; Paul Franco, “Tocqueville and Nietzsche on the Problem of Human Greatness in Democracy,” *Review of Politics* 76 (2014): 439–467; Alan Kahan, “Democratic Grandeur: How Tocqueville Constructed His New Moral Science in America,” in *Tocqueville’s Voyages*, 177-201; Kahan, *Tocqueville, Religion, and Democracy*.

³⁴ DA, 1280.

³⁵ DA, 1282, note f.

³⁶ DA, 1282.

So “well-being” is an especially attractive concept to the democratic mind, and Tocqueville often links it with democracy specifically.

At other points, however, Tocqueville invokes human nature (as discussed in Chapter 1) and an implicit standard for what constitutes the flourishing of human nature. By this standard he judges aristocracy and democracy, including soft despotism, assess their excesses, and prescribe prophylactics. He repeatedly suggests he guides himself by this standard, steering between the excesses of social state:

If I were born in an aristocratic century, amid a nation in which the hereditary wealth of some and the irremediable poverty of others diverted men from the idea of the better and, as well, held souls as if benumbed in the contemplation of another world, I would want it to be possible for me to stimulate among such a people the sentiment of needs; I would think about finding more rapid and easier means to satisfy the new desires that I would have brought about, and, diverting the greatest efforts of the human mind toward physical study, I would try to excite the human mind in the pursuit of well-being.

If it happened that some men caught fire thoughtlessly in the pursuit of wealth and exhibited an excessive love for material enjoyments, I would not become alarmed; these particular traits would soon disappear in the common physiognomy.

Legislators of democracies have other concerns. ...

[They] must apply themselves without respite to lifting up souls and keeping them pointed toward heaven...

Democracy favors the taste for material enjoyments. This taste, if it becomes excessive, soon disposes men to believe that everything is only matter; and materialism, in turn, finally carries them with an insane fervor toward these same enjoyments. Such is the fatal circle into which democratic nations are pushed. It is good that they see the danger and restrain themselves.³⁷

The prudence of the statesman includes “[counterbalancing] our particular defects.”³⁸

Furthermore, Tocqueville’s ideal democratic statesman is aggressively pro-spiritual well-being so to aim at the right “unchanging” “end” for humanity.

³⁷ DA, 956-8.

³⁸ DA, 817.

I do not doubt that the social and political constitution of a people disposes them to certain beliefs and to certain tastes in which they easily abound afterward; while these same causes turn them away from certain opinions and certain tendencies without their working at it themselves, and so to speak without their suspecting it.

All the art of the legislator consists in clearly discerning in advance these natural inclinations of human societies, in order to know where the effort of the citizens must be aided, and where it would instead be necessary to slow it down. For these obligations differ according to the times. Only the end toward which humanity must always head is unchanging; the means to reach that end constantly vary.³⁹

By helping the democratic social state adjust for its weaknesses, legislators help it best hit a target, a standard that reflects what is best simply for human flourishing.⁴⁰

I do not have to settle here whether “well-being” is a purely democratic concept.

However, we should not cede “well-being” to democracy because that understates Tocqueville’s concern with human flourishing and not just aristocratic grandeur.⁴¹ That all humans seek their happiness is one of the oldest claims in philosophy.⁴² Each social state promotes a vision of the good life, the comparisons of which are at the core of Tocqueville’s project. These are partial visions surely, expressed in different languages and frameworks.⁴³ Just as the problem with

³⁹ DA, 955.

⁴⁰ Compare with Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011,) 2. “If therefore there is some end of our actions that we wish for on account of itself, the rest being things we wish for on account of this end, and if we do not choose all things on account of something else – for in this way the process will go on infinitely such that the longing involved is empty and pointless – clearly this would be the good, that is, the best. And with a view to our life then, is not the knowledge of this good of great weight, and would we not, like archers in the possession of a target, better hit on what is needed?”

⁴¹ I use happiness, well-being, flourishing and related terms loosely here, aware that these terms may not always be exact synonyms or map evenly or equally on to Tocqueville’s concepts.

⁴² Since Tocqueville thinks God thinks in terms of “well-being,” can well-being be a purely democratic concept? Tocqueville imagines himself as God because he imagines God as neither democratic nor aristocratic but able to see both. DA, 1282.

⁴³ One might argue that these languages and frameworks are incommensurable. I am open to this line of thought in a limited sense that the terms and frameworks may *become* incommensurable. Tocqueville argues that democratic language is loose; it is prone to change and to multiple meanings. Democratic people likewise prefer generalities and are prone to imprecisions of language. (See DA, 818-829.) However, despite the “revolutionary” character of democracy, there are important aristocratic remainders in democratic social states – ideas, law, religion, etc. – that mean that the old paradigm is never completely gone. The point of departure matters. This is of course an overbroad,

interest is defining and understanding it well, the problem with flourishing or well-being is defining and understanding it well. As we examine Tocqueville on the question of welfare, and poverty, we must bear in mind the dual nature of well-being as spiritual and as material and the importance of hitting the mark between the two. This is among the tasks of the legislator, of the thinker-statesman, in framing public policy to support the general welfare.

Charity, social policy, and democratic well-being

As a legislator and minister, Tocqueville worked on topics ranging from French domestic and colonial policy to trade and international relations, many of which require him to move between the modes of statesman and thinker. This is especially the case in the context of social reform legislation. In *Democracy* Volume II Part IV, Tocqueville enumerated policy issues – infrastructure, transportation, industrialization, vulnerability, atomization and loss of local community, regulation of the Church and education -- that introduce the sovereign power into new spheres of authority in the name of democratic well-being. Action on no singular one of these issues produces soft despotism, but the accumulation of state action in these areas is characteristic of soft despotism. In nineteenth century America, some of these matters of social reform might have been broached through the “reciprocal action of men upon one another.” However, France, a country with its own point of departure, laws, mores, religious landscape, and revolutionary history, and with an emergent “social problem,” is a different case than America. In Rahe’s words, there was a distinctive “French disease.”⁴⁴

imprecise application of Kuhnian thinking on paradigm shifts and incommensurability. See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

⁴⁴ See Rahe, 221-240.

This introduces, as Christine Dunn Henderson and Seymour Drescher have noted, a question -- the answer to which may explain why Tocqueville, having composed the first *Memoir on Pauperism* in 1835, left his *Second Memoir on Pauperism* uncompleted. That question is, “Is the slide into soft despotism inevitable?”⁴⁵ For Tocqueville to consider it inevitable sits uneasily with his opposition to determinism.⁴⁶ But is soft despotism is a strong inclination for France?

We have already established that there was a looming question for a liberal of Tocqueville’s stripe whether the French had the character to uphold the informal and formal institutions and practices of self-government. We also established that soft despotism undermines, even eliminates, the spaces and conditions for *intérêt bien entendu* and the virtuous love of others towards which it may lead. Soft despotism thrives on and is sustained by individualism, egotism, and indifference to politics and to the love of and well-being of one’s neighbors. Atomization and indifference are not the only causes of administrative centralization and government assistance. (One might cite the Industrial Revolution, the famines of the 1840s, and real or potential crises which remind democratic peoples of their vulnerability.) But they do encourage and justify the paternal benevolence of the State. Absent strong associational norms and religious convictions, absent strong local government infrastructure, how might challenges of pauperism be alleviated other than through the centralized State?⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Christine Dunn Henderson, “Introduction,” in *Memoirs on Pauperism and Other Writings*, xi-xxxiv.

⁴⁶ DA, 1285. “Providence has created humanity neither entirely independent nor completely slave. It traces around each man, it is true, a fatal circle out of which he cannot go; but within its vast limits, man is powerful and free; so are peoples.”

⁴⁷ Again it was an open question whether the French people could be educated and encouraged to practice something akin to *intérêt bien entendu*, and therefore to develop capacities necessary for political liberty, including associations. Selinger, 91.

The question then becomes, how to aim at democratic well-being through public policy in such a way that the vulnerable are provided for, without exacerbating a centralization that alienates men from one another and incapacitates them for the “reciprocal action” of *intérêt bien entendu* and love. How to “enhance solidarity with and among their fellow citizens” while encouraging them “to act upon the principle of subsidiarity by promoting family life, voluntary associations, private initiative, and a public order that facilitates the healthy functioning of society’s most basic communities?”⁴⁸ How to craft a public policy and institutional framework that balances the compelling demands of justice and charity?

Despite his “resistance to the social,” Tocqueville was not insusceptible to the social problem’s lure and not blind to its importance.⁴⁹ From the Comteans and Saint-Simonians to the conservative Catholics to the liberal Protestant Doctrinaire abolitionists, French social movements and social reform in the mid nineteenth century often took on a religious or quasi-religious flavor.⁵⁰ Running through Tocqueville’s writings on social reform is a deeper,

⁴⁸ Benedict XVI, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080503_social-sciences.html.

⁴⁹ Cheryl Welch, “Tocqueville’s resistance to the social,” *History of European Ideas* 30, 1 (2004): 83-107. See also Cheryl Welch, *Liberty, and Utility: The Ideologues and the Transformation of French Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 5–43. See also Gianna Englert, “‘The Idea of Rights’: Tocqueville on The Social Question.” *The Review of Politics* 79, 4 (2017): 649–74.

⁵⁰ One examination of this from the left and bottom of French political life: Edward Berenson, *Populist Religion and Left-Wing Politics in France, 1830-1848*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). Victor Hugo’s body of work is an excellent example of this phenomenon in literature, while Lamennais exemplifies it in religious and political thought. See also Edward Berenson, “A new Religion of the Left: Christianity and Social radicalism in France, 1815-1848,” in Francois Furet and Mona Ozouf (eds), *The French Revolution and the creation of modern political culture*, vol. 3, pg. 543-560.

The Saint-Simonians and Comteans and conservative Catholics in particular articulated arguments why individualism, industrialism, and pauperism were evidence of a desiccated morality and social fabric downstream of liberal political economy and English industrialization. See Koenraad W. Swart, “‘Individualism’ in the Mid-Nineteenth Century (1826-1860)

sometimes inchoate, sometimes immediate theoretical question about the relationship of charity and justice in a modern, democratizing social state.⁵¹

Plato's City in Speech subordinated all the virtues to justice. Few concepts of virtue other than Christian charity could offer a challenge to justice in the history of Western political and moral philosophy. Though the ongoing tradition of Catholic Social Thought has prominently developed and articulated it in encyclicals from the historic *Rerum Novarum* (1891) to the pontificate of Francis today, that Christian concepts of charity would have bearing on historic and present social and political arrangements is neither a medieval, nor an antiquated nineteenth century or an exclusively Catholic view.⁵² Historians, philosophers, and political theorists have recently refocused on theological and ethical concepts of love, merit, and desert and their relationship with theories of justice and their salience and explanatory power for our contemporary political world and many of its features.⁵³

⁵¹ The term "social justice" was first used by the Jesuit Luigi Taparelli, a teacher of Pope Leo XIII whose 1891 *Rerum Novarum* initiated the tradition of Catholic social encyclicals. This is a criminally understudied contribution to nineteenth century social and political thought. Thomas Behr, *Social Justice and Subsidiarity: Luigi Taparelli and the Origins of Modern Catholic Social Thought* (Washington, District of Columbia: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019). See also, on another key player in the development of the Catholic social thought tradition whose arguments were made in opposition to Marx, Martin J. O'Malley, *Wilhelm Ketteler and the Birth of Modern Catholic Social Thought: A Catholic Manifesto in Revolutionary 1848*, (München: Utz, 2008).

⁵² Major encyclicals in this line include but are not limited to: *Quadragesimo anno* (1931), *Laborens exercens* (1981), *Centesimus annus* (1991), *Caritas in veritate* (2009), *Deus caritas est* (2005), and *Laudato si* (2014).

⁵³ Examples beyond Anderson include Brague, *The Kingdom of Man*; Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*; Hanley, *Love's Enlightenment*; Axel Honneth, "Love, Society, and Agape: An Interview with Axel Honneth"; Simon May, *Love: A History*, and May, *Love: A New Understanding*; Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism*; Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*; Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism*; Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, and Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*.

Nussbaum considers it a "problem" for the liberal democratic society to deal fittingly with emotions: "Love, I shall argue, is what gives respect for humanity its life, making it more than a shell. If love is needed even in Rawls's well-ordered society – and I believe it is – it is needed all the more urgently in real, imperfect societies that aspire to justice" (15). She reiterates in the conclusion, "Love, then, matters for justice – especially when justice is incomplete and an aspiration (as in all real nations) but even in an achieved society of human beings, were such to exist" (380). Nussbaum's lodestars in her inquiry are Rawlsian political liberalism, Comte, Mill, Tagore, and Whitman, among others, and does not draw upon the Christian tradition, though her emphasis on the frailty of human beings and the need for love even under conditions of perfect justice -- "embracing imperfection while striving for justice" (395) – provides opportunity for comparison.

It is impossible here to detail the rich theological and philosophical tradition of Christian charity and its relationship to modern concepts of love, interest, philanthropy, utilitarian and deontological ethics, and liberal theories of justice, in Tocqueville specifically and in the tradition more broadly.⁵⁴ It suffices to consider the concept of charity as broadly represented by the thought of Thomas Aquinas, whose clear exposition of the tradition renders him a good starting point.⁵⁵ Charity – agape or caritas -- is a precept of the New Law. It is a theological virtue with no equivalent in the pre-Christian classical tradition of Rome or Greece, (nor did the institutions that carry out charitable works of mercy exist prior to Christianity⁵⁶). Charity entails the love of man for God for God’s sake and the love of neighbor as ourselves for the love of God. As a theological virtue, it is given; it is a grace from God to man, and from man to man via God. It is eminently personal. It is above justice and unlike justice, it is not a natural or cardinal moral virtue. However, because it is a theological virtue, though it can sit in a complex relationship with justice, it is non-rivalrous with justice, for they belong to distinct categories of virtues. Justice includes the related virtues of religion, piety, liberality, and equity. The virtue of charity includes spiritual and corporal works of mercy, means by which persons care for others spiritually (for example in the form of fraternal correction) and materially in the forms of

⁵⁴ See, for example, Gary A. Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). See Hanley, *Love’s Enlightenment*.

⁵⁵ Here I draw from *Summa Theologica* IIaeII 22-46. I recognize that I take some liberties in choosing Aquinas to help lay out the framework of Catholic thought on charity. Thomism, central as it was to centuries of late medieval/scholastic, and Catholic thought, had to be revived in 1879 by Pope Leo XIII in *Aeterni Patris*. However, if I must cherry-pick, Aquinas is the best cherry to pick for these purposes. See Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., (Huntingdon, PA: Our Sunday Visitor, 2000), paragraphs 1896-1889 (henceforth CCC) for charity as the “greatest social commandment”, requiring justice and making justice possible. See also CCC, 1811-1829, 1855-1856, 2093-2094.

⁵⁶ One study of this that emphasizes charity’s distinction from pagan euergetism and charity’s theoretical/theological and practical emphasis on the poor is Paul Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque: sociologie historique d’un pluralisme politique*, (Paris: Seuil, 1976). One often cited piece of primary source material to this effect is Julian the Apostate’s Letter 22 to Arsacius, in which he insists that Romans imitate the charitable practices of the Christians who are winning converts through their acts of mercy.

beneficence and almsgiving.⁵⁷ This is intimately related to the Eucharist; in almsgiving, Gary Anderson writes, “the layperson has the opportunity to participate in this divine act by imitating that mercy [of God in the Eucharist] in his or her daily actions.”⁵⁸ One encounters the person of God through this personal encounter with the poor. As the “greatest social commandment,” charity moves in to act where justice, in a fallen world, is imperfect. As love of neighbor charity is in a sense supererogatory. However, the absence of charity or a charitable spirit towards neighbor or fellow citizen is not without possibly significant moral and social consequences, for the absence of charity promises its opposed vices of hatred, envy, and indifference.⁵⁹ In Tocqueville’s words, “And if we plumb the depths of our hearts, won’t we all be frightened to discover what envy makes us feel about our neighbors, friends, and relatives? We are not jealous of these people because they are neighbors, friends, and relatives, but because they are our likes [*semblables*] and equals.”⁶⁰ Charity therefore, though not required like justice, is possible where justice is not, and its merciful character makes it distinctive from justice. It is the “greatest commandment” and the “greatest social commandment.”

⁵⁷ Tocqueville’s quality as the “spiritual director” of democracy takes on new and interesting angles when it is considered in the mode of fraternal correction.

⁵⁸ Anderson, *Charity*, 8.

⁵⁹ On indifference, see CCC, 2094.

⁶⁰ Tocqueville, cited in Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 179. See Summa Theologica, II-II, 36, a. 1, reply to objections 2 and 3. Hatred can arise from envy, because hatred arises from sorrows, and envy is sorrow and pain at the good our neighbor enjoys. Envy therefore is closely connected with fear of lack for oneself, or fear arising from comparison with another, but the possibility of negative comparison is only possible among those who are similar enough to merit a comparison. A certain equality is a necessary condition for envy. In that way, the democratic equality of conditions – the experience of living alongside *mes semblables* – and the restiveness of Americans and democratic men may breed envy. Equality of conditions, one might say, is the condition of finding yourself comparable or alike others. They share a kind of likeness; democracy’s passion for equality is a passion for equality with one’s likes. Jaume notes that Tocqueville realized this and its connection to theology. See Jaume 179.

As we will see, in the first *Memoir on Pauperism*, Tocqueville advances a historical argument that Protestant nations built the welfare state as a replacement upon the ruins of the Catholic infrastructure for poor relief.⁶¹ In other words, welfare states emerged in Protestant nations to address the new problem of the lack of an institutional framework for charity. In the Reformation then, charity –a gift, a grace, a “sacramental act” a form of redistribution undertaken horizontally among men in light of the love of God -- became a right, a political claim on the community as a matter of justice. In the words of Gary A. Anderson,

[Today] one often misses the crucial variable that drove much of Christian history for its first fifteen hundred years: the promise that scripture provides that one could meet God in the face of the poor. Charity was, to put it briefly, a sacramental act. That is, an act that established a contact point between the believer and God. To think of poverty as a social problem that could be solved was not really imaginable in the mindset of premodern man.
...

The charitable deed lost, in the sixteenth century, its central role making God present to the believer and became a simply a sign of the underlying personal faith of the believer. Bereft of this sacramental sensibility the donor no longer had any reason to meet the beggar *in person* [italics added]. The needs of the indigent could be more ably assisted by civic organizations.⁶²

The roots of civil society lay in one sense in this movement away from sacramentality towards more purely “civic” associations, though the rich network of associational life Tocqueville

⁶¹ For an excellent overview of this, see Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650*.

⁶² Anderson, *Charity*, 6, 7-8. To act charitably, i.e. to encounter the poor face to face and to help them, for the Christian is “not just a Kantian ‘duty’ but a declaration about the metaphysical structure of the world itself. Charity, in short, is not just a good deed *but a declaration of belief about the world and the God who created it*” (4). Anderson makes the argument, related to the interests of this project, that early and medieval Christians had no issue with self-interest being part of charitable giving. The idea of giving to the poor to “lay up treasure in heaven” (Matthew 6:19-21) and the vision of the early Church in Matthew 25, Anderson argues, reveal that one of the innovations of Christianity was to tie the interests of this world to the interests of the other. This is a feature, not a bug, and not an embarrassment, as later theorists downstream of Protestant and Kantian ethics would claim, because one acts in imitation of Christ and “meets Christ through this concrete action of showing mercy” (6).

observed and theorized in America, with its local liberties, rights, and privileges, had much in common therefore with pre-Reformation Catholic Europe.⁶³

In Tocqueville's day, the term *charité légale* designated public welfare, distinct from *charité directe or charité privée*. Given this now extended discussion of justice, charity, and welfare states, we must ask: Can we speak of a Tocquevillian view of charity? Have we yet encountered charity as a Tocquevillian concept? Wolin suggests that "philanthropy is more intimately connected with Tocqueville's way of theorizing than an association of it with charity would suggest."⁶⁴ Richard Avramenko and Brianne Wolf have noted that scholars who pay attention to Tocqueville's catalogue of virtues often speak of honor, courage, or devotion, but not charity. Avramenko and Wolf, in their treatment of Tocqueville on philanthropy, distinguish between charity which "pertains to all people" and "charity as it pertains to the elite" and use "philanthropy" to designate the latter.⁶⁵ Some historians have analyzed Tocqueville's opposition to the institution of legal charity which was in many respects mainstream, if only because there was often French consensus about what *not to do*: "What is remarkable about the French view of the Poor Law is that liberal economists, social Catholics and republicans of all shades used the same evidence, drew the same analogy, and reached the same conclusion about the inherent

⁶³ Tocqueville suggests this when he says in the *Ancien Régime*, "Transportée d'un seul coup loin de la féodalité et maitresse absolue d'elle-même, la paroisse rurale du moyen âge est devenue le *township* de la Nouvelle-Angleterre » (ARR, 142). For one study of this, see Maureen Flynn, *Sacred Charity: Confraternities and Social Welfare in Spain, 1400-1700*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

⁶⁴ Wolin, 421-3.

⁶⁵ Richard Avramenko and Brianne Wolf, "Disciplining the Rich: Tocqueville on Philanthropy and Privilege," *The Review of Politics* 83 (2021) 3: 351-374. I take issue with their argument insofar as it views philanthropy as a subspecies of charity; they rightly document that philanthropy as a term is Greek and philosophic in origin. This makes it very different from "charity" which is Christian and theological in origin. Both terms are helpful and descriptive though to discuss philanthropy in a modern democratic, Christian or secularized post-Christian age is to need to be attentive to the ways in which "philanthropy" has been changed by "charity."

dangers of the Poor Law; yet they approached the question from such different perspectives.”⁶⁶

In an early nineteenth-century milieu in which the “humanitarianism” and social relief programs of the 1790s had stalled and proceeded only slowly, Seymour Drescher describes Tocqueville’s

own contributions as inconsistent and “incomplete.”⁶⁷ (That said, so too was the July

Monarchy’s attention to these issues – precipitating, in Tocqueville’s view, the events of 1848.⁶⁸)

Welch has emphasized the centrality of concepts of charity in Tocqueville and Beaumont’s

abolitionism and what Tocqueville learned from the economic and social thought of Jean-

Baptiste Say, Sismondi, Guizot and Catholics like Alban de Villeneuve-Bargemont.⁶⁹ In a

⁶⁶ Timothy B. Smith, “The Ideology of Charity, the Image of the English Poor Laws, and Debates over the Right to Assistance in France, 1830-1905,” *The Historical Journal*, 40, 4 (Dec 1997): 997-1032. See also Frances Gouda, *Poverty and political culture: The rhetoric of social welfare in the Netherlands and France, 1815-1854*, (Lanham, Maryland, 1995), pp. 145-165. See also Philip Morey, “Through French eyes: Victorian cities in the eighteen-forties viewed by Léon Faucher,” *Historical Research*, 88 (2015): 291-313.

⁶⁷ Drescher, *Dilemmas of Democracy*, 100-101. “The humanitarian movement also dealt almost exclusively with problems in which there was a broad consensus on what constituted the problem... The personnel of humanitarianism in France were also selected to maximize elite control. In this the notable moral societies were merely the counterparts of the narrowly restrictive political institutions of the French constitutional monarchy.” Also Drescher, *Dilemmas of Democracy*, 19-22. Drescher, rather than aiming to try to reconcile seeming contradictions within Tocqueville’s thought, aims to put them on display, to “emphasize the full force of their contradictory and unresolved status in his thought,” though unlike Zetterbaum, he does not think this makes Tocqueville a “bumbling propagandist.” Drescher’s collection and edition of Tocqueville and Beaumont’s writings on social reform is an excellent starting point for the scholar interested in these questions. Seymour Drescher, *Tocqueville and Beaumont on social reform*, (New York, Harper & Row, 1968.)

⁶⁸ He refers to the two Memoirs on Pauperism. Drescher, *Dilemmas of Democracy*, 108. “Precisely at the point where the essay was to deal with prevention and remedies, Tocqueville’s publishing impulse died” (108). “Between [Tocqueville and Beaumont], penitentiary reform and the abolition of slavery virtually exhausted the positive social legislative efforts of Tocqueville and Beaumont during the July Monarchy. They also nearly exhausted the social reforms seriously considered by that regime. Legislative action was meager and sporadic. It was not until the rising tide of lower-class agitation and economic depression in 1846 and 1847 that the government and the Chambers bestirred themselves to launch a systematic inquiry into working class conditions as a whole” (196). On prison reform, understood as an “attack the problem of poverty, to do something concrete for the poor,” Drescher, *Dilemmas of Democracy*, 124-150. Over time, due to France’s particular challenges, Beaumont and Tocqueville came to embrace not only solitary confinement (Philadelphia system) but came to accept the centralization of prisons in France as something that could not be changed and therefore could at least be improved upon.

⁶⁹ Cheryl Welch, “La charité chrétienne and liberal citizenship: Anti-slavery rhetoric in France from 1815 to 1848,” unpublished paper for the Society for French Historical Studies, Paris, June 17-20, 2004. Cheryl Welch, “Tocqueville on Democracy After Abolition: Slaves, Souls, Subjects, Citizens,” *Tocqueville Review*, 27, 2 (2006): 227-256. Cheryl Welch, “Tocqueville on Fraternity and Fratricide,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, 303-336. Welch uses the term “fraternity” as a heuristic for the ties Tocqueville considered important to the liberty of democratic peoples, though Tocqueville himself avoided the term because of its revolutionary connotations.

similar spirit, Michael Drolet's studies of Tocqueville's political economy underscore that, though Tocqueville was a self-described amateur in such matters, his reading, comprehension, and application of the major themes of political economy of his day go far deeper than is often superficially discerned from *Democracy in America* itself. He was "resolutely committed to the cause of humanitarianism" and his study of social issues became "integral to his new science of politics" because it applied theoretical ideals to trying to achieve the best possible regime in practice. Contra Drescher and Henderson, Drolet reads Tocqueville's approach to pauperism not as an admission of potential defeat vis-à-vis soft despotism but as evidence of "his faith in voluntary local initiatives" and awareness of the challenges such initiatives might face.⁷⁰ Taking the imperfections of the world (and imperfectability of the world) as a given, "The schemes which attracted his attention, mutual aid societies, savings banks, agricultural colonies, forms of joint-ownership, were among the most progressive of his day" but he also considered them more consistent with both the frailty and strengths of human nature than the schemes of philanthropists and idealists whose pursuit of an "ideal of perfection" through public charity "would unwittingly serve both to corrupt individual morals rather than elevate them and open the way to the expansion of the state's empire over civic life."⁷¹ Eric Keslassy similarly underscores the influence of Catholic and Christian thinkers on his approach to pauperism, arguing that this shows Tocqueville's liberalism was not straightforwardly liberal or libertarian. "Bien qu'il dénonce les funestes conséquences morales de la charité légale, ce qui ne manque pas d'être repris lorsque ce petit opuscule est évoqué, il montre également que Tocqueville ne croit pas

⁷⁰ Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy and Social Reform*. See, as well Drolet, "Democracy and political economy: Tocqueville's thoughts on J.-B. Say and T.R. Malthus."

⁷¹ Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy and Social Reform*, 236-7.

qu'un marché libre de toutes contraintes puisse résoudre la question sociale. »⁷² This reading is one Daniel Mahoney has also endorsed.⁷³

In this light, it is not shocking that Tocqueville joined the Catholic Armand de Melun's *Annales de la Charité* and in the late 1840s and 1850s, frequented Catholic circles concerned with strengthening public and private forms of assistance to the poor.⁷⁴ One French scholar comments, against the grain of much Anglophone scholarship, that this involvement "témoigne de l'inspiration chrétienne du théoricien de la démocratie... Tocqueville le 'libéral' campe une position réformatrice à la fois morale et conservatrice... » Where it concerns social reform, a crucial, even « premier réseau d'influence d'A. de Tocqueville demeure » in his later years « celui du catholicisme social.»⁷⁵

Therefore we can speak of a Tocquevillian view of charity as it concretely relates to social policy. We have also already encountered something in Tocqueville akin to charity. For,

⁷² Éric Keslassy, *Le libéralisme de Tocqueville à l'épreuve du paupérisme*, (Paris : Harmattan, 2000), 24.

⁷³ Daniel Mahoney, "Christianity, Democracy, Socialism: Tocqueville's defense of a limited public charity in politics," *The Catholic Social Science Review*, 19 (2004): 39-46.

⁷⁴ Drescher, *Dilemmas of Democracy*, 119.

⁷⁵ Anne Lhuissier, "Alexis de Tocqueville et l'économie sociale chrétienne : sociétés alimentaires et classes ouvrières," *Genèses*, 37 (1999) : 135-155. The movement for social Catholicism in nineteenth century France is another criminally understudied subject. The one study of it (which Drescher also cites) is Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Les débuts du Catholicisme social en France, 1822-1870*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1951). Duroselle cites Armand de Melun's memoir and his description of the salon of Mme Swetchine: "C'est dans ce salon que discutaient entre le Père Lacordaire, Montalembert et leurs disciples, les plans de batailles des catholiques pour la liberté, que M. de Falloux, avec les députés de la Droite, préparait la loi sur l'enseignement... Dom Guéranger » - the re-founder of the Benedictine Order in France – « avec l'esprit et la physionomie d'un moine du Moyen Age, venait y chercher la première pierre de la résurrection de Solesmes et expliquer ses premiers travaux et ses espérances en faveur de l'unité de la liturgie et de la prière. C'est là qu'en petit comité j'ai entendu l'abbé de Genoude lire ses premiers sermons en prophétisant le prochain retour des Bourbons et les heureux résultats du suffrage universel, et que plus tard Tocqueville redevenait chrétien à la parole de cette femme en qui il trouvait, disait-il, la sainteté unie au génie » It was Mme Swetchine whose guiding hand introduced Melun to Sister Rosalie, a member of the Order of Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent De Paul, who gave Melun a copy of the *Life of St. Vincent de Paul*. The Order of nuns was founded as a non-cloistered order dedicated to helping the poor and was and is still housed at 14 rue du Bac in Paris.

intérêt bien entendu can lead to “the love of God that makes men virtuous” and is compatible with the “magnificent expression” of virtue that is Christianity, that is loving neighbor like God loves. To put it another way: One way we might understand the highest form of *intérêt bien entendu* as an expression of Christian charity. *Intérêt bien entendu* can, as we observed in the previous chapter, disappear under the wrong conditions, and with it, so too can virtues with which it is intimately connected. These include political virtues necessary for a free democratic social state. They also include the other-directedness upon which human flourishing depends in any social state and *especially* in the democratic social state, where an institution like the family is no longer supported by the legal conventions of aristocracy but relies on affection alone for longevity.⁷⁶ As we observed, the despot can withstand its subjects hatred of him provided they do not love each other; in fact, the Sovereign’s regulation of charitable establishments such as schools, hospitals, and seminaries is essential to soft despotism. Consequently, charity – qua love and qua institution *in civil society* -- risks disappearing under soft despotism just like *intérêt bien entendu*. Under the administration of the modern state and the workings of the market, charity then could become entirely unneeded.⁷⁷ Is it undesirable that it might be possible to overcome poverty and eradicate charity?⁷⁸ Not necessarily, especially not to democratic minds convinced

⁷⁶ Mitchell shrewdly observes that Tocqueville is concerned more with association than with friendship -- a distinctive fact about his political theory given his echoes back to the ancients. Mitchell, “It is not Good for Man to be Alone.”

⁷⁷ In the words of Pierre Nicole: “One gives in order to get. This is the source and foundation of all human commerce, which takes a thousand diverse forms. Because man does not simply trade merchandise for other merchandise or cash; he also trades works, services, attention, and civilities. Thus through commerce all of life’s needs are somehow met without the involvement of charity.” Pierre Nicole, *De la charité et de l’amour propre*, 382, cited in Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 178.

⁷⁸ As one scholar once quipped to me (and here I paraphrase): why would I want charity if I could have a perfectly just distribution, either from the market or the state, and could have a guarantee (a right) to assistance rather than have to hope for a gift? Gary Anderson’s answer to this from the Christian tradition is that charity provides an encounter between the giver and the recipient on the horizontal level, and on the vertical level, it allows the giver to both imitate God and to encounter God in the person he is helping. It is a sacramental act. Without the quality of sacramentality, and without the fallen, frail view of human nature Christianity provides, one can reasonably ask the

of human perfectibility and often discomforted by human vulnerability and inequality. To aim at a comprehensive equality of conditions (in this case, through the redistribution of the State) is to create a world where all are equal and autonomous except in their dependence on the State for the maintenance of their equality. But just as envy and resentment can emerge only among those who are comparable enough to merit a comparison, charity occurs under some condition of inequality and need, where one person and another meet via the gift. Soft despotism, Tocqueville fears, represents a political and social order of atomized equal individuals released of moral obligations to their neighbors by the Sovereign who cares for them on their behalf. It is a vision that, by generating real equality, aims to interrogate whether the “The poor will always be with you” (Mk 14:7, Mt 26:11). Charity, to the degree it continues to exist, becomes legal, public, a right, part of democratic justice, no longer a gift. Tocqueville is both a thinker and a statesman; he is concerned not only with the best regime but with the ways to bring about the best possible regime under the constraints of human nature and of the social state. For Tocqueville, the problems and challenges for the democratic social state raised by pauperism and the social question are central to creating a best possible just, free democratic social state that not only responds to the needs of the poor (thereby encouraging their material well-being) but that also leaves space for the “face to face encounter” of persons and the “reciprocal action of men on one another” crucial to well-being rightly understood.⁷⁹ For without those encounters, men may be equal but they are less than men.

The remainder of this chapter details the theoretical and practical challenges that emerge from Tocqueville’s work in social policy by examining a select handful of writings and

question whether it would not be a better, more just world if one were to produce a world in which charity became unnecessary. Anderson, *Charity*.

⁷⁹ Mitchell, “It is not Good for Man to Be Alone.”

illustrative cases. Under the constraints of this chapter, I leave aside the rich domain of Tocqueville's abolitionism on which Welch and Drescher, among others, have written. Instead I focus on pauperism, well-being, and charity.⁸⁰ The next section treats Tocqueville's view of "the poor," the industrial aristocracy, and nature of poverty in Tocqueville's thought. Building on my articulation of the case for "well-being," I argue that for Tocqueville, the concept of poverty offers a mirror image of the well-being central to democracy and at which democratic legislators aim. It then continues to the authors – principally Say, Villeneuve-Bargemont, and Malthus – from whom Tocqueville draws in his account of public versus private charity. The workings of Tocqueville's mind are irreducible to the inputs of interlocutors in his immediate historical context. Tocqueville has, in Mansfield's words, a mind that chooses its interlocutors and makes its own context.⁸¹ What we are specifically interested in is the way in which Tocqueville describes the problem of pauperism and evaluates potential solutions through the contrast between public and private charity. The ideas of a Say, Villeneuve-Bargemont, and Malthus however help us to grasp more clearly than is evident in Tocqueville's own writings how political economy and specifically the response to pauperism were bound up in implicit and explicit theological and moral arguments about self-interest, original sin and its effects, human perfectibility, charity, and justice.

It finally examines in detail Tocqueville's First and Second *Memoirs on Pauperism*, dated 1835 and 1837, with the aid of selected other Tocqueville writings on social reform. Lastly, it

⁸⁰ See for example, Drescher, "Democracy, Civil Society, and Antislavery in Tocquevillian Perspective," Drescher, *Tocqueville and Beaumont on social reform*, and Welch, "La charité chrétienne and liberal citizenship."

⁸¹ Mansfield, "The aristocracy in democracy."

turns to Tocqueville's writings and speeches on the 1848 Revolution, in which the issue of charity and the right to work became a major point of public contention.

It concludes by reflecting on the question posed by Drescher and Henderson, namely soft despotism's inevitability, and on the trade-offs and tensions that politics occasions. In Tocqueville's own words, "Practice is often removed from theory." To enter politics with an ethos of responsibility and service (such as Tocqueville admired in his grandfather Malesherbes) is to have to embrace limits, boundaries, and constraints, to do the best with what is given.⁸² But Tocqueville takes a different tack: it is in the trade-offs and tensions of an imperfect world, of trying to improve that imperfect world, that lay not only injustice and the occasion of hardship but opportunities for solidarity, for the exercise of *intérêt bien entendu* and for love in spaces that are shared, that permit the "face-to-face encounter." Tocqueville does not turn to friendship or to philosophical contemplation when he considers remedies for democracy's excesses. Nor, as just mentioned, does he embrace a progressive philosophy of history that promises immanence or perfectibility. He sees the world he inhabits as broken, in need of justice and betterment, but partial, frail, incapable of perfection though capable of doing its best possible. In other words, his is a world that needs *intérêt bien entendu* as a training in virtue. However just that world may be or become, it also needs charity. It needs free spaces for association, *intérêt bien entendu*, and love. The democratic world Tocqueville envisions coming into being, inclined towards individualism and atomization, needs "face-to-face" encounters that "draw [men] out of their

⁸²An attitude unlike the physiocrats of the Ancien Regime, the Jacobin revolutionaries "who had never taken the least part in public affairs," and the socialists of 1848 who boldly sought to conform political realities to their visions. Tocqueville, "Speech to The Academy of Moral & Political Sciences."

soliloquies and renew their lives in and through their relations with those immediately around them.” In the fellowship of others, “Man *truly* lives.”⁸³

Tocqueville and the idea of “the poor”

In America, Tocqueville noted the poor – *les pauvres* -- do not exist. In the most literal sense, this was clearly not true. While he paid scant attention to the presence of poor Whites in the South for example, his and Beaumont’s study of the penitentiary system and their encounters of pioneer hardship reveal they were not blind to the existence of American poverty.⁸⁴

Beaumont’s *Marie* offered a striking portrait of how rights and equality of opportunity were often obstructed by the confluence of race and class. As many (following Pierson) have noted, Tocqueville and Beaumont did not visit Lowell, MA (a destination for many an industrially-minded visitor to America such as Michel Chevalier), where they might have observed the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution and factory labor in America.⁸⁵ Tocqueville was not himself an economist; he prioritized, in Raymond Aron’s words, the democratic reality, not the industrial reality of Comte or the capitalist reality of Marx.⁸⁶ Leo Damrosch even says he “largely neglected” the “phenomenon” of social class in America.⁸⁷ Many others, as Richard

⁸³ Mitchell, “It Is not Good for Man to Be Alone,” 279-280.

⁸⁴ On Tocqueville’s failure to discuss poor Southern Whites, Sparrow, “The Other Point of Departure: Tocqueville, the South, Equality, and the Lessons of Democracy.” See also Gustave de Beaumont, Alexis de Tocqueville, *On the Penitentiary System in the United States and its Application to France*, trans. Emily Katherine Ferkaluk, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁸⁵ Pierson says of this seeming failure to notice the industrialization of America that “The reader will forgive the foregoing digression by the editor when it is emphasized that this failure on the part of Tocqueville and Beaumont to interest themselves in the material progress of the American people constituted perhaps their chief weakness as observers and later caused an obvious disproportion in Tocqueville’s book.” Pierson, 174-175. On Michel Chevalier’s American journey, see Jeremy Jennings, “Democracy before Tocqueville: Michel Chevalier’s America,” *The Review of Politics* 68, 3 (2006): 398-427.

⁸⁶ Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, (New York: Routledge Classics, 2019), 63, 194, 204-205.

⁸⁷ Damrosch, 205.

Swedberg notes, view Tocqueville's disdain for money and criticisms of the bourgeois, mercantilist mind as an aristocratic inheritance, his political theory essentially constituted by *ancienneté* and a desire to retrieve this "pronounced strain of anti-modernism."⁸⁸ Tocqueville was proud of his aristocratic lineage, maintaining an *esprit de corps* of *noblesse oblige* and even a romanticism about the past.⁸⁹ He wrote his future wife in 1833 that "Truly I do not ask of the world either money or power, but only esteem. I want the world to believe that I am really led by motivations which are and will always be the rule of my conduct. I believe that these motivations are high and noble."⁹⁰ His pride in inheriting the chateau at Tocqueville and in working the family estate, his failure to attend to ensuring profits off of *Democracy in America* and the *Ancien Regime*, and his threadbare discussions of money with friends, suggest a man keen to set aside financial matters out of choice, personal disposition, and aristocratic instinct.

Taking this line too far, however, is problematic, for it assumes Tocqueville (and all philosophers) is the product of class, rather than recognizing that Tocqueville understood himself as an aristocrat by instinct but a democrat by reason and therefore as capable of seeing and thinking beyond his instinctual preferences.⁹¹ Furthermore, that he retained an aristocratic cast of mind in a world hostile to it did not prevent an ability or a deep interest in those less fortunate.

⁸⁸ Swedberg, 75-79. On this point, see, among other examples, Boesche, *Strange Liberalism*. 85-86; Fernand Braudel, "Alexis de Tocqueville's Recollections," *Society* 26 (March-April 1989): 68; Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism*, 41-46, and "Aristocracy in Tocqueville," *Tocqueville Review* 27, 2 (2006): 323-48; Smith, *Modernity and its discontents*, 197-222, on Tocqueville, and 223-242, which presents Flaubert as an anti-bourgeois with similarities to Tocqueville. See Wolin, 7, on "antimodernism as *ancienneté*. It colors virtually all of Tocqueville's thinking..." See also Wolin, 450-455, 466-467.

⁸⁹ *Selected Letters*, 85-88. His writings to his future wife Mary Mottley as he toured England attest to a mind haunted by images of Queen Elizabeth and Dudley, of knights and ladies, his soul "swept away into the past with an inexpressible force." Boesche notes that this letter offers a strong contrast to Tocqueville's usual claims that he was not a romantic.

⁹⁰ Cited in Swedberg, 75-76.

⁹¹ Swedberg nicely addresses this. Swedberg, 75.

One might argue the opposite, that it in fact helped him to see realities about the democratic social state and the new industrial economy to which others, including the new industrial aristocracy, would have been blind. Furthermore, notwithstanding his aristocratic lineage, Tocqueville was by no accounts rich as an aristocrat and seemed to not desire to be. “No riches but well-being and safety,” he once described his approach to a friend, in a rare reference to finances in his correspondence.⁹² This shares something with his thinking about what would be desirable for all citizens in democratic ages.

All of this is ground clearing to a more essential point, namely Tocqueville’s attentiveness to the psychological, moral, and psychosocial dimensions of social phenomena such as poverty. The phenomena of industrialization and pauperism were not merely material developments; they were spiritual, psychological, moral, and he understood them as such. A close reader of Rousseau and Smith (whose pin factory he cites), and attentive like them and like Plato, Fenelon, and Montesquieu beside to the ways in which commerce and greed might order or disorder moral and political life, Tocqueville recognized in the development of pauperism the expansion of desires and standards of living, not only the expansion of poverty. Industrialization and modern commerce interested him not as independent disciplines but rather as part of the whole of the study of political and social life. “Notwithstanding Tocqueville’s deep appreciation of the American commercial spirit, in this regard his sympathies were with Aristotle, for whom economics could not be the master science. He did not,” Mitchell emphasizes, “return from

⁹² See on this Swedberg, 76-79. Swedberg suggests the best way to think of Tocqueville is as an aristocrat who enjoyed comfort but not luxury, treating money in a manner more consistent with classical notions of sufficiency than with modern ideals of superfluity. “Safety and a little bit more—not doubling or trebling his investments—was Tocqueville’s ambition. In his private life then, Tocqueville, in brief, seems to have shared the ideas of his class with regard to money. He disliked having profit-making as a goal, and his general attitude was more along the lines of the precapitalist oikos or household management. According to this view, you should handle your estate wisely and, in this way, slowly increase your wealth. The goal for the owner of an estate, Xenophon says in *Oeconomicus*, is to live a comfortable and honorable life” (78).

America and write an update to that portion of the *Wealth of Nations*.”⁹³ Tocqueville, however, considered political economy a science subservient the broader understanding of politics and society, such that he sided with Smith, for whom political economy was part of the work of a statesman and Malthus, for whom viewed economics was “part of a Christian version of a wider science of morals and politics.”⁹⁴ Perhaps it is not coincidental that in the 1830s, when Tocqueville began to distance himself from the Saysian and liberal political economy he absorbed in the late 1820s – which held that economics and political economy were “divorced” from politics and morality -- Tocqueville shifted further towards religion and spiritualism, including as they related to political economy, well-being, and poverty.⁹⁵

That the boundaries and definitions of the discipline of economics was in flux in Tocqueville’s day means that concepts like “political” or “social economy”, “industry”, “poverty”, and “pauperism” were laden with far broader moral, spiritual, and religious

⁹³ On this, see Mitchell, *Fragility*, 102-161, particularly 156-161, on “the sufficiency of politics and economics.” Mitchell: “While politics may rank higher than economics (following Aristotle), religion ranks higher than both. In this regard, Tocqueville and Aristotle part company and the peculiar affinity between Tocqueville and Plato comes into view. Put another way, politics – construed as a *wholly immanent affair* – is not, for Tocqueville the master science. ... Convenient disciplinary boundaries offer an all-too-convenient answer to the question of whether the spiritual dimension is appropriately treated by political or economic science at all... Science, however, is knowledge adequate to its object; and Tocqueville, adhering to this understanding, insists on considering spiritual matters in his (new) political science.” Mitchell, *Fragility*, 156-158.

Adam Smith should be given his due, for Smith understood political economy as part of the work of a “statesman or legislator,” the *Wealth of Nations* being a subordinate piece to the broader Smithian project begun in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. It is impossible here to provide a comprehensive review of relevant treatments of Smith. For a few treatments of Adam Smith, see the essays in *Adam Smith: His Life, Thought, and Legacy*, ed. Ryan Patrick Hanley, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), and Ryan Patrick Hanley, *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). See also cited works by Emma Rothschild in footnote 198.

⁹⁴ Tocqueville to Lord Radnor, 5 November 1843, cited in Drolet, “Democracy and political economy,” 170.

⁹⁵ For a discussion of this, see Drolet, “Democracy and political economy,” 169-171. For a treatment of Jean-Baptiste Say: Richard Whatmore *Republicanism and the French Revolution: An Intellectual History of Jean-Baptiste Say's Political Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Whatmore reminds us that it is difficult to characterize Say’s thought, including as Smithian, though it is often described as such (Whatmore, 5-6).

meanings.⁹⁶ This is well-reflected in Tocqueville's more expansive and even figurative understanding of poverty and "les pauvres." When Nassau Senior read Tocqueville's claim in *Democracy* that America was more egalitarian than England, he responded with opprobrium. When Tocqueville first traveled to England in 1833, as much as he may have been "seduced" (in Jeremy Jennings's words) by their aristocratic traditions, the country had little in common with America: "nowhere do I recognize our America."⁹⁷ England was not only the nation with the highest standard of living, but with the greatest number of poor and the oldest system of legal charity. The British countryside, he wrote his mother, "stunned" him with an "excessive wealth that one notices... a universal luxury which, people say, often hides poverty but which at least hides it wonderfully well from the eyes of the foreigner."⁹⁸ In *Democracy*, Tocqueville had argued that in England, "the welfare of the poor has often been sacrificed to that of the rich, and the rights of the greater number to the privileges of the few." Against that charge, Senior cited English workers' better pay and argued that farmers and millworkers had no need to be proprietors of their farms or mills. Tocqueville's response to him is revealing:

It seems to me that you give to the words 'le bien du pauvre' a restricted sense that is not at all mine. You translate it by the word 'wealth' which applies specifically to riches. I myself meant by it everything that contributes to well-being in life: personal consideration, political rights, ease in obtaining justice, enjoyments of the mind, and a thousand other things that contribute indirectly to happiness. I believe, until it is proven to the contrary,

⁹⁶ Swedberg makes the point that Tocqueville's interest is more in "economic phenomena" than in what the modern discipline of economics considers itself to concern, though this has changed of late. Swedberg, 1-2.

⁹⁷ Tocqueville to Beaumont, cited in Jennings, *Travels with Tocqueville*, 134.

⁹⁸ Cited in *Travels with Tocqueville*, 131. He wrote a German, Leon von Thun-Hohenstein, after his 1833 trip something similar that "Perhaps like me, you will finish up by concluding that England should not be judged by its appearance and that much squalor and poverty lies beneath a brilliant exterior." Cited in Jennings, *Travels with Tocqueville*, 138.

that in England the rich have gradually drawn to themselves almost all the advantages that society bestows on mankind.⁹⁹

Tocqueville's answer makes clear that not only is *well-being* a central concept; it is a concept that (along with poverty) Tocqueville had to clarify for his friend was *not* for him exclusively about material prosperity, wealth, or redistribution of property.¹⁰⁰ Tocqueville had theorized the equality of conditions as a distinctive democratic experience born of roughly equal material equality, equal political rights, and a fundamental (if loose) conception of social fellow-feeling. That is to say, the equality of conditions is as psychological and spiritual as it is the product of actual social and material conditions. Just so, well-being and poverty each reflect material conditions as well as spiritual conditions. To speak of the "welfare" or well-being of the poor is not always to speak in a narrow economic sense but in a broader sense of human flourishing.

For Tocqueville then to say that America had no "poor" is not in fact a literal statement but must be taken in a way that reflects culture, rights, economic opportunity, and the "thousand other things that contribute indirectly to happiness." In America, even where one might perceive distinctions of wealth, Tocqueville notes that America conforms to the middle class. Even the Puritans formed a "thoroughly homogeneous" middle class society.¹⁰¹ The especially democratic passion for well-being is itself a thoroughly middle-class passion.

When, on the contrary, ranks are mingled and privileges destroyed, when patrimonies divide and enlightenment and liberty spread, the desire to gain well-being occurs to the imagination of the poor, and the fear of losing it to the mind of the rich. A multitude of mediocre fortunes is established. ...

⁹⁹ Cited in Damrosch, 206. This passage would make for a productive comparison of Tocqueville's thought on the conditions of well-being with Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach or Amartya Sen on development as freedom. Also in *Selected Letters*, 96-98.

¹⁰⁰ This again would be a difference from Say and even Guizot, for whom economic prosperity, property, and wealth would guarantee liberty. Drolet, "Democracy and political economy," 172.

¹⁰¹ DA, 59.

I seek a passion that is natural to men who are excited and limited by the obscurity of their origin or the mediocrity of their fortune, and I find none more appropriate than the taste for well-being. The passion for well-being is essentially a passion of the middle class; it grows and spreads with this class; it becomes preponderant with it. From there it gains the upper ranks of society and descends to the people.

I did not meet, in America, a citizen so poor who did not cast a look of hope and envy on the enjoyments of the rich, and whose imagination did not grasp in advance the good things that fate stubbornly refused him.

On the other hand, I never saw among the rich of the United States this superb disdain for material well-being that is sometimes shown even within the heart of the most opulent and most dissolute aristocracies.

It is not that in the United States, as elsewhere, you do not find a fairly large number of rich men who, holding their property by inheritance, possess without effort an opulence that they have not gained. But even these do not appear less attached to the enjoyments of material life. The love of well-being has become the national and dominant taste.¹⁰²

In America, the poor citizen considers the rich his equal and can imagine – not unreasonably – a day when he might strike it rich by hard work or luck, or where the rich might fall upon hard times. The “constant vicissitudes” of industrial crises means “all the changes are the same;” the American man responds to this with “that’s life.”¹⁰³ Lastly, and significantly, manners are fluid and uniform enough that the rich man possesses the manners of the middle-class merchant. The average citizen could pass for a rich man, and through associations and political participation, the rich and the middle-class share in .¹⁰⁴ Americans, to the degree they chase material well-being at the expense of spiritual well-being and “a thousand other things” that aid in happiness, misunderstand their well-being and become figuratively if not literally impoverished. “You do

¹⁰² DA, 933-934.

¹⁰³ DA, 1089-1092. The tune “That’s Life” made famous by Frank Sinatra conveys this restless, buoyant democratic disposition quite nicely.

¹⁰⁴ Tocqueville would be unsurprised by the fashion choices of a Bill Gates, whose personal wealth notwithstanding, chooses to dress in a distinctly non-descript, inexpensive looking manner. See on this also Tocqueville’s observations about Americans abroad. DA, 1000-1005, 1085-1089.

not gradually enlarge your soul like your house.”¹⁰⁵ But the middle-class-ness of American culture made it particularly open and repellant of distinctions that persisted elsewhere, where rich and poor live as “always suspicious and rival powers.”¹⁰⁶ “Such a state is not democratic but revolutionary.”¹⁰⁷

When Tocqueville discusses the emerging industrial aristocracy in *Democracy*, it is consistent with his observations that in America, competition for well-being will push democratic people towards industrial careers and away from agriculture, which is fundamental for well-being but slow and tedious.¹⁰⁸ But these passages in *Democracy* take on a distinctly European flavor, inspired by his observations of the Industrial Revolution in Manchester, England, and Ireland especially, though France is not far from mind.¹⁰⁹ He describes, in the words of Alban de Villeneuve Bargemont, a “new feudalism” coming into being in which industry creates new distinctions among classes.¹¹⁰ Smith’s prediction is in a sense confirmed: the free market system may prove the ruin of some aristocrats while elevating new ones through

¹⁰⁵ DA, 1121. Tocqueville makes this remark in the context of his description of the man who works hard to advance, and of that man’s sons and subsequent generations. It bears interesting similarity to Adam Smith’s discussion of the poor man’s son in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

¹⁰⁶ DA, 1019.

¹⁰⁷ Tocqueville’s reasoning why this – at least in England – had not (at least not yet, in his day) led to revolution? The old aristocracy there not only retained and exercised real political authority to match its moral dominion. As Jennings notes, and as Tocqueville later incorporated into the *Ancien Regime*, the distinction between the *gentleman* of good manners and education and the *gentilhomme* of good breeding was compatible in England with an openness to their aristocratic corps such that the English aristocracy ceased to be a firm caste. The gentleman could be admitted and over time, garner real political responsibility. Jennings, *Travels with Tocqueville*, 137. See ARR, 174-176, and *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, 80-82.

¹⁰⁸ See DA, 1005-1031, on democracy’s modification of the relationship of servant and master, on changes in salaries, and on changes in lease duration.

¹⁰⁹ See Swedberg, 126-136.

¹¹⁰ Beaumont, in *Marie* (1835) said, “In truth there exists in America something that resembles the feudal aristocracy. The factory is the manor, the manufacturer, the sovereign lord, the workers are the serfs.” DA, 81, note s, 980, editor’s note.

their cleverness and mastery of market demand.¹¹¹ This however produces a class with a set of mores distinct and in some ways radically different from the mores of ancient aristocracy.

These poor have few means to emerge from their condition and to become rich, but the rich constantly become poor, or leave trade after having realized their profits. Thus, the elements that form the class of the poor are more or less fixed; but the elements that compose the class of the rich are not. Truly speaking, although there are rich men, the class of the rich does not exist; for these rich men have neither spirit nor aims in common, nor shared traditions or shared hopes. So there are members, but not a corps.

Not only are the rich not united solidly with each other, but you can say that there is no true bond between the poor and the rich.

They are not fixed in perpetuity next to each other; at every moment interest draws them closer and separates them. The worker depends in general on the master, but not on a particular master. These two men see each other at the factory and do not know each other elsewhere, and while they touch at one point, they remain very far apart at all others. The manufacturer asks the worker only for his work, and the worker expects from him only a salary. The one does not commit himself to protecting, nor the other to defending, and they are not linked in a permanent way, either by habit or by duty.

The aristocracy established by trade hardly ever settles amid the industrial population that it directs; its goal is not to govern the latter, but to make use of it.¹¹²

The Americans, though they throw themselves into industry, are mostly occupied in “small enterprises.” Though there are some “great” industrial enterprises, as a nation they are still predominantly culturally middle class and “the poorest as well as the wealthiest citizen readily combine their efforts.”¹¹³ “All the men of democracies, whether they are poor or rich... are all led towards commerce, not only because of the gain that it promises but by love of the emotions it gives.”¹¹⁴ By contrast, under the new industrial aristocracy of the Industrial Revolution

¹¹¹ Tocqueville’s invocation of the pin factory indicates he had Smith in mind. Tocqueville’s engagement with Smith here seems to demonstrate approval and appreciation, and friendly critique. In Hanley’s words, “Smith’s moderate perspective on political economy, one that emphasized the costs as well as the gains of modern progress, would have naturally attracted Tocqueville...” See Hanley, “Tocqueville and the Philosophy of the Enlightenment,” 62-64.

¹¹² DA, 984.

¹¹³ DA, 976.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

underway in Europe, which applies at an impressive and great scale the division of labor, the worker and the master gradually separate from one another, the worker being degraded in his intellect, the master becoming elevated high above his worker by an expansion of his intellect.¹¹⁵ Under these conditions, industrialists, liberated from aristocratic moral and legal conventions and liberated by the free market to contract workers at will, feels no moral obligation to workers. The worker and the poor are distinct categories; however, both experience a kind of moral degradation because of industrialization. The poor have always existed. But Tocqueville notes (consistent with Rousseau and Smith before him) that the market creates desire where it did not exist. Industrialization creates new forms of poverty. Desires are expanded, standard of living rises, and industrialists, “after impoverishing and brutalizing the men it uses, delivers them in times of crisis to public charity to be fed.”¹¹⁶

The literally impoverished are also figuratively impoverished. Degraded in their human capacities, they are impoverished relative to the artisans who preceded them.¹¹⁷ Making pinheads for twenty years of his life, the worker is “immobile,” no longer integrated into a broader economy but “bound” to an “occupation and often to a place in society that he cannot leave.” This impoverishment is also personal and relational: “Between the worker and the master, contacts are frequent, but there is no true association,” and barring the possibility of workers’ cooperatives and associations, neither will there be association with fellow workers. In

¹¹⁵ DA, 982-983. “Thus, at the same time that industrial science constantly lowers the class of workers, it raises the class of masters. While the worker applies his intelligence more and more to the study of a single detail, the master casts his sight every day over a broader whole, and his mind expands in proportion as that of the worker contracts. Soon nothing will be needed by the worker except physical strength without intelligence; the master needs knowledge, and almost genius to succeed. The one more and more resembles the administrator of a vast empire, and the other a brute.”

¹¹⁶ DA, 984.

¹¹⁷ DA, 982. “Each day he becomes more skillful and less industrious, and you can say that in him the man becomes degraded as the worker improves... The art makes progress, the artisan goes backward.”

the “endemic” illness of democratic industrial crises— an illness that “cannot be cured, because it is not due to an accident but to *the very temperament of these peoples*” [italics added] – public charity becomes that on which the workers and poor must depend. Parallels with the isolation of the penitentiary system and the atomization of soft despotism emerge.¹¹⁸

Therefore we can summarize a few different ways poverty works conceptually for Tocqueville. Human nature being both spiritual and material, poverty, and well-being each are both spiritual and material conditions. Material prosperity is no guarantee – contra Say – of political liberty nor spiritual well-being. The porousness and spillover between domains of life notwithstanding, here is one place where Tocqueville’s thought sounds with the strains of Plato, Augustine, Pascal, Fenelon, Rousseau, and Smith. To be filled up in material prosperity may permit certain freedoms; in Aristotle’s terms, it provides equipment for a happy, virtuous life. But that material prosperity and luxury entail human flourishing is a trick, a deception played upon the human mind. One sees the rich and thinks them happy, immune to the vacillations of fortune, even (so it seems) to the fear of death.¹¹⁹ But viewing luxury as a proxy for happiness is, again, a ruse. Material well-being is fundamentally insufficient for and potentially at cross purposes with genuine human flourishing, *even if* material prosperity can also be a helpful indicator of the presence or absence, possibility, or impossibility, of genuine flourishing. In passing through Ireland, Tocqueville observed that the Irish were lucky if they lived with pigs. Material well-

¹¹⁸ DA, 977-978.

¹¹⁹ DA, 944-945. “The taste for material enjoyments must be considered as the primary source of this secret restlessness that is revealed in the actions of Americans, and of this inconstancy that they daily exemplify. The man who has confined his heart solely to the pursuit of the goods of this world is always in a hurry, for he has only a limited time to find them, to take hold of them and to enjoy them. The memory of the brevity of life goads him constantly. Apart from the goods that he possesses, at every instant he imagines a thousand others that death will prevent him from tasting if he does not hurry. This thought fills him with uneasiness, fears, and regrets, and keeps his soul in a kind of constant trepidation that leads him to change plans and places at every moment.”

being in the absence of what Tocqueville considers fundamental human goods -- political life and associational life, and the goods of the soul – is not human well-being. It is animal.¹²⁰

Poverty was, to Tocqueville, a “providential element of the human condition.”¹²¹ But various forms of poverty were historically contingent. Pauperism is that species of poverty that emerges from the specific confluence of democracy and industrialization, and in England, from incentives set in motion by the Poor Laws and its system of public charity, which long predates industrial society. Pauperism, like poverty and like well-being, is not for Tocqueville the result of a set of material conditions or economic forces, unless material and economic forces comprehend the complexities of human psychology and desire. Pauperism, therefore, is not solvable merely via redistribution or the application of perfectibilist theories of progress to economic reality. Tocqueville was no “perfectibilist.”¹²² Tocqueville’s approach to pauperism aimed at what he considered the best possible in practice, not at the perfect. As we will see, this meant articulating “a vision [that] repudiated both libertarianism and collectivism” which he would title “Christian

¹²⁰ DA, 939-941, 964. “If men ever succeed in being content with material goods, it is to be believed that they would little by little lose the art of producing them, and that they would end by enjoying them without discernment and without progress, like the animals.”

¹²¹ Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Social Reform*, 35.

¹²² Ibid, 49-53. Drolet offers a helpful assessment of Malthus versus the progressives and perfectibilists, like Condorcet and later Say. “For Malthus the insurmountability of real and relative economic scarcity emphasized the importance of self-discipline and individual duty. He believed the perfectibilists ignored this because they believed all individual and social ills were rooted in social institutions and their improper organization. According to Malthus individual and social ills could not be eliminated simply by reorganizing and changing these institutions. The perfectibilists made a ‘great error’ in attributing ‘almost all the vices and misery that prevail in civil society to human institutions. Though Malthus recognized that some institutions contributed to vice and misery, the principal cause of these ills lay in the ‘inevitable laws of nature.’ Well-being could be achieved only if individuals recognized these natural laws and led a moral existence within their limits. According to Malthus the perfectibilists’ over-zealous assessment of the power of scientific progress created conditions in which individuals discounted natural limits and ignored their moral duties, believing instead that advances in science could push back the boundaries to human action or rectify any errors of conduct. This improper understanding of science effectively removed the beneficent power of scarcity. It cultivated an unwarranted optimism which prompted individuals to live imprudently, and ultimately, immorally. In believing that scarcity could be removed, the perfectibilists created the conditions in which an individual was no longer stimulated ‘to remove evil from himself, and from as large a circle as he can influence.’ Perfectibility undermined a powerful and efficient moral force. Malthus saw the laws of nature, far from being a restraint upon society, as the stimulus to individual and social improvement” (50-51).

charity applied to politics,” a vision that might strike a balance between the compelling needs for public charity as a political principle with the freedom, association, fellowship, and spiritual goods of *intérêt bien entendu* and charity in civil society.¹²³

The Memoirs on Pauperism

Few scholars of Tocqueville have devoted substantial thought to the two *Memoirs on Pauperism* until recently. Not translated into English until 1968 by Seymour Drescher, interest in it has risen in the last several decades, with editions appearing by Gertrude Himmelfarb in 1997 (the Drescher translation) and Christine Dunn Henderson in 2021.¹²⁴ The first *Memoir*, written following his 1833 travels to England during the passage of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, was given in the spring of 1835 as a speech in Cherbourg. (*Democracy in America* Volume I was also published that year, making Tocqueville a literary celebrity). The second *Memoir*, begun during Tocqueville’s work on *Democracy in America* Volume II, he left incomplete, though it is often dated 1837.¹²⁵ Some stress its attempting to work through the “paradoxes” of industrial society and the welfare state; sympathizing with the poor but unwilling to support a system of public welfare; looking to fix the social question by expanding political participation; developing a solidaristic theory of associations in civil society that distances himself somewhat from other economic liberals; and in the second *Memoir*, offering what is sometimes described as small potatoes solutions to pauperism.¹²⁶ Other readings portray it as a “sustained attack” by

¹²³ Mahoney, “Christianity, Democracy, Socialism: Tocqueville’s defense of a limited public charity in politics.”

¹²⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Alexis de Tocqueville’s Memoir on Pauperism*, ed. Gertrude Himmelfarb, trans. Seymour Drescher, (London: Civitas, 1997). Alexis de Tocqueville, *Memoirs on Pauperism and Other Writings*, ed., trans., Christine Dunn Henderson, (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021). The Henderson is henceforth “*Memoir*.”

¹²⁵ Christine Dunn Henderson, “Introduction,” in *Memoir*.

¹²⁶ Englert, ““The Idea of Rights”” ; Cyrille Ferraton, “L’idée d’association chez Alexis de Tocqueville,” *Cahiers d’économie Politique*, 1 (2004), 45-65; Gertrude Himmelfarb, “Introduction,” in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Memoir on*

Tocqueville on anti-poverty measures.¹²⁷ Most analyses tend not to take a sustained look at the work “charity” does, with its theological ties and ties to *intérêt bien entendu*, for Tocqueville. Setting *The Memoir* in that frame challenges some of the superficiality, untidiness, and general lack of feeling often attributed to the text. It flushes out instead Tocqueville’s desire to balance the compelling interests of the poor against public charity as an institution that can not only contribute to pauperism but precipitate soft despotism. It also helps us to draw a notable through-line from Tocqueville’s theorization of associations and *intérêt bien entendu* considering Christian moral virtue to the meaningful political, civil, and moral differences of public versus private charity.¹²⁸

Pauperism, trans. Seymour Drescher, (London: Ivan, 1997), 9-31. Jimena Hurtado, “L’inégalité au temps de l’égalité : démocratie, industrialisation et paupérisme chez Alexis de Tocqueville,” *Cahiers d’économie Politique*, 2, 59 (2010) : 89-117 ; Keslassy, *Le libéralisme de Tocqueville à l’épreuve du paupérisme*; Lhuissier, “Alexis de Tocqueville et l’économie sociale chrétienne : sociétés alimentaires et classes ouvrière”; Mahoney, “Christianity, Democracy, Socialism: Tocqueville’s defense of a limited public charity in politics” ; Swedberg, *Tocqueville’s Political Economy*, 126-145 ; Welch, “Tocqueville’s resistance to the social.”

¹²⁷ Wolin, 421.

¹²⁸ On charity versus philanthropy: Avramenko and Wolf recently analyzed Tocquevillian philanthropy as a sub-species of charity (thus downstream of Christian concepts), while at the same time defining it in its Greek lineage from Aeschylus. (See Avramenko and Wolf, “Disciplining the Rich: Tocqueville on Philanthropy and Privilege.”) While Tocqueville no doubt draws from and inherits both the Christian and classical tradition, philanthropy, if we define it as the Greeks did, cannot be a form of charity. Charity is also not Aristotelian liberality or magnanimity. The claims of Christianity change the nature of moral obligations. If we define philanthropy, however, as Tocqueville and Beaumont present it in *On the Penitentiary System* (and as Villeneuve-Bargemont also does in *Economie politique chrétienne*) as a scientific and humanitarian enterprise – that is to say, secularized and elite – the terms, though appearing similar, remain conceptually and importantly distinct. This is essential to understanding the work that each does Tocqueville’s thought. For the purposes of this examination, I define philanthropy as secular, elite, generally scientific, and humanitarian, having much in common with efficiency, bureaucracy, and scientific administration. Charity will have a very different profile. Philanthropy in France was conceived of as a kind of public-private partnership, operating mostly at the level of the notable class, and influenced by “publicist” philosophers. By contrast, American prisons Tocqueville and Beaumont applaud for being the product of local trial and error, local administration, and local charity, both in financial support and in local Christian ministry to prisoners. Charity is local, democratic, and personal, generally religious. This difference between charity and philanthropy is supported by Tocqueville’s observations but Olivier Zunz’s history of *Philanthropy in America* also distinguishes between local, democratic, religious charity and scientific, administrative philanthropy. American philanthropy only properly begins with the postbellum period and the new industrial aristocrats, the robber barons. See Zunz, *Philanthropy in America*.

In the *Memoir* and in his speeches addressing the right to work and the right to assistance, Tocqueville argues for a limited welfare infrastructure, what he calls “Christian charity applied to politics.”¹²⁹ Tocqueville lays out a vision of charity as a private virtue exercised between persons that builds moral ties through the personal exchange of gift and gratitude. Yet this virtue of charity is weak in democratic ages; it cannot be counted on. Consequently -- and given the scale of pauperism and industrialization -- a form of public charity is desirable, particularly where *intérêt bien entendu* and the habit of association is weak. Yet public charity, he argues, is also potentially degrading, not just in its downstream effects and negative externalities, but because of the moral effects of turning a gift into a right.¹³⁰ His answer to the practical political question “What is to be done?” is dissatisfying in a way that befits his theoretical account of pauperism, welfare, and civil society. As his critique of legal charity reveals, part of what is to be done is to encourage the immaterial elements of well-being -- which is easier said than done. Part of what is to be done is to recognize the chasm between the ideal and what can be done, the limits of the thinker and of the legislator in an imperfectible social order, and consequently to encourage human face-to-face encounters in a world not necessarily rendered more relational and personal for becoming more egalitarian.

Tocqueville’s lessons in political economy

Tocqueville was not a political economist. That said, recently scholars have moved to detail the contours of Tocqueville’s thought about political economy which is better described as

¹²⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, “Tocqueville’s Critique of Socialism 1848 – or the Speech on the Right to Work,” Online Library of Liberty, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/tocqueville-s-critique-of-socialism-1848>.

¹³⁰ *Memoir*, 30.

“economically relevant phenomena and economically conditioned phenomena.”¹³¹ Our focus here is not the political economy of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. It is also not Tocqueville’s political economy in and of itself. Rather, we take direction from Tocqueville by examining his understanding of political economy as a subset of his broader thought about politics, society, and morality, and how his political economic views clarify his view of charity. Tocqueville’s thinking on economic phenomena and the relationship between economics, politics and religion also cannot be reduced to the influence of a few early nineteenth-century theorists whose works pale in significance alongside Rousseau’s *First* and *Second Discourses*, Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws*, or Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations*. But Tocqueville did not only read the great works of political philosophy. As an ambitious young law clerk in Versailles in the 1820s, Tocqueville absorbed what was in the water. What was in the water would echo and reinforce not only the great debates to which Rousseau, Montesquieu, Smith, Fenelon, and others contributed, but also the theological underpinnings and “assumptions” of the evolving discipline of political economy.¹³²

In these formative years, the newspaper the *Globe* served (especially from 1824-1831, before being purchased by the Saint-Simonians in 1831) as a central organ of liberal political thought, opposed to the Villèle government and embracing a spirit of “Laissez faire, laissez passer: here is the fundamental maxim of the nineteenth-century; it is the remedy to all ills, and the source for all improvements.”¹³³ For these thinkers “industry” was indicative of, if not

¹³¹ Swedberg, 74. In this section, I lean on the studies of Michael Drolet, Cheryl Welch, Richard Swedberg, and others who have made focused examinations of Tocqueville’s political economy.

¹³² See Rodriguez, “Tocqueville’s State of Nature Foundation,” for an analysis (one counterintuitive to much Tocqueville scholarship) of how Tocqueville’s anthropology as revealed in the *Memoirs on Pauperism* is indebted to Rousseau’s state of nature.

¹³³ Drolet, “Democracy and Political Economy,” 162.

synonymous with, the general interest. These liberal political economists often referred to their work as “social economy” or “industrial economy,” looking to prioritize the social and distance their theories from politics.¹³⁴ In this way, they were not unlike the conservative Catholics and progressive socialists of their day. In this corner of intellectual history, *Le Globe*’s editor Charles Duchâtel looms large. He spread the ideas of Destutt de Tracy, Ricardo and Say (even on occasion Malthus), and later fended off St-Simonian, Comtean, Catholic, Christian, and conservative critics once fissures eventually split the *industrialiste* camp.

Tocqueville studied Jean-Baptiste Say’s *Cours complet d’économie politique* in 1828 and again in 1831 en route to America. He turned repeatedly to his friend Andre-Marie Dupin, a member of the *Le Globe* circle, to gain clarity on its ideas.¹³⁵ That Tocqueville read Say in depth twice (and was probably introduced to him even earlier) is to say that not only did he read Say, but he read Say in order to learn economics.¹³⁶ This is rather unsurprising; Say was the foremost economist of his day and was the inaugural holder of the first university chair in economics in France, specifically for “industrial economy.” (It was, in fact, Guizot who elevated him to that position.¹³⁷) Say’s influence on Tocqueville and the structure of his thought is, as it would be for a generation of Frenchmen, significant.¹³⁸ But Say’s would not be the last word. Upon returning from America, Tocqueville made several trips to England, including in 1833 and again in May 1835 after the publication of *Democracy*.¹³⁹ In the interim of these two visits, his views on

¹³⁴ See Welch, “Tocqueville’s resistance to the ‘social’.”

¹³⁵ Drolet, “Democracy and Political Economy,” 165.

¹³⁶ Drolet, “Democracy and political economy,” 161-162.

¹³⁷ Whatmore, 213.

¹³⁸ On this, Swedberg, 79-83.

¹³⁹ *Selected Letters*, 82, 85. Also in *Lettres choisies*, 287-291.

political economy began to shift away from the views populating the *Globe*, in part upon reading *Economie politique chrétienne* by Alban de Villeneuve-Bargemont and Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*.¹⁴⁰ This had consequences for the 1835 *Memoir on Pauperism* and the second volume of *Democracy*. How did these different theories – Say, Villeneuve-Bargemont, and Malthus -- differ?¹⁴¹

Tocqueville had admiration for much of Say's (1767–1832) political and economic theories. Say's love of political liberty, his reflections on the coincidence of political and economic liberty, and his assessment of America as a “large scale republic” whose citizens “united virtue with self-interest,” have definite echoes in Tocqueville's assessment of America particularly in *Democracy* Volume I.¹⁴² In his reading and rereading of Say, Tocqueville took pages of notes that were rearranged alphabetically, which Swedberg suggests means an active engagement with the ideas.¹⁴³ (As much can be gleaned from his desire to have Dupin clarify Say for him.) Nassau Senior (1790-1864), with whom Tocqueville would enjoy a long and warm personal acquaintance beginning in 1833 and who was instrumental in the 1834 reform of the Poor Laws, followed Say in many of his principles.¹⁴⁴ His *Outline of the Science of Political Economy* (1836) proposed that political or “social economy” (in his preferred nomenclature) should aim at wealth creation, not “human welfare.” The “narrow path” of economics had to steer away from both political and moral questions, and “That every man desires to obtain

¹⁴⁰ See Welch 88-90, Drolet, 181-182.

¹⁴¹ Say wrote against Malthusian theory. Jean-Baptiste Say, *Lettres à M. Malthus sur différents sujets d'économie politique*, (Paris : Bossange, 1820), <http://books.google.com/books?id=rHMOAAAAQAAJ&oe=UTF-8>.

¹⁴² Drolet, “Democracy and political economy,” 168.

¹⁴³ Swedberg, 82-83.

¹⁴⁴ For a short discussion, see Swedberg, 87-89.

additional Wealth with as little sacrifice as possible” was the foundation of economics, which he compared to gravity in physics.¹⁴⁵ Tocqueville’s friendship with Senior lasted until his death and was, notably, of the kind that when Senior criticized Tocqueville’s characterization of England, Tocqueville wrote back to him saying he was “a very competent judge” of economics but “you will nonetheless allow me not to share your opinion.”¹⁴⁶ (This is in stark contrast to his relationship with Mill, which cooled over differences of opinion in foreign policy.¹⁴⁷)

That Tocqueville never mentions or cites Say in any of his published writings is not surprising for a man whose readings are notoriously hard to pin down; Say would be far from the only thinker to receive this treatment. Tocqueville’s relationship with Senior is far clearer and easier to trace. But it does suggest that Say was not one with whom Tocqueville cared to be publicly identified, whatever their intellectual affinities and Say’s uncontested prominence in the field.¹⁴⁸ This uncertainty has led scholars to differ in their assessment of the closeness of Tocqueville’s views to Say’s.¹⁴⁹ But Tocqueville by the early 1830s seemed to distance himself from Say, in part by rejecting Say’s “divorce” of morality and politics from economics. To

¹⁴⁵ “It is in Political Economy what gravitation is in Physics, or the dictum de omni et nullo in Logic: the ultimate fact beyond which reasoning cannot go, and of which almost every other proposition is an illustration.” Nassau Senior, *An Outline of the Science of Political Economy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, [1836] 1938), 2, cited in Swedberg, 87-88.

Hugh Brogan compares Tocqueville and Senior on the question of pauperism. On Brogan’s evaluation, “The political economy on which Tocqueville and Senior agreed was not much more than a rationalization of the class interests which had emerged at a particular moment of social evolution.” Hugh Brogan, “Pauperism and Democracy: Alexis de Tocqueville and Nassau Senior,” in Eduardo Nolla, *Liberty, Equality, Democracy*. (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 129–41.

¹⁴⁶ In Swedberg, 90. Also in *Selected Letters*, 96-98.

¹⁴⁷ Swedberg analyzes the question of the influence of Tocqueville on Mill and vice versa in manners of economics. See Swedberg, 91-99. His assessment is that they are less close than meets the eye.

¹⁴⁸ One thinks of Rousseau or Machiavelli for example, references to which are present but hidden in *Democracy*.

¹⁴⁹ For Swedberg, beyond these initial studies and notes qua introduction to political economy as a field, “Beyond this, however, it is difficult to see what impact Say may have had on Tocqueville’s thought” (Swedberg, 83). By contrast, Drolet renders the relationship closer. Drolet, “Democracy and political economy.”

Kergolay, as they contemplated founding a journal, he wrote in 1834 that their new enterprise should rise above the petty dynastic political questions of la légitimité” and speak to the political landscape more generally. He then adds,

Although political economy today strikes me as materialistic in all its efforts, I would like the journal to emphasize the more immaterial aspects of this science; I would like it to bring in ideas and feelings of morality as elements of prosperity and happiness; and I would like it to try to rehabilitate spiritualism in politics and to make spiritualism popular by driving home its utility.¹⁵⁰

Articles Tocqueville later composed for his and his friends’ newspaper *Le Commerce* in 1844 and 1845 sharply expressed Tocqueville’s criticism of an economic *laissez-faire, laissez-passer* liberalism and its advocates, Say among them.¹⁵¹ Man has, he wrote, “moral needs more demanding than physical needs.”¹⁵²

Alban de Villeneuve-Bargemont offered Tocqueville a stark contrast with the Anglophile and Anglophilic liberal political economists. Though there is a general scholarly consensus about his influence on Tocqueville’s thinking, he requires somewhat more by way of introduction and explanation.¹⁵³ Villeneuve-Bargemont (1784–1850), a prefect, aristocrat, and peer of

¹⁵⁰ Tocqueville to Kergolay, September 28, 1834, in *Lettres choisies*, 308. In French : “Aussi, tandis que tous les efforts de l’économie politique de nos jours me semblent tendre à se matérialiser, je voudrais que la tendance de la revue fût de mettre en relief le côté le plus immatériel de cette science ; qu’elle cherchât à y faire pénétrer les idées, les sentiments de moralité comme éléments de prospérité et de bonheur ; qu’elle cherchât à réhabiliter le spiritualisme en politique et à le rendre populaire en faisant sentir l’utilité. Je voudrais que cette même tendance spiritualiste se retrouvât dans sa manière de traiter les autres sciences et les arts. » Mélonio, in her note on this passage, indicates this is Tocqueville stepping away from Say and revealing a “hostilité” to a political economy “accusé de ‘matérialisme.’” *Lettres choisies*, 308, note 57.

¹⁵¹ This is a point well-made by Boesche and Drolet. Roger Boesche, “Tocqueville and Le Commerce: A Newspaper Expressing His Unusual Liberalism.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44, 2 (1983): 277–92. See also Drolet, “Democracy and political economy,” 172.

¹⁵² Boesche compares this latter point on moral versus physical needs to Durkheim’s statement in *The Division of Labor* that “Morality is the least dispensable, the strictly necessary, the daily bread without which societies cannot exist.” Boesche, “Tocqueville and Le Commerce,” 287. Boesche also notes that *Le Commerce* often references or engages Rousseau on these points.

¹⁵³ See for sustained engagements of Villeneuve-Bargemont’s thought and Tocqueville’s engagement with it, Swedberg, 83–87, and Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy and Social Reform*, 95–111. See also Keslassy, 86–100.

Tocqueville's father, was a political legitimist opposed to industrialism of the sort promoted in *Le Globe*.¹⁵⁴ His personal experiences working as a prefect in two northern French departments had exposed him to the poverty of these communities, and led him to develop extensive data on illness, industrial accidents, and other measures of health and illness.¹⁵⁵ He spent much time in the agricultural sector and valorized it. It is another reminder of the tenuous nature of the discipline of economics at that time that Villeneuve-Bargemont classified his work as "économie politique Chrétienne" while others spoke of "économie sociale." He was a deeply and openly Catholic, and he and his work were prominent in what might be called nineteenth century French social Catholicism.¹⁵⁶ To attempt to study French social Catholicism is to be reminded of the corners of the history of political thought that remains untouched by scholarship. Villeneuve-Bargemont was of a circle of collaborators and similarly minded writers who, beginning in the 1820s, were interested in incorporating Catholic moral insights into discussions of the new postrevolutionary economic landscape and in offering necessary corrections, sometimes friendly

¹⁵⁴On Tocqueville and the legitimist tradition, see Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 36-45.

¹⁵⁵ His statistics were unique and detailed, and Tocqueville made good use of them. He discovered that about half of the population of the city of Lille was poor enough to be considered indigent poor, and almost half the working population of the *Nord* department was so poor as to be registered with the government. Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy and Social Reform*, 95.

¹⁵⁶Swedberg suggests that though Villeneuve-Bargemont was well-known in his own day, his influence was limited. Keslassy however found that all the 28 candidates for the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques between 1834 and 1839 made reference to Villeneuve-Bargemont's work as "essential." Keslassy, 87. Social Catholicism concerns the "amélioration du sort des classes populaire," and is part of the more capacious tradition of the doctrines of Catholic Social Thought, which "a pour objet de préciser ce que doivent être les rapports moraux de l'homme avec ses semblables, en ce qui concerne la vie familiale, économique, et politique » (Duroselle, 10.) The main study to this day of French social Catholicism is Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Les débuts du Catholicisme social en France, 1822-1870*. See also, on related questions of the religiosity of society and adapting Catholic concepts to serve social and sometimes socialist ends: Michael Behrent, "Society Incarnate: Association, society, and religion in French political thought, 1825-1912," PhD diss., New York University, 2006; Berenson, *Populist Religion and Left-Wing Politics in France, 1830-1848*; Berenson, "A new Religion of the Left: Christianity and Social radicalism in France, 1815-1848."

and sometimes hostile, to liberal political economy.¹⁵⁷ Many of them edited or contributed to *L'Avenir*, the short-lived (1830-1831) liberal Catholic newspaper condemned by the papal encyclical *Mirari Vos*. That said, the politics of this broad group ranged from committed democrats to legitimists such as Villeneuve-Bargemont, and Duroselle characterizes Villeneuve-Bargemont as the originator of social Catholicism among French conservatives.¹⁵⁸ Many of the members of these circles – Henri de Lacordaire, Frederic Ozanam, Alfred de Falloux, to name some better known to history -- participated in the *La Société d'économie charitable* and Melun's *Annales de la Charité*, both of which had taken inspiration from Villeneuve-Bargemont's work. Tocqueville would become members of both groups. Additionally, he and Villeneuve-Bargemont overlapped in the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, though they do not seem to have struck up a friendship or corresponded.¹⁵⁹

Villeneuve-Bargemont's three-volume *Economie politique chrétienne* was published in 1834, just as Tocqueville had finished *Democracy I* and was turning to the study of pauperism, and he read it immediately.¹⁶⁰ Villeneuve-Bargemont, though he agreed with Smith in many respects, disagreed with the English and Anglophilic political economists who had, as we discussed previously, theorized that one could divorce economics or political economy from

¹⁵⁷ For example, this wide-ranging group appreciated Adam Smith, but disagreed with many of his disciples who either attacked clerical celibacy (Sismondi) or failed to see the importance of moral values to economic life. They had an appreciation for the Saint-Simonians who were closer to reality but “erred on the moral plain.” Duroselle, 48.

¹⁵⁸ Duroselle, 70.

¹⁵⁹ Swedberg, 83-84. That may have been due to Tocqueville's political sensitivity about how their different views of French dynastic politics might affect his political career. Tocqueville's brother Edouard seemed to have been particularly strongly influenced by Bargemont's work.

¹⁶⁰ Mélonio in Swedberg, 84. Alban de Villeneuve-Bargemont, *Economie politique chrétienne, ou Recherches sur la nature et les causes du paupérisme en France et en Europe, et sur les moyens de le soulager et de le prévenir*, (Brussels : Méline, Can, & compagnie, 1837 édition), http://books.google.com/books?id=63qHoZqDqnoC&hl=&source=gbs_api.

moral questions and that a science such as economics should concern itself only material prosperity rather than a more capacious understanding of well-being. In his eyes, industrialism, industrialization and the “English system” were materialist, as was its new “scientific,” efficient, and elite philanthropy. Mechanization and the division of labor both embodied and encouraged the severing of moral from economic considerations, while a rising industrial aristocracy – in his words, a “new feudalism” -- perpetuated these inequalities, which were crucially caused not by nature but by an unjust system. Villeneuve-Bargemont held that inequalities existed in nature due to original sin, the source of many miseries of the human condition. However, pauperism was a new form of inequality, its moral degradation of the poor immoral and unnatural. That the new political economy claimed to be secular, and that industrialization and pauperism had emerged alongside this new political economy was a strong indictment in Villeneuve-Bargemont’s mind. It would have to be corrected by a Christian political economy that not took the fact of original sin and therefore the imperfect justice of the world as a given, to be corrected as possible by human action and ultimately by Providence.¹⁶¹ “In truth, the ills of humanity . . . can only be explained through religion.” By emphasizing both moral and spiritual needs and the virtues of moderation in both the rich and the poor, a Christian science of political economy might reestablish an economic equilibrium between supply and demand.¹⁶² The world of his theory was one in which perfect justice is impossible but where a different relationship between moral and economic considerations would make a more just order, and where remaining imperfections in

¹⁶¹ The other fissure here is the nature of liberty, a point Keslassy highlights. “La liberté qu’elle se dessine dans les positions anglaises, est une valeur en elle-même sans autre finalité ni sans autre transcendance ; on n’est pas libre pour mais libre de. La conséquence en est le refus de définir le contenu de la liberté. Or, l’Eglise ne peut renoncer à l’exigence de la vérité : la vie humaine a un sens, la liberté est donc une flèche tirée vers cette vérité qui la transcende. » Keslassy, 91.

¹⁶² Swedberg, 85.

might be helped through charity.¹⁶³ Charity would always be needed. Religion meanwhile would help to “substituer à l’exploitation de l’intérêt l’impulsion plus noble et plus douce de la charité » and work to build up the moral lives of workers through (and here Villeneuve-Bargemont cites Edmund Burke) “patience, frugality, work, sobriety and religion.”¹⁶⁴ In Keslassy’s words, “Pour Villeneuve-Bargemont, l’égoïsme et l’avidité ont rompu un équilibre que la charité et la morale doivent rétablir. »¹⁶⁵ Not only had the indigent poor given in to the worst elements of his nature ; Villeneuve-Bargemont thought the new industrial aristocracy also had much to confess.

However “conservative” Villeneuve-Bargemont may have been politically in his own day, his recommendations are not uniformly conservative by our own lights or even restrained. The second volume of Villeneuve-Bargemont’s *Economie* condemned English public welfare and called for a Christian political economy that would rest upon both state and private promotion of agriculture and charity.¹⁶⁶ Charity included both greater personal charity through religious practice *and* formal, state intervention establishing legal charity as a principle of politics. He advocated for fixing a minimum wage (the poor cannot save if they cannot pay for necessities, he emphasized); forcing employers to contribute towards funds for sick workers;

¹⁶³ Swedberg describes Tocqueville as a “social Catholic” because of how far Tocqueville followed Villeneuve-Bargemont but he concludes Tocqueville’s proposed solutions were secular and political, rather than moral. “While the two agreed that modern political economy looked only to the needs of the body and neglected those of the soul, they parted ways when they analyzed the implications of this materialism. Villeneuve-Bargemont made an appeal to people’s sense of charity; he wanted them to undo the destructive effects of the existing type of political economy by becoming religious and opening up their hearts to the misery of their fellow beings. Tocqueville, in contrast, followed a secular line of analysis that drew on Montesquieu and Rousseau... [however] Tocqueville may have felt some instinctive sympathy for Villeneuve-Bargemont’s type of reasoning, since he was a Catholic with social concerns himself” (Swedberg 86). Part of the argument of this chapter is that Tocqueville’s associational solutions, while they have political consequences, are not purely secular.

¹⁶⁴ Cited in Keslassy, 92.

¹⁶⁵ Keslassy, 92.

¹⁶⁶ See Drolet, *Tocqueville, Social Reform and Democracy*, 102-103 for a discussion of his agricultural reforms and the relationship of agriculture to moral and political life.

encouraging workers' associations; ensuring a wider distribution of agricultural property and starting model farms and agricultural societies; and -- with the Catholic Church playing an active, primary role -- ensuring moral and religious education, savings accounts (often through charitable societies), safe housing, and pensions for workers.¹⁶⁷ Again, some of this would be established politically, other elements of the program through associations, others through the Church. Villeneuve-Bargemont also argued that the religious nature of charity mattered for its diffusion. What he called "philanthropy" or "scientific charity" -- which he considered "icy," English, materialistic, the result of incorrect Enlightenment accounts of human nature -- could not respond adequately to the realities of human nature nor could it deliver on its promises to eventually eliminate the need for future charity through improved administration and adherence to the laws of economics.¹⁶⁸ Villeneuve-Bargemont did not believe one could overcome the need for ongoing charity. The poor would always be with us; men were obligated both by natural sympathy and charity to care for them.¹⁶⁹ Charity, in addition, was a theological virtue, and the error of the English philosophers and philanthropists, on his view, had been to attempt a form of

¹⁶⁷ See Drolet's extensive discussion of this. Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Social Reform*, 100-108.

¹⁶⁸ See Drolet's explanation of this. Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Social Reform*, 107-108. "Because English philanthropists adopted what was at heart a materialist conception of human nature, they were disposed to accept liberal political economy's strict demarcation between economics and morals. This undermined their attempts to admonish industrialists and landed aristocrats to help the poor; since philanthropy was now considered an inferior branch of political economy, philanthropic acts which interfered with profits made bad economics. The 'icy theories of political economy, the calculations and combinations of personal interests' dominated the 'philanthropic enterprise in England'" (Drolet, 107). Drolet also notes that unlike another legitimist political economist Fodéré who viewed Malthus as the culmination of materialist English philosophy, Villeneuve-Bargemont attributed the break between economics and morality to Smith, though as we have seen, that was a contested view. Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Social Reform*, 100-102. See also Villeneuve-Bargemont, 77 : "Quoi qu'il en soit, tandis qu'Adam Smith se plaisait à proclamer l'accroissement rapide de la population comme le fondement et l'indice de la prospérité nationale, d'autres publicistes y apercevaient la source des plus grandes calamités pour les individus. L'expérience de vingt années acquises à cet égard en Angleterre sembla résoudre la question en faveur de cette dernière opinion : une nouvelle école fut opposée à celle de Smith, et puisa ses principales doctrines dans l'Essai de Malthus, sur le principe de la population. Nous devons exposer, avec quelque étendue, un système qui a opéré de si grands changements dans les idées reçues. »

¹⁶⁹ As we will see, Tocqueville distinguishes himself from Villeneuve-Bargemont by opposing widespread public or legal charity. In this Tocqueville agrees with Malthus. See Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Social Reform*, 110.

charity without religion. But a French “charité Chrétienne dans la politique” would go far to improve what could be improved through much needed aid ever increasing numbers of the poor. As Keslassy notes, Villeneuve-Bargemont paradoxically demonstrated a remarkable faith in Providence and in the possibility of political and social action to effect meaningful social change that lay behind his affirmation of the effects of original sin and his moralism.

This brings us to Thomas Malthus, the clergyman and economist (1766-1834) who published *An Essay Concerning Human Population* in 1798.¹⁷⁰ Tocqueville cited Villeneuve-Bargemont’s statistics Tocqueville directly in the First *Memoir*, but it is harder to pin down precisely how, when, and where Tocqueville would have encountered Malthus. Malthus was in the water. A February 1835 letter Tocqueville sent to German Leon von Thun-Hohenstein confirms that Tocqueville had read the *Essay* by that point.¹⁷¹ Drolet notes Tocqueville would have likely encountered a Pierre Prevost 1823 translation of the 1803 *Essay*.¹⁷² It is also likely that Tocqueville encountered Malthusian ideas in *Le Globe* when the editor Duchâtel published a series of essays on Malthus and Malthus’s student Thomas Chalmers in 1825-1826.¹⁷³ Malthus proved an interesting interlocutor for these French liberal political and “social” economists, for they both affirmed and rejected his findings in equal measure. Where many agreed with his assessment of population growth and the challenges of scarcity under rapid industrialization, his integration of moral considerations and economics and Malthus’s firm conviction that scarcity

¹⁷⁰ Malthus receives little treatment in Swedberg, except a brief mention (Swedberg, 80). For a short treatment of Malthus, see Donald Winch, *Malthus: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For more, Robert J. Mayhew, *Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

¹⁷¹ Swedberg, 303 note 33. Drolet, “Democracy and political economy,” 177.

¹⁷² Drolet, “Democracy and political economy,” 178.

¹⁷³ Ibid. Also Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Social Reform*, 38. See on these points also Keslassy, 43-57.

was ineradicable were more contested.¹⁷⁴ (Say carved out a middle position between the perfectibilists Godwin and Condorcet and Malthus, agreeing with Malthus that population growth would exceed ability to meet need, but arguing that industry and scientific knowledge would eventually correct for this.¹⁷⁵)

Tocqueville additionally would have encountered Malthus via Villeneuve-Bargemont. Villeneuve-Bargemont not only read Malthus.¹⁷⁶ Villeneuve-Bargemont considered Malthus a fellow traveler in developing a political economy that would defend rights such as association and property and eliminate pauperism to the degree possible through education, moral reform, and forms of charity. Both efforts were to be grounded in the moral foundation provided by Christianity. Pauperism was not only a social challenge; it raised the specter of theodicy which Malthus's English disciples took up. In one scholar's description:

The dominance of scarcity in human affairs, dramatized for the nineteenth century by the principle of population, the law of diminishing returns and the ever-present competitive struggle, presented a *prima facie* problem for Christian theology. How can a God who is good, omnipotent, and wise will scarcity for His creatures? Though difficulties of a similar kind had afflicted theologians from time out of mind, the Dismal Science presented the Problem of Evil in a novel and threatening form. Not only was the inevitability of human suffering to be accounted for, but also the supposed social utility of greed, selfishness, competition, vainglory, and emulation, hitherto condemned by the Church as sinful.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴See Welch, "Tocqueville's resistance to the 'social'," 87. For example, Tracy and Say agreed with Malthus there was a limited means of subsistence for a potentially infinitely increasing population, and Tracy conceded this made his optimistic *industrialisme* difficult.

¹⁷⁵ See Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy and Social Reform*, 49-53.

¹⁷⁶ Villeneuve-Bargemont, 81-82. in Book I of *Economie politique Chrétienne*, he explained the objections of Say, James Mill, Ricardo, de Tracy, Duchâtel, Blanqui, and Sismondi to Malthus and offered subsequent defenses of Malthus.

¹⁷⁷ Anthony Waterman, "The Ideological Alliance of Political Economy and Christian Theology, 1798-1833," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 34, 2 (1983): 231-44. See also Anthony Waterman, *Revolution, Economics, and Religion: Christian Political Economy, 1798-1833*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Emma Rothschild has built a body of research around Smith, Condorcet, Malthus, and concepts of progress, social security, and laissez-faire. See Emma Rothschild, "Condorcet and the Conflict of Values," *The Historical Journal* 39, (3) 1996: 677-701; Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the*

Understood this way, the stakes of the question of pauperism then were high for Christians but also for the perfectibilists and optimists like Godwin and Condorcet whose progressive accounts of history had to make sense of pauperism within progression of history. Fundamentally, for Malthus, though Godwin and Condorcet and their followers had “beautiful” theories of human progress, it was a “great error” to argue that “almost all the vices and misery that prevail in civil society” are due to faulty systems and “human institutions.”¹⁷⁸ Simply put, industrial growth by scientific means could not solve the problem of evil (and original sin, and therefore scarcity) to which pauperism attested.¹⁷⁹ By thinking it possible, Malthus argued, man forgets he also needs to “remove evil from himself.”¹⁸⁰ Hence the need for moral education, reform, and restraint, in addition to whatever legislators might attempt. Thus Malthus envisioned a political economy that encouraged men to live within the “laws of nature” and moderate their desires and would not have understood himself as “the progenitor of a dismal science.” He believed in the power of original sin to shape human behavior and produce human miseries, but “he was a rational Christian” who believed that God’s Providence worked through the laws of population and that men could conform themselves to it.¹⁸¹ Human welfare rightly understood meant living within limits and disciplining the self according to those limits. This line of argument became most

Enlightenment, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Emma Rothschild, “Social Security and Laissez Faire in Eighteenth-Century Political Economy,” *Population and Development Review* 21 (4) 1995: 711–44.

¹⁷⁸ Malthus, *Essay*, p. 56 and p. 46, in Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy and Social Reform*, 139.

¹⁷⁹ Mayhew puts it thus: “Malthus’s great originality was in arguing for the empirical rather than theological truth of this vision [of the Fall in the Garden] (although he never denied the theological version of the argument either), taking the tools of Enlightenment reason and using them to invert its normal stories of human progress in favor of a narrative of human society as “condemned to a perpetual oscillation between happiness and misery.” Mayhew, 67. Malthus further attacked Godwin and Condorcet for their atheism and the bizarre consequence of it that they attempted to lengthen life in this world because they deny the next. Mayhew, 73.

¹⁸⁰ Malthus cited in Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy and Social Reform*, 51.

¹⁸¹ Mayhew, 73–74.

associated with his call for “moral restraint” in the sexual habits of the poor, though the logic extends towards immoderate material desires more broadly.¹⁸² In his Christian utilitarianism, Malthus refused to deprive the poor of their free will or agency or lay their entirely at the feet of greedy landowners and industrialists and poorly framed institutions.¹⁸³

Villeneuve-Bargemont and Malthus’s practical recommendations differed substantially. Villeneuve-Bargemont endorsed a system of public charity in which government officials were “ministers of charity” and through which, in cooperation with model farms, savings banks, and moral and religious education, the poor would be materially and spiritually fed, encouraged to achieve independence and self-sufficiency.¹⁸⁴ The English Poor Laws tried but failed to do this, thereby perpetuating the problem.¹⁸⁵ By contrast, Malthus had relatively little confidence in welfare systems or in the Poor Laws which had in alleviating individual misfortunes spread “the evil over a much larger surface”; government had thus “[altered] by fiat the whole circumstances of a country.”¹⁸⁶ Always an author with a taste for biting satire, Malthus’s 1803 edition of the *Essay* (which Tocqueville may have read) included a passage arguing that a man without support “from his parents on whom he has a just demand, and if society do not want his labour, has no

¹⁸² It is worth noting that Malthus envisioned later marriage (for women, from 28-30) as the solution to this. Moral restraint in the form of celibacy would curb sexual passions, enable the sexes to develop better relationships with one another, encourage prudence and discernment, and ensure that a couple could support a family. Winch, 40-41.

¹⁸³ Winch, 42-43.

¹⁸⁴ See Drolet, 109.

¹⁸⁵ Timothy B. Smith lists Villeneuve-Bargemont as among those who “shared the view that legal charity was dangerous.” This is not the case. I attribute this to an oversight of editing on his part, since he next discusses Villeneuve-Bargemont’s disciple, Armand de Melun who was “prepared to accept the necessity of state intervention to deal with the social question and in 1848 he published a famous pamphlet in which he argued that the ‘state alone can change a demand into a reform, an idea into an institution’”. See Smith, “The Ideology of Charity,” 1007-1008.

¹⁸⁶ Malthus, cited in Mayhew, 124. “...if the poor-laws had never existed, though there might have been a few more instances of very severe distress, yet the aggregate mass of happiness among the common people would have been much greater than it is at present.” Malthus, cited in Winch, 46, 44.

claim of right to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, he has no business to be where he is. At nature's mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him," and "If these guests get up and make room for him, other intruders immediately appear demanding the same favour."¹⁸⁷ Malthus's thought on the Corn Laws shows far more nuance than his criticisms of the Poor Laws would suggest.¹⁸⁸ But he could not support the Elizabethan Poor Laws because he saw them as a "self-defeating attempt to turn the need for sustenance by the poor into an effective demand by government subsidy," thereby creating a "poverty trap" for recipients and for those immediately above them who did not receive relief.¹⁸⁹ That said, however, again the caricature of Malthus belies reality. For he did not believe in effecting a revolution by overturning the whole edifice. The poorest populations were being sustained by the public charity of the Poor Laws, however ill their effects, and whatever changes were to be made had to be made carefully.¹⁹⁰ Malthus hoped for "the *gradual* and *very gradual* abolition of the poor laws", an abolition "so gradual as not to affect any individuals at present alive, or who will be born within the next two years."¹⁹¹ Barring

¹⁸⁷ Malthus, cited in Mayhew, 125. This passage would later be removed in the 1806 edition.

¹⁸⁸ For a discussion of this, Mayhew, 118-119. Mayhew emphasizes that Malthus's nuanced approach to the Corn Laws reveals he "was by no means the heartless utilitarian of romantic and Dickensian caricature." Though he considered himself a disciple of Adam Smith, for him the "operation of a free market is not the sovereign road to Malthus's brand of utilitarianism" (119). He supported the Corn Laws on the grounds that it would stimulate agriculture – and thereby support a growing domestic population -- and help with the food security of the poor at home and the economic independence of Britain from foreign markets. Mayhew, 120-121.

¹⁸⁹ See Mayhew, 122-124. Malthus's concept of "effective demand" has bearing on this; it entailed a chasm between man's material desires and wants and demand, and the ability to respond to demand. Malthus, cited in Mayhew, 122 "…the desire of any individual to possess the necessary conveniences and luxuries of life, however intense, will avail nothing towards their production, if there be no where a reciprocal demand for something which he possesses. A man whose only possession is his labour has, or has not, an effective demand for produce according as his labour is, or is not, in demand by those who have the disposal of produce."

¹⁹⁰ "...no inference . . . [should] be drawn against what has been done for the relief of the poor in the present scarcity." Malthus, cited in Mayhew, 125. He also thought that the "allowance system" or "Speenhamland system" -- which would later be condemned by the Royal Commission into the Operation of the Poor Laws (in which Nassau Senior was a leading member) as creating a "universal system of pauperism" -- had contributed to the problem but had to be undone slowly and carefully. See Winch, 45-49.

¹⁹¹ Malthus, cited in Winch, 49.

the possibility of abolition, he envisioned a “improved administration of our actual laws, together with a more general system of education and moral superintendence.”¹⁹²

The workings of Tocqueville’s great mind are irreducible to the inputs of a Say, Villeneuve-Bargemont, Malthus, or to other interlocutors in his immediate historical context. This survey of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century political economy has not meant to demonstrate that it is. Tocqueville made his own context.¹⁹³ What we are interested in in this part of our exploration is not the degree to which Tocqueville’s diagnosis and prescriptions align with the reforms of the Poor Laws in 1834, or even with the specific analyses or prescriptions of Say, Villeneuve-Bargemont, or Malthus, though similarities will become evident. But reviewing the ideas of a Say, Villeneuve-Bargemont, and Malthus we grasp perhaps more clearly than in Tocqueville’s own writings the ways in which key concepts of political economy and specifically the response to pauperism were bound up in implicit and explicit theological and moral arguments about charity, justice, original sin and its effects, human perfectibility, the potential chasm between the ideal and the real, and how that chasm might be overcome through the market, civil society, justice, charity, or some combination thereof.

That Tocqueville would have understood *intérêt bien entendu* in relation to Christian virtue, and that he would have interrogated how public charity was both in accordance with democratic sentiment and influenced the moral character of democratic peoples – this reflects the spirit of his age. He would build this into his theorization of the democratic social state, a theory that was distinctly relational, psychosocial, concerned with the consequences of new social

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Mansfield, “The aristocracy in democracy.”

relationships of equality for human association and relationship.¹⁹⁴ “All that Tocqueville wrote about civil society and local politics should be understood in light of this worry,” for it is not good for man to be alone, even if all men are equal.¹⁹⁵ His approach to pauperism should be understood in this light as well.

The First Memoir on Pauperism

In 1834, as he was completing *Democracy* Volume I, Tocqueville was asked by the Royal Academic Society of Cherbourg in his native Normandy to write and deliver remarks about pauperism. Tocqueville was a new member of the society, but he would not have been an accidental or surprising choice for this assignment. He was fresh from his 1833 English trip and was observing the reforms of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act from afar (a copy of which was provided him by Nassau Senior, also author of the 1833 Report on the Poor Laws). Additionally, he and Beaumont had published *On the Penitentiary System* the year before to great success, winning the Montyon prize from the French Academy.¹⁹⁶ The issue of penitentiaries and methods of prison reform under the July Monarchy was a largely apolitical issue that was widely supported as a means of helping to improve the welfare of the poor and working classes. Tocqueville’s newly broadcast expertise in that area did not in and of itself make him an expert on pauperism but it certainly provided an intellectual and political gateway.

¹⁹⁴ For two articulations of this, see Mitchell, “Tocqueville’s Puritans,” and Mitchell, “It is not Good for Man to be Alone.” Seymour Drescher likewise provides a formulation of this element of Tocqueville’s thought, which was “discursive and psychological.” “His analysis of institutions, as of social character, was personified as well. Bureaucracies were presented in terms of the bureaucrat, government in terms of the ruler, slavery in terms of the master and slave.” Drescher, *Dilemmas of Democracy*, 24.

¹⁹⁵ Mitchell, “Tocqueville’s Puritans,” 351. Mitchell, “It is not Good for Man to be Alone.”

¹⁹⁶ Zunz, *The Man Who Understood Democracy*, 111. See also Jennings, *Travels with Tocqueville*, 134-137, for discussion of the context of the *Memoir*.

The issue under question in pauperism was not only poverty but the government centralization that accompanied attempts to resolve the social question through welfare and rights to work.¹⁹⁷ This centralization had begun in England with the Elizabethan Poor Laws but seemed to accelerate as democracy developed.¹⁹⁸ The Poor Laws reform of 1834 proved, in Brogan's words, to be "the seed of a mighty tree" that emerged wholly mature in *Democracy* Volume II. After crafting the first *Memoir*, Tocqueville began to work intermittently on a second that changed its setting to the France and examined practical responses to pauperism. This second *Memoir* would be left unfinished; one can speculate several reasons why. Among those reasons might be the demands of crafting *Democracy* Volume II, the demands of campaigning for and then winning elective office, and even the demands of married life. (He and Mary were married in 1835). Drescher and Henderson suggest that Tocqueville channeled his theoretical energies for the resolution of pauperism into *Democracy*, eventually leading to his theory of soft despotism. If he abandoned the second *Memoir* and its practical responses to pauperism and the welfare state, Drescher and Henderson argue, a question emerges, namely whether Tocqueville abandoned the second *Memoir* because he now thought the slide into soft despotism inevitable. Is the slide into soft despotism inevitable? Can it be reversed? Or slowed?¹⁹⁹ If soft despotism represents a social and political condition where "the very idea of associating together to solve [citizens'] own problems is impossible," endorsing public charity seem a recognition that associating to address pauperism outside of political institutions – i.e. via *intérêt bien entendu*,

¹⁹⁷ Brogan, "Pauperism and Democracy," 132.

¹⁹⁸ Tocqueville made the following note after a conversation with Henry Reeve in 1835:
 "Centralization – a democratic instinct – the instinct of a society which is beginning to shake off the medieval system of individualism. Prepares the ground for despotism.
 Why is centralization so much more habitual in democracy? A big question to be dug out in the third volume of my book, if I can fit it in -- a *leading* question (Ibid)."

¹⁹⁹ Henderson, "Introduction," in *Memoir*, xxxi.

private charity, and charitable and civil society associations -- is also impossible (if not in the American context, then in the European.)²⁰⁰

The contrast between public and private charity is at the core of and grounds Tocqueville's analysis. It draws attention to the errors not only of unbridled industrialism and its industrial aristocracy but also of an unbridled (even benevolent, if not always beneficent) welfare state. Recall from *Democracy II*:

It is easy to foresee that the time is coming when man will be less and less able to produce by himself alone the things most common and most necessary to his life. So the task of the social power will grow constantly, and its very efforts will make it greater every day. The more it puts itself in the place of associations, the more individuals, losing the idea of associating, will need it to come to their aid. ...

The morals and intelligence of a democratic people would run no lesser dangers than their trade and industry if the government came to take the place of associations everywhere.

Sentiments and ideas are renewed, the heart grows larger, and the human mind develops only by the reciprocal action of men on each other. ...

A government can no more suffice for maintaining alone and for renewing the circulation of sentiments and ideas among a great people than for conducting all of the industrial enterprises.²⁰¹

As we have seen, Tocqueville understands *intérêt bien entendu* as related to Christian virtue, the "love of God which makes men virtuous." Both require face-to-face encounters. They are, in a word, personal. Tocqueville articulates in the *Memoir* the depersonalization that can characterize pauperism and the welfare state's response to pauperism, and how it might be possible to balance care for the poor through legal charity with the reciprocal action of men on one another that renew the sentiments, enlarge the heart, and contribute to political and civil liberty.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ DA, 900-901.

Tocqueville begins the *Memoir* in a way that evokes the opening of *Democracy*, painting a broad picture of the European continent before descending into particular observations of England, Spain, Portugal, and France.²⁰² He presents a paradox: countries that appear the poorest “in reality contain the fewest indigents” but “among the peoples whose opulence you admire, one part of the population is obliged to rely on the *gifts* of the other in order to live” [my italics added].²⁰³ England seems to those visiting – and here he seems to recount his own experiences – an “Eden of modern civilization” where there is “everywhere the feeling of order, of well-being, and of leisure; a feeling of universal prosperity that seems to exude from the atmosphere itself and that thrills the heart at every step. This is how England *appears* [italics added] at the traveler’s first glance.”²⁰⁴ However, this opulence masks extreme inequality such that, according to Villeneuve-Bargemont’s assessment, there are more paupers relative to the population in England than in the poorer nations of Spain or Portugal.²⁰⁵ Something similar, Tocqueville notes, is at work in France where about a sixth of the population of the industrialized Nord department lives on public charity.

To explain this fact, Tocqueville engages in a philosophical thought experiment about the historical development of societies.²⁰⁶ As in *Democracy*, he turns to rivers as metaphor for the

²⁰² The two most readily accessible English language translations are by Seymour Drescher (edited by Gertrude Himmelfarb) and Christine Dunn Henderson. I have used both and here I cite the Henderson translation, which will be called *Memoir*.

²⁰³ *Memoir*, 1.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 1-2.

²⁰⁵ Tocqueville cites Villeneuve-Bargemont’s statistics. For one take on Tocqueville’s use of statistics, see Michael Drolet, “Tocqueville’s Interest in the Social: Or How Statistics Informed His ‘new Science of Politics,’” *History of European Ideas* 31 (2005) 4: 451-71.

²⁰⁶ See Rodriguez on this point. His analysis of the Rousseauian elements of this history in the *Memoir* is helpful and apt. Rodriguez, “Tocqueville’s State of Nature Foundation.” Whether this can be taken as a veritable “state of nature” foundation to Tocqueville’s theory depends on how we choose to define nature.

passage of time and “rapidly [goes] down the river of humanity to today.”²⁰⁷ He imagines men who “gather together” initially “not to enjoy life but to find the means of surviving.”²⁰⁸ They satisfy their limited desires and limited imaginations through limited “social organization.” Lacking the distinction of “outward sign[s]”, inequality could not establish itself with any permanence.²⁰⁹ It was through agriculture that distinctions arose – one hears the echoes of Locke and Rousseau -- in the form of private property, the “the most active element of progress.”²¹⁰ The superfluities which emerge from agriculture prompt desires that reach beyond mere satisfaction of urgent material needs. In this “social stage,” settlement, inheritance, and accumulated profit develop the “taste for pleasures” latent in man’s nature, and “inequality reaches its furthest limits” in the concentrated property holdings of the stage of history before feudalism.²¹¹ Feudalism legalized political inequality but thereby softened the extreme inequality by introducing legal conventions. Hence an “inequality of conditions,” with which came “wealth, enlightenment” and “the power of the few, the poverty, ignorance, and weakness of all the rest.”²¹² “Those who cultivated the soil without possessing it” had their subsistence assured. Their self-interest coincided with their masters’. They were “limited in their desires as well as in their power, without distress about the present, tranquil about a future that was not in their control.”²¹³ Their lives share something with modern slaves, Tocqueville notes, but they

²⁰⁷ *Memoir*, 3. See DA, 17. “... placed in the middle of a rapid river, we obstinately fix our eyes on some debris that we still see on the bank, while the current carries us away and pushes us backwards toward the abyss.”

²⁰⁸ *Memoir*, 3.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 4.

²¹⁰ *Ibid*, 3.

²¹¹ *Ibid*, 5.

²¹² *Ibid*.

²¹³ *Ibid*, 6.

possessed more freedom, dignity, and morality.²¹⁴ Simultaneously, their masters led “brilliant” and “lavish” but not “comfortable” lives.²¹⁵

As more men take to agriculture, needs develop and “next to those who live from the products of the earth but do not work, arises a numerous class that lives by its own industry, but not by working the land.”²¹⁶ It seems to be, in Tocqueville’s presentation, Providence who wills this progress: “Each century, as it slips from the hand of the Creator, the human mind is developed, the circle of thought broadens, desires increase” and the “poor and rich, each in their sphere, develop ideas of new pleasures that their predecessors had overlooked.”²¹⁷ In a succinct but significant passage, Tocqueville writes that men, in moving “from the cottage to the factory... obeyed the immutable laws governing the growth of organized society... we can no more assign a term to this movement than we can impose limits on human perfectibility. The limits of both are only known to God.”²¹⁸ We have already established that Tocqueville does not believe in the possibility of human perfectibility. This reflects an epistemological conviction that we cannot know the limit, whatever it may be.

Furthermore, if economic development and human perfectibility advance together, this seems to be a happy accident of history, not a feature -- in other words, there is no necessary

²¹⁴ It recalls Adam Smith in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. “In what constitutes the real happiness of human life, they are in no respect inferior to those who would seem so much above them. In ease of the body and peace of the mind, all the different ranks of life are nearly upon a level, and the beggar, who suns himself by the side of the highway, possesses that security which kings are fighting for.” Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 185.

²¹⁵ *Memoir*, 6.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*, 7.

²¹⁷ *Ibid*.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, 8.

correlation between economic advancement and an unadulterated improvement of the human condition. The Industrial Revolution ushered in “an immense quantity of new goods” and put comfort “within reach of the many” but “these happy outcomes have not been achieved without a necessary cost.”²¹⁹ In Lawler’s words, for Tocqueville, things always get better and worse at the same time.²²⁰ The population increases and is “happier” but more are “ready to die of want” without “recourse to public support.”²²¹ Additionally, a greater number of persons depend on the market and industry for their wages and satisfaction of their daily needs and pleasures. Tocqueville echoes Villeneuve-Bargemont; the worker “counts” on agriculture for his nourishment, but he does not work the land and cannot supply his own needs from it.²²² Dependence on the market rises among the poor. Meanwhile, the industrial class which “received from God,” Tocqueville says, “the special and dangerous mission of providing, by its own risks and dangers, the material happiness of all the others,” grows larger and is itself similarly exposed to industrial crises. As it grows, everyone’s needs “multiply and diversify.”²²³ More and more choose to enter industrial occupations rather than staying in agriculture to nourish a growing population, a “major subject of reflection for today’s statesmen!”²²⁴

²¹⁹ *Memoir*, 8.

²²⁰ Peter Augustine Lawler made this comment repeatedly. For one such instance, see Peter Augustine Lawler, “The tool of selective nostalgia,” *First Things*, October 23, 2014, <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2014/10/the-tool-of-selective-nostalgia>. See also Lawler, “Liberal education is for everyone,” *The Imaginative Conservative*, April 17, 2015, <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2015/04/liberal-education-everyone.html>.

²²¹ *Memoir*, 8.

²²² *Ibid.*

²²³ *Memoir*, 9.

²²⁴ Tocqueville in *Democracy* also discusses the democratic preference for industry over agriculture. DA, 972-979.

As Tocqueville describes it, the “gradual development of pauperism” testifies to the need to incorporate in the study of the laws of economics considerations of politics, mores, and the desires of the human heart.²²⁵ For “Man is born with needs” by nature “and he makes needs for himself.”²²⁶ As civilization develops, as society equalizes, the human capacity for comparison and hope – and the confusion of wealth and commodities that signify wealth with happiness -- facilitates pauperism’s growth as the market develops. In England, the average standard of living for which any man may “hope for in life is higher than in any other country in the world,” and “what the Englishman lacks has never been possessed by the Frenchman.”²²⁷ Like the democratic citizens who feel their vulnerability and insecurity more strongly as they become more equal, the English who feel the inability to enjoy new goods as a misfortune as their prosperity grows. “Society believes it must come to the aid of those who are deprived of them, and it cures evils that it did not previously even perceive.”²²⁸ Consequently:

If all of these reflections are correct, one will easily see that the more nations are wealth, the more the number of those who appeal to public charity might multiply, because two very powerful causes tend towards this result: among these nations, the class most naturally exposed to need is increasing incessantly, and on the other side, needs themselves infinitely multiply and diversity; the opportunity of finding oneself exposed to some of them becomes more frequent every day.²²⁹

Tocqueville urges his audience not to give itself over to “dangerous illusions” or become “drunk” at the sight of this “spectacle” and its “greatness.” In other words, these developments are not

²²⁵ In approaching pauperism in this way, Tocqueville shows his indebtedness not to Say, but to Plato, Aristotle, Fenelon, Rousseau, and Smith, as well as Christian political economy of his day. See Adam Smith’s famous passage on the diamond buckles of the aristocracy. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations, Volume I*, ed. R.H. Campbell and A.S. Skinner, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund/Oxford University Press, 1976), 418-419.

²²⁶ *Memoir*, 10.

²²⁷ *Ibid*, 11, 10.

²²⁸ *Ibid*, 11.

²²⁹ *Ibid*.

unadulterated goods. It falls to the legislator to try to “look for the means of attenuating the inevitable evils which are already easy to foresee.”

The Memoir Part II: Virtues versus systems of charity

Tocqueville closed Part I claiming “society will become more perfected, wiser; existence will be more comfortable, sweeter, more embellished, and longer.” Yet for an increasingly large and impoverished portion of humanity, this may not be possible absent the support of their fellow men through State redistribution. That welfare systems often work at cross purposes from their aims is not only however a result, in Tocqueville’s eyes, of poorly framed incentives and of the challenge of translating ideas into concrete public policies. It also has to do with the nature of the relationship created in the redistribution of funds from rich to poor, the channels through which that redistribution occurs, and in whose name the redistribution – or to put it another way, the gift – occurs. We observed in Tocqueville’s account of soft despotism,

Nearly all the charitable establishments of old Europe were in the hands of individuals or of corporations; they have all more or less fallen into dependence on the sovereign, and in several countries, they are governed by the sovereign. It is the State that has undertaken almost alone to give bread to those who are hungry, relief and a refuge to the sick, work to those without it; it has made itself almost the unique repairer of all miseries.

Education as well as charity has become a national affair among most of the peoples of today. The State receives and often takes the child from the arms of its mother in order to entrust it to its agents; it is the State that takes charge of inspiring sentiments in each generation and providing each generation with ideas. Uniformity reigns in studies as in all the rest; there diversity like liberty, disappears each day.²³⁰

Charity’s transformation from a private, personal act in accordance with a theological virtue to a form of political redistribution by the State is not without moral and material consequences, nor is it without consequences for structure of civil society. This is the case for Tocqueville even as

²³⁰ DA, 1223.

one recognizes that such benevolence on the part of the state responds to the genuine needs of the poor and working classes.²³¹

Tocqueville distinguishes between two forms of charity. The first “leads each individual, to relieve, according to his means, all of the ills that are found within his reach.” Christianity declared it a “divine virtue” and “called it charity.”²³² Because it exists within the Church and between individual persons in civil society, it “escapes” political or social regulation. It is “as old as the world”; it is a gift; it is voluntary; it is free. This element of gratuity is vital to its essence as *charity*. Tocqueville announces he is primarily concerned with the second type of charity, which is a product of history. His explication of the second reveals he evaluates the second by the standard of the first. The second type, “less instinctive, more rational, less enthusiastic and often more powerful, leads society to concern itself with the misfortunes of its members and to attend systematically to alleviate their sufferings.” His description might be compatible with the charity of the Middle Ages produced and disseminated through Catholic Church hospitals, orphanages, orders, and the like. But Tocqueville narrows his definition. This type is “born out of Protestantism and is developed only in modern societies.”²³³ It is a system with a certain aesthetic appeal:

At first sight, there is no idea that appears more beautiful and more grand than public charity.

Society reflects upon itself, daily probing its injuries, and concerning itself with healing them; while assuring the rich the enjoyment of their goods and protecting the poor from the excesses of misery, society also demands from some a portion of their superfluity in

²³¹ Though of course Tocqueville’s account of the growth of desires and so called “needs” – which echoes Malthus’s distinction between wants and needs that grounds his concept of “effective demand” – allows for the possibility that what is understood as a need is artificial and not actually a genuine need.

²³² *Memoir*, 12.

²³³ *Memoir*, 12.

order to provide necessities for the others. This is certainly a grand spectacle in the presence of which the mind is elevated and the soul cannot fail to be touched.²³⁴

This is beautiful in theory but “experience comes to destroy a part of these beautiful illusions.”²³⁵

The development of the welfare state, Tocqueville reminds us, only emerged in England under the influence of the “religious revolution [of Henry VIII] that changed the face of England.” It is thus in England over the intervening centuries that this experiment has “systematized and broadly applied these *theories* of public charity” [italics added]. He retraces history. With the establishment of the Anglican Church came the disestablishment of the Catholic and the confiscation of Church property by state and nobility alike. The dissolution of the monasteries Tocqueville describes as the “suppression” of “almost all of the charitable communities” of England and consequently of the richness of associations, confraternities, and other organizations built around them. If the numbers of poor initially stayed constant, “the means of providing for their needs ... were partly destroyed,” and the number of poor grew “significantly.”²³⁶ Hence the Elizabethan Poor Laws, by which local parishes levied taxes to assist and employ the poor in lieu of the convents and monasteries.

Tocqueville concludes that history shows that “Once having accepted the principle of legal charity, England was not able to depart from it ... English legislation about the poor was nothing but a long development, over two centuries, of Elizabeth’s laws.”²³⁷ Tocqueville does not blame this legislation alone for the development of pauperism; his description of the causes of

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid, 13. Tocqueville cites both Blackstone and Senior in support of his argument.

²³⁷ Ibid, 14.

pauperism is decidedly not monocausal. But the Poor Laws' framework of incentives and the mores it encouraged over generations contributed to path dependency. Now, "one may judge the fatal consequences that have followed from the adoption of this principle," for the reality is "far from the beautiful and seductive theory that I set out above."²³⁸

First, it is clear to Tocqueville that legal rights to assistance have not eliminated poverty but have exacerbated and extended it. This is not just a statement of material conditions; it is a statement about mores. Despite an "absolute right to society's assistance" and the administrative apparatus to secure it, the English peasant benefitting from that right can scarcely be distinguished from the Spanish peasant, though Spain is much poorer.²³⁹ A "law that gives to all poor –whatever the origin of their poverty – a right to public assistance" undermines man's need to labor to live. This also describes the indiscriminate giving of the charitable organization. However, the charitable organization relies on the voluntary gifts of its donors. A law by contrast redistributes through taxation, which is non-voluntary. This creates a potential problem of justice and a moral problem of resentment that the fruits of the labors of the productive and industrious are used against their will to support those who do "nothing or make bad use of their work." This moves Tocqueville to pose the question, "Is it possible to escape these disastrous consequences of a good principle?"

To the suggestion that administrators might examine the merit or desert of welfare recipients, or create work requirements, Tocqueville responds that these "palliatives" fail for

²³⁸ *Memoir*, 14- 15.

²³⁹ *Memoir*, 15.

reasons “easily... understood.”²⁴⁰ For a magistrate to establish merit or blame for poverty is an impossible enterprise. This is an epistemic point barely remarked on in the literature.

Nothing is so difficult as distinguishing the nuances that separate an undeserved happiness from misfortune that vice has produced. How many miseries are simultaneously the result of both of these two causes! What profound knowledge about the character of each man and of the circumstances in which he has lived is presumed by judgment about such a point, what cold and inexorable reason! Where will be found the magistrate with the conscience, the time, the talent, the means of devoting himself to such an examination? Who will dare to let a poor man die of hunger because this death is his own fault? Who will hear his cries and argue about his vices? At the sight of the miseries of our fellow men, even personal interest is quieted?²⁴¹

Tocqueville is not doubting there may be some deserving and some undeserving poor. Desert matters for justice. However, merit may be inscrutable. The challenge of assessing merit rightly produces in the soul of a magistrate a fear that someone’s further misfortune would be on their hands. Behold a problem. Knowing the causes of poverty seems relevant, necessary even, to helping the poor and to crafting proper and correct policy to alleviate their poverty. This is part of the aim of social science and statistics about poverty such as compiled by Villeneuve-Bargemont or Senior. However, discerning the causes of poverty *well* –truthfully and justly assessing the admixture of personal responsibility and circumstances – is only possible for someone with godlike knowledge, who “Holding in his hands the sorrows or the joys, the life or the death of a considerable portion of his fellow men... [would] not shrink from the exercise of this terrible power.” This presents an intractable problem, not simply for Tocqueville and as articulated by Tocqueville, but for social policy generally and for the magistrate specifically. Two responses would include mercy for all or hypocrisy, claiming to reward only innocent poverty while making public charity universally accessible. Consequently,

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ *Memoir*, 16.

Poverty is identified, but its causes remain unclear: poverty is an evident fact, but its causes can only be proven by reasoning that is always contestable... The laws will have declared that blameless poverty alone will be given assistance but in practice, assistance will be given to all poverty.²⁴²

Tocqueville elsewhere emphasizes that democratic minds love “simple and general ideas” and “uniform legislation.”²⁴³ Here is a benevolent, even merciful application of that tendency. But he also emphasizes the hubris of the misplaced hope “that you can achieve a very great result with the help of a single means” such as universal public assistance.²⁴⁴ Making public charity a gift in this way remains a practical challenge. Resources are finite; thus officials institute work requirements – which makes public charity not in fact free.²⁴⁵ Furthermore, the growing poor population may outstrip the available work opportunities. Seeming to run into problems at each turn, Tocqueville concludes we “delude” ourselves by thinking that such systems will finally solve the problem perfectly. “The laws must be made for men and not with an eye to an ideal perfection that does not correspond to human nature or to patterns that are only rarely seen.”²⁴⁶

But does it matter that charity is a gift? What if it were a right? The monastic system, the medieval counterpoint to the modern welfare state, represented “lofty ideals” of morality and religion, Tocqueville says, though it had its own “vices.” Within the monastic and Christian framework, charity was a gift, given graciously in imitation of God and with reference to God, and while the alms themselves might not have been infinite, God’s charity and mercy (of which

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ DA, 1195.

²⁴⁴ DA, 741, note d. See Cheryl Welch, “Tocqueville’s New Political Science in the Shadow of the Old,” *Tocqueville Review*, 40, 1 (2019): 185-211.

²⁴⁵ Contrast the priest in a Catholic country with the Protestant welfare magistrate. The priest does give charity “indiscriminately... to all those in need;” the Eucharist and God’s grace is, so to speak, a renewable resource. Financial aid in the form of public assistance, however, is not endlessly renewable, nor are work opportunities.

²⁴⁶ *Memoir*, 17.

alms are part) could be .Legal charity that is established on a “permanent basis” and takes a bureaucratic and “administrative form” reproduces all the “vices” of the monastic system, Tocqueville argues, without its moral ideals. It creates a class dependent on the industrial class (both the owners of the means of production *and* the working class) and makes this dependence a right. Charity itself therefore is transformed when it is made a right.

With this, Tocqueville returns to the themes with which he opened Part II of the *Memoir* and offers a moral critique of public charity. In *Democracy*, he had described the “idea of rights” as a “divine notion,” “nothing more than the idea of virtue introduced into the political world.”²⁴⁷ Here he similarly argues “there is nothing that elevates and sustains the human mind [esprit] more than the idea of rights,” for it elevates him who asserts his rights to the level as he who grants.²⁴⁸ However, the right to charity, Tocqueville argues, is “unique” in that it does the opposite. It publicizes and legalizes a condition of political and social inequality and “debases” the man who claims it. Does not private charity also require recognizing inequality? Yes. But for Tocqueville, this is easily resolved by the nature of private charity. The poor person who “[appeals] to individual charity... recognizes [his inferior state] in secret and for a moment,” and receives the gift of charity based on a common humanity, the *imago dei*, in the sight of God. “The poor person who demands alms in the name of the law is thereby in a still more humiliating position than the indigent who his fellow beings for alms out of pity and in the name of the One who regards all men from the same point of view and who subjects rich and poor to equal

²⁴⁷ DA, 391, 389.

²⁴⁸ *Memoir*, 18.

laws.”²⁴⁹ Better to ask for alms in the name of a personal God, who judges all equally and whose Providence made some rich and some poor, than in the name of the State and its law.

This appeal to the Creator could easily be dismissed. However, Tocqueville doubles down on the personal nature of the gift of private charity versus the impersonal redistribution of public charity. The personal, face-to-face nature of private charity – meeting the beggar in person, as Gary Anderson emphasized -- is essential to charity itself.²⁵⁰ In Tocqueville’s words:

The act of generosity itself makes the giver interested in the one whose poverty he has undertaken to relieve. The second, supported by assistance that he has no right to demand and that he perhaps did not hope to obtain, feels himself drawn by gratitude. A moral link is established between these two classes that have so many interests and passions contributing to their separation and though they are divided by fortune, their will brings them together.²⁵¹

The spontaneous and free gift of charity not only overcomes the material self-interest of the giver but actively and voluntarily wills the well-being of the other. That the recipient *has no right* means it is fully a gift for which he may feel deep gratitude. He can feel seen as a person. That this exchange is predicated on inequality is not a moral problem for Tocqueville. But in legal charity, the “alms remain but their morality is removed.”²⁵² Legal charity removes the personal, producing resentment in both the giver -- whose surplus is not freely given but taken by taxation, making him more tied to his surplus -- and the recipient, who “feels no gratitude for a benefit that could not be denied him.” Materially it provides regular and assured support to the poor. Morally it achieves the opposite of its well-intentioned aims: “Far from tending to unite into a single people these two rival nations that are called the rich and the poor and that have existed

²⁴⁹ *Memoir*, 19.

²⁵⁰ Anderson, *Charity*, 7-8.

²⁵¹ *Memoir*, 19.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

since the beginning of the world, legal charity breaks the only line that could have been established between them.”²⁵³ Now when the rich and poor meet “face-to-face” it is “for combat.” Even at that great expense, it fails to eliminate poverty. The poor remain with us, and society is demoralized and divided.

The lost morality of the act is fundamental for Tocqueville because it points toward what it is to respect and honor – if not also love -- the human person. Public welfare robs the pauper, who has been “reduced to the satisfaction of his most pressing needs,” of his spirit and of “the respect of his fellows, which is the first condition of all progress.”²⁵⁴

What action for conscience and human activity remains in a being so limited in every way, who lives without hope and without fear because he knows the future, as an animal does, because he ignores destiny’s circumstances, and who is thus focused like the animal in the present and in the ignoble and fleeting pleasures that the present offers to a brutalized nature? ²⁵⁵

Compare with *Democracy*: “If men ever succeed in being content with material goods, it is to be believed that they would little by little lose the art of producing them, and that they would end by enjoying them without discernment and without progress, like the animals.”²⁵⁶ For the sake of his material well-being, the pauper is also “immobilized,” attached to the parish where he receives benefits. The law and reason disincentivize him from taking liberty. For in a country where public charity exists, “individual charity is almost unknown.” He could not beg for alms or

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 20.

²⁵⁵ Ibid. See DA, 548-582.

²⁵⁶ DA, 939-941, 964.

receive public charity elsewhere. Consequently, anyone whom “poverty menaces” is likewise circumscribed, tied down “just as the medieval peasants were.”²⁵⁷

Tocqueville proceeds to offer several anecdotes from his time visiting Lord Radnor in England of the ways in which pauperism acts as a “hideous and immense tumor” on the body of England. The examples are illustrative, both of what Tocqueville observed and what he intended his audience to appreciate. The first example: a well-dressed man in a wig revealed to be living off public subsidies and who had appeared in court to protest the diminishment of his payments. The second: a poor young pregnant woman, “whose faded features bear the imprint of her sufferings,” whose husband had departed on a sea voyage. Having heard nothing from him, she demands alms but the “overseer of the poor hesitates to give it to her.” Meanwhile her “well-off merchant” father-in-law “refuses to fulfill the duties that nature imposes on him but which the law does not demand from him. The magistrates insist; they attempt to inspire remorse or compassion in this man’s selfish soul,” but they fail, and the village is compelled to support the young woman.²⁵⁸ Next, young healthy men who demand assistance or work from the village. Next, several young women pregnant outside marriage on whose “carelessness” and “lack of modesty” Tocqueville comments. The first names the father of her child; he is present and they leave together, a family unit created by court order. The second names the father, who is absent.

²⁵⁷ *Memoir*, 21. These passages bear similarities to Tocqueville’s discussion of American slavery in *Democracy in America* Volume I. Slavery, he argues, fatally links the “transitory fact of slavery” with “the material and permanent fact of the difference of race,” and transforms this into a moral judgment. Once a man has been enslaved, “we hardly recognize in him the general features of humanity... we very nearly take him for being an intermediate between a brute and man.” The parallel between the enslaved person and the pauper has limits, but the shared language of brutalization alerts us that Tocqueville sees them as comparable, and that Tocqueville’s view of the pauper recognizes the ways in which he is a victim of broader systemic political, administrative, legal, and economic forces. See DA, 548-582.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 23.

These examples Tocqueville provides mix moral disapprobation with tragedy and pathos. He clearly sees as undignified and undeserving the old man and the young men of working age who make claims upon the state. Likewise, the young women pregnant outside of marriage betray to Tocqueville's eyes a willingness to exploit state coffers when lack of sexual restraint produces a child. These women "enrich themselves by their very vices" because "illegitimate pregnancies must almost always improve these women's material situation."²⁵⁹ This is in contrast to the two other cases of pregnancy: the woman who should be able to call upon family support but whose family unjustly will not help, therefore will be supported by the State; the man and woman who admit their parentage of their child are sent away together without State support. Tocqueville declares through the words of Lord X (Lord Radnor) that legal charity has incentivized sexual freedom. As the examples demonstrate, it also makes it possible for families to fail to support their own. That legal charity makes permissible broader sexual freedom does not however make the state "anti-family." Radnor states that the care for abandoned babies, the "neediest of all indigents," is the greatest public expense and that the State goes to great lengths to maintain children in the care of their parents, including through State support.

The issue of abandoned children and single mothers, and the role of welfare in creating incentives, is an issue to which Tocqueville returned. The fate of orphans and abandoned children were an issue Tocqueville had been politically and personally invested in since before his travels to America.²⁶⁰ In America, he and Beaumont had encountered religious and charitable institutions for children and adolescents in New York and Boston that they admired for their

²⁵⁹ *Memoir*, 25.

²⁶⁰ This may have been related to his affairs as a young, single man; it is sometimes speculated that he fathered a child at the age of sixteen in Metz. See Zunz, *The Man Who Understood Democracy*, 17.

success in caring for and educating them.²⁶¹ During his tenure in the departmental assembly of La Manche, Tocqueville studied this issue further. He observed that society must “dans certains cas prévus et avec certaines précautions indiquées par la loi, venir au secours des orphelins qui ne peuvent se passer absolument de son appui,” particularly given the absence of a sufficient civil society infrastructure.²⁶² Though in France the principle remained that no one had the “droit au secours,” exceptions to this rule exist for “certaines misères qui, par leur nature, sont si irrémédiables et si bien définies, que l’exception est nécessairement renfermée dans des limites connues d’avance.” This is above all the case of orphans and abandoned children. Tocqueville, in considering whether the “tours d’abandon” ought to be suppressed to prevent mothers from abandoning their children, reflects on the difficulty of writing just policy that helps the needy but also does not implicitly disadvantage others. He provides the example of the child whose father left versus the child whose father died: Should policy only support one or the other when they are effectually in “la même situation”? Should one punish the child whose father left because his father left? Is to support the child whose father left to incentivize abandoning one’s children?

Tocqueville extends this line of thought further :

Toutes les misères humaines, quelle que soit leur origine, sont sœurs. Elles se tiennent par la main, et la société ne peut offrir un asile à l’une d’entre elles sans attirer aussitôt toutes les autres à sa porte.

Vous prenez à votre charge l’enfant naturel que la fille-mère ne peut nourrir ; pourquoi ne pas prendre aussi le fils de la veuve ? Pourquoi pas l’enfant que l’inconduite ou la misère de ses parents légitimes menacent de périr ? vous soulager la fille-mère, pourquoi laisser sans secours la femme honnête ? vous soignez le malade, pourquoi abandonner le pauvre ?

Et qu’est-ce que tous ces secours que la société distribue à ceux qui souffrent, sinon les conséquences diverses d’une même idée, les portions détachées d’un seul et vaste système de législation qu’on nomme la charité légale ; system dont toutes les parties se tiennent

²⁶¹ For a summary of Tocqueville’s work on abandoned children, see Drolet, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Social Reform*, 161-173.

²⁶² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Textes économiques*, ed. J.L. Benoit and Eric Keslassy, (Paris: Pocket, 2005), 322-331.

étroitement et se commandent les unes les autres, de telle sorte qu'il est impossible de les développer out de les restreindre séparément ? ...

Nous nous effrayons encore à ce terrible mot de la charité légale. Le nom nous fait peur et nous ne voyons pas que nous avons depuis longtemps la chose...

La charité légale vous envahit de toutes parts, mais elle marche au hasard, faisant tantôt trop, tantôt trop peu ; créant ici des habitudes qu'il faudra changer, ailleurs ne préparant pas aux habitudes qu'il faudrait prendre.²⁶³

By admitting this, Tocqueville declares “on fait ici un premier pas sur le champ sans limites que parcourt la charité légale en Angleterre.”²⁶⁴ Tocqueville’s conclusion on this issue as a politician in the mid-1840s may be surprising. The state should suppress the tours d’abandon and provide support to single mothers because a child without a parent is a “prolétaire qui ne possède même pas une famille” and maintaining such “liens salutaires” is good not only for the child but for society at large.²⁶⁵ Whatever cost it amounts to, it is worth the cost to preserve the bonds of family that furnish the social and political identity of a child and future citizen, even if it creates incentives for single motherhood. It is also, notably, less costly to support single mothers than to raise a child as a ward of the state. Finally, he urges this issue can only be partially solved at the local level, given the existing administrative infrastructure. “Le législateur seul” can adequately and legally “harmoniser et régulariser” all the parties.²⁶⁶ In this mode, he does not sound like the philosopher who decries soft despotism. His conclusions here and the reasoning behind them

²⁶³ Ibid, 343-344. See also 340-341 : “Il en résultera nécessairement ceci : c’est que, dans un grand nombre de communes, on verra bientôt, à cote d’une fille mère à laquelle la société vient apporter régulièrement son aumône, une mère légitime qui succombera sous le poids de sa misère ou qui ne sera secourue que d’une manière très irrégulière et très incomplète. Un pareil spectacle pourra-t-il se supporter longtemps dans le sein d’une société civilisée, messieurs ? Non sans doute... »

²⁶⁴ Ibid, 328.

²⁶⁵ Ibid, 329. “L’enfant trouvé est un prolétaire qui ne possède même pas une famille. Il ne tient à rien dans le corps social ; il ne s’intéresse à rien ; il ne s’y sait responsable de rien ; comment en deviendrait-il un membre utile ? Sa mère, en le rejetant du sein de la famille naturelle, et en perdant ses traces, a produit le grand mal ; la société en brisant les liens de la famille adoptive, rend ce mal irrémédiable. On ne saurait combiner d’une manière plus funeste un crime individuel et une erreur sociale. »

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 344.

underscore both the necessity of undertaking social reform and the difficulty of doing so concretely and in perfect concordance with one's ideal theories.

What is to be done? Christian charity applied to politics and developing the art of association

Tocqueville concludes the *Memoir* by asking the question, what then is to be done? He expresses he does not share the optimism of many Englishmen about reform of the Poor Laws under Senior, which maintain society's "obligation to feed the poor." Those who desire to help the poor too often do "the good that pleases most of those who give," not that "which is truly useful for the recipient; not that which most completely relieves the miseries of some, but which serves the well-being of the greatest number."²⁶⁷ The beneficence of policy makers may serve them more than it serves those they try to help; beneficence in this aspect "does not deserve the name of virtue." He thus returns to the first type of charity, to private charity between persons. This charity "almost always produces useful results. It addresses the largest miseries; it walks quietly behind misfortune and unannounced and silently, repairs the ills misfortune has caused. It shows up everywhere there are unfortunates to assist; it grows with suffering."²⁶⁸ In other words, it is free, voluntary, a gift, not a right or entitlement one can claim. "One does not know where it can be found, and it is not aroused by the cry of all sufferings." Under modern democratic and industrial conditions, in a world where "blind devotions and instinctive virtues" are more and more rare, a world very different from the Middle Ages where "religious fervor gave [charity] immense energy," individual charity appears weak.²⁶⁹ This weakness "protects it" from

²⁶⁷ *Memoir*, 26.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 26.

²⁶⁹ DA, 923, 967.

producing dangerous consequences a la public charity but also makes it seem inadequate to the modern challenge. “Individual charity is a powerful agent that society must not scorn, but to which it would be imprudent to entrust itself; it is one means, but it cannot be the sole one.”²⁷⁰

The state therefore must act in some way. Tocqueville unambiguously declares “not only the utility but also the necessity” of a public charity that responds to “inevitable evils such as infant frailty, the failings of old age, illness, insanity,” and public emergency, and that provides an education to the children of the poor. But this ought to be, however and wherever possible, distinguished from a “regularized, permanent, administrative system” which separates the rich and poor and paves the way for “violent revolution” whenever it becomes easier to “strip [the rich] suddenly of their goods than to demand assistance from them.”²⁷¹

Public charity therefore can in fact be both just and necessary on Tocqueville’s terms, even if in its justice and its necessity it may pave the way either for soft despotism or violent revolution. Again, in Delba Winthrop’s words, soft despotism can resemble “an aggravated version of the European welfare state.”²⁷² But Tocqueville *would* have his audience recognize that it loses something of the integrity and morality of charity as originally understood and that it is a poor substitute for the face-to-face encounters of private charity, *intérêt bien entendu*, and the richness of associational life. “Sentiments and ideas are renewed, the heart grows larger, and the human mind develops only by the reciprocal action of men on each other.”²⁷³

²⁷⁰ *Memoir*, 28.

²⁷¹ *Ibid*, 27.

²⁷² Winthrop, “Rights, interests, and honor,” 204.

²⁷³ DA, 900-901.

Tocqueville would later describe his positive vision of a limited but effective public charity as “Christian charity applied to politics.” This language appears both in letters and many years later in his September 12, 1848, speech, “On the Right to Work.”²⁷⁴ Picking up the thread of the *Memoir on Pauperism*, he argued to the Académie in 1842 that elite patronage societies working on prison reform would lose their effectiveness if they were gradually assimilated into centralized government. Their independence and their non-compulsory nature underscore their integrity.”²⁷⁵ “Whatever happens, it will never be possible to *effectively* combine Government action and individual charity.”²⁷⁶ He went on, “To want to create or regulate [charity] in the name of the law is to destroy it.” His and Beaumont’s writings on a variety of social reforms reflect a delicate, nuanced dance between what would be necessary as a matter of justice for the common good, and what properly speaking must be left free, to the realm of civil society, voluntary action, and charity.

In his 1843 letters with Gobineau, which we discussed in Chapter 1, Tocqueville developed his argument that the modern mind was much more distanced from Christian theology than from Christian philosophy by discussing charity and welfare. Where Christianity had established equality in the *imago dei*, the moderns sought to make this equality immanent and material: “L’idée que tous les hommes ont un droit à certains biens, a certaines jouissances... a pris une immense étendue et des aspects d’une variété infinie.” The Christian virtue of charity, “nous en faisons de plus en plus un devoir social, une obligation politique... » On governments

²⁷⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, “Tocqueville’s Critique of Socialism (1848), » trans. Ronald Hamowy, Liberty Fund, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/page/tocqueville-s-critique-of-socialism-1848>.

²⁷⁵ Tocqueville, “Report to the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences on M. Allier’s Book: Studies on the Penitentiary system and Patronage societies,” June 4, 1842, in *Tocqueville and Beaumont on Social Reform*, 90-98.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 95.

was imposed « une obligation étroite de réparer certaines inégalités, de venir au secours de certaines misères... »²⁷⁷ In Tocqueville's follow up letter to Gobineau, he indicated that public charity was in fact an inheritance of Christianity that had been transformed by the modern bureaucratic apparatus: "Vous dites que l'aumône, de privée, est devenue sociale... j'y vois plutôt la doctrine chrétienne d'une époque très civilisée, très administrative, très démocratique qu'un système nouveau... C'est la charité légale directe." Modern welfare does, on Tocqueville's view, rest on theology via Christian philosophy.

It is however a notable speech in 1848 where Tocqueville makes the clearest statement about "Christian charity applied to politics." When the February 1848 Revolution and the June Days had made the matter of a new French constitution all too urgent, a Constituent Assembly in September 1848 turned to forming a constitution.²⁷⁸ An amendment was introduced establishing the "right of all citizens to education, work, and assistance," all central demands of the socialist Left. Its opponents however, including Montalembert, Thiers, and Tocqueville, carried the day.

²⁷⁷ *Lettres choisies*, 518.

²⁷⁸To summarize: Following escalating discontent with the July Monarchy, a financial crisis and poor harvest in 1846, and widespread depression in the "Hungry Forties," the prohibition of the Banquet Campaign's planned banquet for February 22, 1848, became the occasion of revolution. After the resignation of Guizot on February 23, a provisional republican government, the Second Republic, was formed on February 26; universal male suffrage was decreed on March 2, and elections scheduled for April. The Constituent Assembly elected that April was politically moderate, and radicals such as Francois-Vincent Raspail, Louis Blanqui, and others led Parisian workers in attempting to establish a new government – an attempt suppressed by the National Guard. The struggle was not over. From June 23 to 26, christened "the June Days," Parisian workers led uprisings against the Constituent Assembly who now sought to close National Workshops established in February to provide jobs for the unemployed. Men of the left, such as Lamartine and Ledru Rollin who both were agitators in the Banquet Campaign, sided with the "Party of Order" against the workers. The new Constituent Assembly turned in the months of September and October to forming a constitution.

Karl Marx on this: "The first draft of the constitution, made before the June days, still contained the *droit au travail*, the right to work, the first clumsy formula wherein the revolutionary demands of the proletariat are summarized. It was transformed into the *droit à l'assistance*, the right to public relief, and what modern state does not feed its paupers in some form or other? The right to work is, in the bourgeois sense, an absurdity, a miserable, pious wish. But behind the right to work stands the power over capital; behind the power over capital, the appropriation of the means of production, their subjection to the associated working class, and therefore the abolition of wage labor, of capital, and of their mutual relations. Behind the "right to work" stood the June insurrection." Karl Marx, "Defeat of the Revolution! Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850," <http://marxengels.public-archive.net/en/ME0638en.html>.

Scholars have shown that under Tocqueville's influence, legislators replaced the "droit" to work with a "more circumscribed" expression of the state's obligation to the poor.²⁷⁹ Tocqueville's speech offered a defense of a limited public charity on the grounds that the French Revolution of 1789 had introduced "Christian charity into politics."²⁸⁰ He leans on ideas from in the *Memoir* in arguing for an energetic but limited welfare state and counters the appropriation of both democracy and Christianity by radicals on the Left. His argument is urgent and political, often rhetorical. It however reiterates concisely some of Tocqueville's central anthropological, moral, and political principles while also emphasizing political prudence and the need for restrained welfare policies that attend to the most miserable without suppressing freedom or tyrannizing over civil society.

Socialism he characterizes as making "an incessant, vigorous and extreme appeal to the material passions of man." It has the aim of "unlimited wealth for all" and men "paid not according to merit but according to need." It makes an attack "either direct or indirect, on the principle of private property," and has "a profound opposition to personal liberty and scorn for individual reason, a complete contempt for the individual..." Tocqueville asks whether it was such a materialistic vision for which the French Revolution was fought,

a formal, regimented and closed society where the State has charge of all, where the individual counts for nothing, where the community masses to itself all power, all life,

²⁷⁹Daniel Mahoney, "Welfare Rights as Socialist Manqué," Law and Liberty, August 27, 2012, <https://www.lawliberty.org/2012/08/27/welfare-rights-as-socialist-manque/>. Seymour Drescher and Sharon Watkins discovered Tocqueville's role in dropping the word "right" from the final constitution.

²⁸⁰Tocqueville explicitly does not use the word fraternity and refuses to replace charity with "fraternity" in this speech, a rebuke to socialist Christians who emphasized fraternity, equality, and union, and eliminated liberty. It suggests his intervention in ongoing debates over the historiography of the French Revolution, the relationship of Christianity and socialism – whether, as claimed by Louis Blanc, socialism was "the Gospel in action" -- and the relationship of charity and fraternity, and of each to justice. See previously mentioned Berenson, "A new Religion of the Left: Christianity and Social radicalism in France, 1815-1848," in Francois Furet and Mona Ozouf (eds), *The French Revolution and the creation of modern political culture*, vol. 3, pg. 543-560, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015015166195>.

where the end assigned to man is solely his material welfare—this society where the very air is stifling and where light barely penetrates? Is it to be for this society of bees and beavers, for this society, more for skilled animals than for free and civilized men, that the French Revolution took place? Is it for this that so many great men died on the field of battle and on the gallows, that so much noble blood watered the earth? Is it for this that so many passions were inflamed, that so much genius, so much virtue walked the earth?²⁸¹

If it had been the case, the Revolution would have been in vain. Therefore, he argues, the guiding vision should not be socialist but should take its bearings from America where “I have seen [democracy] alive, active, triumphant... durable,” where one finds equality and “more freedom than has been known,” where democracy and socialism are “not interdependent” but “different” and “opposing philosophies.” Democracy, in and outside America, he argues is inconsistent with a “meddlesome, all-encompassing and restrictive government,” even if that government is “publicly chosen” and acting “in the name of the people.” Rightly understood, Tocqueville continues with his rhetorical display, “Democracy extends the sphere of personal independence; socialism confines it. Democracy values each man at his highest; socialism makes of each man an agent, an instrument, a number.” Socialism is not unlike democratic materialism. While aiming to ensure material well-being, it misunderstands and undermines genuine well-being.

The February Revolution, he contends, therefore must not be “social.” The new republic they are crafting must be a “real continuation” of the noblest aims of the 1789 Revolution. This entails granting “enlightenment and liberty” and not enshrining political class distinctions. As to the right to work:

Finally, the French Revolution wished – and it is this which made it not only beatified but sainted in the eyes of the people – *to introduce charity into politics. It conceived the notion of duty towards the poor, the suffering, something more extended, more universal than had ever preceded it. It is this idea that must be recaptured, not I repeat by substituting the prudence of the State for individual wisdom, but by effectively coming to the aid of those*

²⁸¹ “Tocqueville’s Critique of Socialism.”

in need, to those who, after having exhausted their resources, would be reduced to misery if not offered help, through those means which the State already has at its disposal...

I ask, is that socialism?

From the Left: Yes! Yes, that is exactly what socialism is.

Tocqueville: Not at all! *No that is not socialism, but Christian charity applied to politics...* There is nothing there which gives to workers a claim on the State. There is nothing in the Revolution which forces the State to substitute itself in the place of individual foresight and caution, in the place of the market, in the place of individual integrity. There is nothing in it which authorizes the State to meddle in the affairs of industry or to impose its rules on it, *to tyrannize over the individual in order to better govern him, or as it is insolently claimed, to save him from himself. There is nothing in it but Christianity applied to politics.*

Yes, *the February Revolution must be Christian and democratic, but it must on no account be socialist.* These words *sum up all my thinking* and I leave you with them. (Italics added.)²⁸²

What Tocqueville describes here as “Christianity applied to politics” amounts to a limited but effective public charity like that recommended in the *Memoir*. Tocqueville would have the new constitution affirm a specifically political duty to the poor and makes clear that this idea is an inheritance of Christianity. The responsibilities of the State for the poor should not, however, compromise the freedoms of civil society, association, and private property that are constitutive of a free and flourishing social order. Mahoney offers this evaluation of Tocqueville’s “Christian democratic vision” that “repudiated both libertarianism and collectivism”

We misread his powerful and still relevant warning against the tutelary state if we confuse it with an absolute opposition to centralized government within its own sphere or to government provision for the poor... the moral and political alternatives are not exhausted by the socialist confiscation of human liberty or by the utopia of an ultra-minimalist state.²⁸³

²⁸² “Tocqueville’s Critique of Socialism.”

²⁸³ Daniel Mahoney: “It should be clear that for all his concerns about the dangers of tutelary despotism and the socialist subversion of democracy, Tocqueville did not oppose the welfare state per se at least in a modest and self-limiting form. Within bounds, it was a legitimate application of Christianity to politics.” Mahoney, “Christianity, Democracy, Socialism: Tocqueville’s defense of a limited public charity in politics,” 45.

However quixotic his hopes to cultivate in Frenchmen habits of association, it is unsurprising Tocqueville turns to associations as answers to pauperism that do not exacerbate the trends towards centralization *and* that maintain something of the free, gracious, and voluntary character of individual charity. As in *Democracy*, where he recommends associations as “aristocratic persons” capable of cooperative and collaborative action, in the first *Memoir* he concludes “Associations of charitable people could give greater activity and power to individual beneficence.”²⁸⁴ The unpublished 1837 *Memoir*, and further writings on pauperism and the working classes each lean on the association in its various forms. As to the second *Memoir*, whereas the agricultural poor need to grow in their stewardship and ownership of private property, achieving this for the industrial poor is more difficult. Given the regularity of industrial crises and that the industrial classes “regardless of the general and permanent causes of poverty” will suffer from them, “It is therefore quite necessary to be able to protect them both from the evils that they bring upon themselves and from those evils against which they can do nothing. The whole question” is the right preventive and mitigative means.²⁸⁵ Workers’ associations he describes as potent if not yet a fully ripe idea:

As our workers gain broader knowledge, and as the art of associating together for honest and peaceful goals makes progress among us, when politics does not meddle in industrial associations and when government, reassured about their goals, does not refuse them its benevolence and its support, we will see them multiply and prosper. In democratic ages like ours, I think that associations of all sorts must gradually come to take the place of the commanding action of a few powerful individuals.²⁸⁶

A further possibility? The establishment of savings banks united to the *monts-de-piété* pawnshops. Rather than channeling the savings of the poor into the State Treasury -- for “just a

²⁸⁴ *Memoir*, 26.

²⁸⁵ *Memoir*, 35.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 36.

part of the savings of the poor ... returns to them” and the “bulk... [gets] lost in the public funds” or the “bondholders’ hands in Paris” – the *monts-de-piété* teaches the art of saving whilst keeping their savings close to home and promising them favorable loans.²⁸⁷ By encouraging local ties, interests, and collaborations, it prevents too much dependence on the State.²⁸⁸

He further toyed with, as Henderson’s edition helpfully demonstrates, the idea of voluntary associations called “township associations” with “no political character” and “entirely separate from [the government].”²⁸⁹ These voluntary societies would be made up of anyone who saw fit to tithe an “annual sum – *of whatever amount* – for the relief of the township’s poor.” Members of the association would themselves be the recipients; those who fell into need each year would have the “right to aid” from its coffers. Tocqueville imagines several benefits from this: the burden on members to contribute would be freely accepted and chosen and therefore not undue. The person who could contribute only little “would willingly give to the association” because “added to the group funds” it could genuinely relieve the miseries of his neighbor. Furthermore, relief would go to one’s neighbor; these associations would be ideally each for a single township. Associations might also add conditions that a recipient not also be a mendicant, and that only residents would be eligible. This plan has, interestingly, some similarities to the parish-based welfare system while addressing some of the problems Tocqueville identified. Individual charity in associating together become stronger; contributions are voluntary and retain the quality of gift given rather than tax demanded; and it is non-political, “their goal being to stop an evil that strikes equally all parties and to which men of all parties are equally invited.” As

²⁸⁷ Ibid, 42-44.

²⁸⁸ Ibid, 46.

²⁸⁹ Tocqueville, “Letter on Pauperism in Normandy,” in *Memoir*, 47.

in individual charity, the poor person “recognizes his inferior state in relation to his fellow human beings” but only “in secret and for a moment.”²⁹⁰ Lastly, because it is township-based, it respects and reflects the personal as well as voluntary dimensions of charity. Tocqueville fails to fully articulate the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity that underlie the insight that one is more willing to care for those with whom one lives but he comments this would be a welcome reminder to the rich that “Providence has placed them in solidarity with the poor and that no misfortunes in this world are entirely isolated.”²⁹¹

Even after Louis Napoleon’s coup aborted the Second Republic, Tocqueville’s pessimism for the future of political liberty in France did not necessarily undermine his hopes for association for the working and industrial classes. In the last years of his life, Tocqueville became close to Madame Sophie Swetchine, the liberal Catholic salonnière with whom he corresponded on spiritual and religious matters and whose extended circle of liberally and socially minded Catholic reformers he became acquainted with. Within his own day, as Mélonio and Kahan have both commented, Tocqueville remained somewhat an “outsider” to the Catholic fold, though within a few decades of his death, he would be praised as the first “rallié” along Leonine lines – though also castigated as a “criminal” by other Catholics.²⁹² Much writings on this late portion of his life however tend to either obscure his participation with social Catholics or characterize it as superficial while emphasizing his ongoing qualms about the cause of political liberty and the relationship of French Catholics to Napoleon. Nevertheless we glean something valuable about Tocqueville’s concerns and activities in his final years and his

²⁹⁰ *Memoir*, 18.

²⁹¹ “Letter on Pauperism in Normandy,” in *Memoir*, 49.

²⁹² Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, 118. On Charles Maurras’s hatred of Tocqueville, see Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, 177-181. See also Kahan, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Religion*, 147-172.

commitment to social policy during his retirement from politics from his engagement with social Catholics.

Take for example his participation in a conference organized by Armand de Melun in July 1855, as detailed by one Francophone scholar.²⁹³ The Réunion internationale de charité opened on July 19, 1855 – the feast day of St. Vincent de Paul, no doubt chosen for this reason – and featured speakers giving reports under five headings: childhood and infancy, social support, extinction of begging and emigration, prevention, correction, and rehabilitation. At this point retired for several years from political life, and months away from the publication of the *Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, Tocqueville gave a presentation Monday July 23 on *associations alimentaires* under the section dedicated to prevention. The specific object of his report was the l'Association alimentaire de Grenoble, an organization which after its opening in 1851 had received attention from Right and Left social reformers as a “véritable laboratoire social.” The *association alimentaire* was a new experiment that had begun to spread with remarkable success. While the *soupes populaires* or *fourneaux économiques* present in major cities provided meals to both the indigent and working poor at a loss, the new *association alimentaire* provided higher quality meals to the working poor specifically. Furthermore, the *association alimentaire* had a membership; akin to an eating club, those who ate there were its members. Tocqueville focused his remarks less on the successes of the organization, which were widely recognized, but on what he understood to be its faults, regularly invoking “la morale évangélique” in his remarks. Though they were superior to the food kitchens in quality and by virtue of their membership requirement – recalling his desire for the working class to form meaningful associations – he criticized those that did not permit take-out. Banning take-out he argued unnecessarily weakened the “domestic

²⁹³ Lhuissier, “Alexis de Tocqueville et l'économie sociale chrétienne : sociétés alimentaires et classes ouvrière.”

hearth” of the working poor by making family meals impossible, *even if* the associational benefits of workers eating in were also widely recognized.²⁹⁴

This example should not be taken out of proportion; as any academic knows, to sit on a panel and deliver a paper at a conference need not be evidence of closeness, familiarity, or like-mindedness with one’s peers and confreres. However, it demonstrates – even as he put finishing touches on the *Ancien Regime* -- Tocqueville’s ongoing engagement with matters of charity, social reform, and care for the working poor, including in a collaborative and predominantly social Catholic charitable context. It underscores the importance for him of creative measures to ensure the poor and working classes are not “prolétaires” without property, family, associational identity, or moral ties, but rather that they are being integrated into and participating in the social body. If a small example, it is also a charming one that reinforces the personal character of Tocquevillian associations and reminds us of the “thousand other things” beyond material wealth (including family dinner) “that contribute indirectly to happiness” and well-being.²⁹⁵

Charity and providence

This chapter has been dedicated to Tocqueville’s theorization of public versus private charity. It has shown that his thought takes as given the imperfections of the world, the chasm between ideal theory and the study of politics, on the one hand, and the implementation and practice of public policy on the other. It has shown that his concepts of well-being and poverty reject a crude materialism in favor of a more holistic spiritual and material well-being that permits him to then evaluate the conditions of the poor and working classes and systems of

²⁹⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, « Sociétés alimentaires, » in *Annales de la Charité*, (Paris : Librairie d’Adrien Le Clere, 1855), 559, cited in L’Huissier.

²⁹⁵ Cited in Damrosch, 206. Also in *Selected Letters*, 96-98.

welfare on a broader basis than material wealth and redistribution. It has drawn on the thinkers from whom Tocqueville learned political economy to indicate not just some of the first encounters he had with approaches to pauperism but how the evolving discipline of political economy and the questions it posed engaged deeper questions of human anthropology, theology, and theodicy, the tendrils of which appear in Tocqueville. It has detailed his critique of public welfare in the Poor Laws through the lens of the goodness of private charity – the goodness of which is found in its moral quality as a free and voluntary gift in the encounter between persons, a gift made in light of a common humanity in the eyes of God, that binds giver and recipient in a moral relationship that uplifts both and permits both to, in a sense, transcend themselves in the encounter with the other. It has complicated his critique of public charity by evaluating his concept of a “Christian charity applied to politics,” while outlining how he thought association might still not only mitigate further development of pauperism but could do so in ways that preserve qualities of private charity while extending its reach and strengthening its grasp.

Let us return to a question posed by Drescher and Henderson, namely is the slide into soft despotism inevitable. Tocqueville does not, in fact, provide a clear answer. His insistence on associational life to stop or slow the spread of soft despotism should be understood on two related but distinct grounds that his evaluation of public versus private charity clarifies. First, notwithstanding the meaningfully different domains and modes of human life, the boundary between those domains is sometimes more or less clear, sometimes more or less porous, sometimes more or less inclined to spillover effects. Associations embody this in their constitution; they are personal; they require cooperation; they mediate between the public and the private. The democratic social state removed the middle tier of what had been the three-tiered aristocratic arrangement of king, nobility, and subjects, and produced the two-tiered State and

citizens. The life of associations, being akin to aristocratic persons, is necessary to democracy but unstable in democratic social states. “All that Tocqueville wrote about civil society and local politics should be understood in light of this worry.”²⁹⁶

In a word, Tocqueville thought about institutions relationally, personally.²⁹⁷ He approached associations not only in their relationship to other associations and to the State but as bodies that offered mediation among and between people. In that sense, churches were not just kinds of associations; the function of associations is akin, as Mitchell notes, to the passing of the peace in the fellowship of a church community, akin to the work of charity.²⁹⁸ The link we established in chapter 1 between *intérêt bien entendu* and Christian virtue, the “love of God that makes men virtuous”, reinforces this. To the degree therefore that public policy undermines or removes the occasion for associations and their activity, even when doing so may be urgent, necessary, or compelling on the grounds of justice, human relationships are altered, individualism encouraged, and preconditions for soft despotism put in place. None of this is to deny, nor does Tocqueville deny, that distributive justice among the citizens of a political community makes demands of solidarity in mutual assistance. But it is to underscore the complexities of balancing principles of subsidiarity and solidarity, of the State “effectively

²⁹⁶ Mitchell, “Tocqueville’s Puritans,” 351.

²⁹⁷ For two articulations of this, see Mitchell, “Tocqueville’s Puritans,” and Mitchell, “It is not Good for Man to be Alone.” Seymour Drescher likewise provides a formulation of this element of Tocqueville’s thought, which was “discursive and psychological.” “His analysis of institutions, as of social character, was personified as well. Bureaucracies were presented in terms of the bureaucrat, government in terms of the ruler, slavery in terms of the master and slave.” Drescher, *Dilemmas of Democracy*, 24.

²⁹⁸ Mitchell, “It is not Good for Man to be Alone,” 280. “Tocqueville thought that the only way forward was to forge a mode of ‘gathering together’ that took full cognizance of that disservice. Tocqueville worried that man, lonely and isolated, would choose the easier path of equality in servitude, replete with universal sympathy, well-run monied economies, and individualism. But there was another choice, a difficult choice that involved risk, uncertainty, improvisation, trust, and good will. That choice was face-to-face relations. Here the politics that emerges bespeaks not a man who possesses excellence that renders him worthy of praise, as would have been the case for Aristotle, but rather a man whose frailty in a contingent world entails that he reach out to others with an outstretched hand, perhaps akin to the ‘saying of the peace’ at a church service.”

coming to the aid of those in need... who, after having exhausted their resources, would be reduced to misery if not offered help” and not “[tyrannizing] over the individual in order to better govern him... or save him from himself,” and of therefore leaving sufficient space for “individual foresight and caution,” “individual integrity,” and for association, fellowship, *intérêt bien entendu*, and charity.²⁹⁹

Early this chapter raised the renewed interest in concepts of love in the history of political thought, whether a turn to love as a political concept is desirable, and whether modern liberalism suffers in any way by love being relegated to the supererogatory.³⁰⁰ As Ryan Hanley has emphasized in interrogating Enlightenment theories of love, weighing these questions means weighing the possibility of transcendence, and what form such transcendence might take – whether that transcendence be vertical, between a person and his Creator, or horizontal in overcoming oneself for the sake of another. He suggests, drawing from Martin Luther King, Jr., that contemporary accounts of love’s relationship with and contribution to politics often fail to duly consider this vertical dimension, the height of the triangle, without which its horizontal breadth and length are incomplete.³⁰¹ Can one have transcendence without a mediator, without a Third person? Tocqueville’s articulation of the differences between private and theological charity, which makes an appeal to God as the Third, and public charity, which appeals to the State as the third, suggests one answer to that question while also suggesting that what the Third

²⁹⁹ “Tocqueville’s Critique of Socialism (1848).” Recall Benedict XVI, “Address to the 14th Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences: “A society that honors the principle of subsidiarity liberates people from a sense of despondency and hopelessness, granting them the freedom to engage with one another in the spheres of commerce, politics, and culture. When those responsible for the public good attune themselves to the natural human desire for self-governance based on subsidiarity, they leave space for individual responsibility and initiative, but most importantly, they leave space for *love*.”

³⁰⁰ Hanley, “Introduction,” *Love’s Enlightenment*, 1-30.

³⁰¹ *Ibid*, 13.

is matters. Philosopher Elizabeth Anderson, in discussing the American “hatred” of the welfare state, has suggested that theological concepts of grace, love, merit, and the nature of Providence are and remain decisive for modern welfare policy. “We have cast off theological assumptions but we are still prisoners of these old ways of thinking which are deeply out of touch with reality and have incredibly harsh and negative consequences for people.”³⁰² For Anderson, a la Max Weber, individualism – the Protestant idea “that I’ve got to save myself” -- was “secularized over time.” In America, she argues this prohibits a healthy regard for the welfare state as a means of solidarity. By contrast, Catholic nations had “this giant institution that’s going to help people.” The charity that guided the works of the Church spilled over into social justice.

Tocqueville would contest elements of Anderson’s account. To blame Protestant individualism for “hatred” of the welfare state fails to recognize that (for Tocqueville at least) the Reformation, Protestantism, and individualism contributed to the growth of welfare states. He might suggest looking elsewhere – perhaps to the historic strength and mores of American civil society – to glean the reasons for American suspicion of welfare state.³⁰³ But that “theological assumptions” about charity and justice might still guide contemporary politics of distribution is not for him under question. “Our society is much more distanced from theology than from Christian philosophy.”³⁰⁴

³⁰² Elizabeth Anderson, “Why do so many Americans hate the welfare state?” *The Irish Times*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/why-do-so-many-americans-hate-the-welfare-state-1.4057860>. There is no reference to Tocqueville in Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don’t Talk About It)*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.) He appears in passing in: Elizabeth Anderson, “Can We Talk? Communicating Moral Concern in an Age of Polarized Politics,” *Journal of Practical Ethics* 10 (2022) 1: 67-92.

³⁰³ On American civic voluntarism and the ways in which civil society has cooperated with and constrained the American state, see Elisabeth S. Clemens, *Civic Gifts: Voluntarism and the Making of the American Nation-State*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020). See also Zunz, *Philanthropy in America*.

³⁰⁴ *Lettres Choiesies*, 515-18, 533-36.

Conclusion

Alexis de Tocqueville died in the spring of 1859 in a house outside of Cannes, where he and his wife had come to stay with the intention of nursing themselves back to health.¹ Tocqueville's health had never been excellent; he nearly died of a fever as he and Beaumont traveled through the American wilderness, but his stubbornness and courage had often made up for what he lacked in physical vigor. Alas, this time it was not to be the case. In the last months of his life, he was nursed initially by his equally ill wife and then by three Sisters of Mercy. His dear friend Beaumont paid a final visit. Tocqueville died eleven days after his friend's departure, with his wife, his friend Kergolay, and his brother and nephew at his side. However he might have characterized his relationship with Catholicism and the Catholic Church at various points in his life, he died a Catholic in good standing, having made a confession and received the sacrament of communion. As his biographer Zunz comments, "Whether Tocqueville had a full reconciliation with his Catholic faith need not be resolved. But there is no reason to doubt, at least, the sincerity of a gesture so completely consistent with his aspirations" to "recover the faith he had known in youth."²

While Tocqueville was slowly dying in the last weeks of his life, John Stuart Mill sent him a copy of *On Liberty*, published earlier that year. Tocqueville's epistolary friendship with Mill had gone through a cool period in the 1840s from which it never quite recovered, but Tocqueville thanked him warmly and in a reconciliatory spirit for sending him the book.

¹ See Zunz, *The Man Who Understood Democracy*, 342-350.

² Ibid, 345, 344.

Tocqueville, however, never opened the book and so never had the occasion to reflect on or respond to one of the most significant adaptations of his concepts. It is a fact of striking consequence and great sadness for the history of political thought, and it leads one to reflect on all that Tocqueville *did not see*, for example the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, abolition, the First Vatican Council in 1869, the Franco-Prussian War, the Commune, and the birth of the Third Republic. When we compare Tocqueville to his generational peers born in the opening of the nineteenth century – Mill who died in 1873, Karl Marx who died in 1883, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Charles Darwin who each died in 1882, or John Henry Newman, who died in 1891 – Tocqueville does seem to have had his life dramatically and tragically truncated.

Tocqueville's reception from his day to our own, in France, the United States, and many other countries and cultures, has been the subject of several excellent studies.³ They attest to what can be well described – to return to the oceanic metaphor of Françoise Mélonio – as the profundity and the breadth of Tocqueville's thought, as well as its accessibility to audiences far beyond its time and place. This study has explored those depths in the interest of clarifying *intérêt bien entendu*, one of his best known yet perhaps most difficult concepts to understand precisely. By explicating Tocqueville's working out of the concept in light of the Christian moral tradition, and specifically a concept of love grounded in Christian ideals of selfless virtue, we

³ Examples include: Enrique Aguilar, "Tocqueville, Argentina, and the Search for a Point of Departure," in *Tocqueville's Voyages*, 365-389; Boyd, "Tocqueville's Conservatism and the conservative's Tocqueville," in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, 133-156; Aurelian Craiutu, "Tocqueville and Eastern Europe," in *Tocqueville's Voyages*, 390-424; Robert T. Gannett Jr., "Tocqueville and the Political Left in America: Heeding a Call for Decisive Action," in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, 157-177; Alan Levine, "Tocqueville and Anti-Americanism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, 1798-203; Reiji Matsumoto, "Tocqueville and 'Democracy in Japan'," in *Tocqueville's Voyages*, 425-455; Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*; Jose Antonio Aguilar Rivera, "Democracy in the (Other) America," in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, 204-229; James T. Schleifer, "Tocqueville in Japan and China: Readings and Questions," in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America*, 230-250; Cheryl Welch, "Introduction: Tocqueville the Twenty-First Century," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, 1-20; Olivier Zunz, "Tocqueville and the Americans: *Democracy in America* as Read in Nineteenth Century America," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, 359-396.

can perceive more clearly some of Tocqueville's intellectual lineage in figures such as Augustine and Pascal but also a Fenelon, and of his active engagement with the political economy of his day. By this, we also become aware of the possible consequences of soft despotism for the moral life; *intérêt bien entendu* and the habits, virtues, and love that can arise from it are threatened, on the one side, by democratic individualism, and on the other, by the shrinking spaces of civil society and association in which those habits can be cultivated and practiced. Individualism "threatens finally to enclose [him] entirely within the solitude of his own heart," and this is both what justifies the need for soft despotism in the eyes of vulnerable, equal democratic citizens, and what strengthens soft despotism when it appears.⁴ Welfare states, built on the ruins of the infrastructure for charity and care of the poor once operated by the institutional Catholic Church, respond to that fact of vulnerability. Welfare looks to address and soothe pauperism by means of a right to support, transforming a gift into a right and transforming the moral character of citizens and the moral character of their interactions with one another in the process. Ironically, what is intended bespeak solidarity amongst citizens, on Tocqueville's view, can instead breed two opposites to charity: hatred and resentment between rich and poor who never meet face-to-face, and if not those, indifference to the fate of your fellows *because* you assume the State will shoulder responsibilities on your behalf. The one promises war between "two rival nations," the other the end of political life itself.⁵

But not just the end of political life: the end of certain forms of human relationship and mutual dependence on which political liberty depends. Individual autonomy is an end of the liberal vision of politics. One might argue, as Bloom did in *The Closing of the American Mind*,

⁴ DA, 884.

⁵ *Memoir*, 19. *Recollections*, 9-10.

that the state of nature in liberal theory comes alive in a certain sense only with the arrival of the technology of industry and the administrative welfare state. Through the technology of the State, we can overcome our nature as social and political animals and are empowered to become atomized individuals, the unencumbered selves liberalism always said we were, in Michael Sandel's famous phrase. As we have seen, Tocqueville's intellectual critique of soft despotism, administrative centralization, industrialism, and welfare state policies belies what he understood qua statesman to be desirable as a political program for democratic well-being, namely a limited form of public welfare that provides for the material well-being of vulnerable populations while still preserving the other, less tangible, more spiritual and relational elements of well-being that are only achieved through the reciprocal action of men on one another. In other words, for the democratic social state to be *good*, to be flourishing, to reflect and uphold genuine human well-being and not the well-being of soft despotism, we need to continue to need each other. Stauffer, despite a quite different interpretation of the possibilities of *intérêt bien entendu* from what I have offered here, argues that "Love is not the only basis for devotion, but it is certainly a possible one. Tocqueville's account suggests that, in very real and powerful ways, democracy obstructs love itself."⁶ A terrifying thought that democracy, which expands the scope of our compassion for humanity write large, simultaneously closes our hearts to those around us.

If democracy does tend towards dissociation and away from forms of love, devotion, and mutual need, and if such reciprocity is constitutive of human flourishing, a fundamental challenge for the democratic social state therefore is not just to preserve liberty from the consequences of the democratic principle of equality, but to preserve essentials of human well-being rightly understood from the self-centered materialistic and individualistic distortions to

⁶ Stauffer, "Tocqueville on the Modern Moral Situation: Democracy and the Decline of Devotion."

which democracy can subject it.⁷ This well-being is both material and spiritual, and that depends on the face-to-face encounter between persons at all three social levels: in the family, in the political life of the State, and in the space between.⁸ “All that Tocqueville wrote about civil society and local politics should be understood in light of [the] worry” that the space between and what happens in the space between would be destroyed, maybe not with a bang or a single moment of totalitarian legislation, but with many small, possibly inaudible whimpers.⁹

If we grant the essential character of those face-to-face encounters, the spaces in which they take place, and the virtues they teach, if we grant that not only is it not good to be alone but that well-being includes a tapestry of voluntary and given relationships, roles, and responsibilities, we are free from the radically autonomous individualistic ideal that underlies and guides much liberal theory and free from the egalitarian two-tiered relationship of individual to State. We are also free from grounding theories of civil society and association along libertarian lines which prioritize voluntary and contractual relationships at the expense of other justificatory reasoning. We are in a world closer to that of the classical polis, of the township, of the Christian fellowship, of a polity charged with rigorous demands of upholding principles of solidarity and subsidiarity and not a severe egalitarianism. Consequently, this also does not mean making the mistake of making all politics like local politics, as MacIntyre reminds us, or alternatively, making the city like a family. To disregard those distinctions commits a different version of the error Tocqueville observes in the administrative state under soft despotism:

⁷ Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, translated by John Waggoner (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 23–25.

⁸ It is notable that both Mitchell and MacIntyre use the word face-to-face encounter to describe the phenomenon that Tocqueville and MacIntyre (respectively) see as fundamental to the fulfillment of our human nature. See Mitchell, “It is not Good for Man to Be Alone,” and MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*.

⁹ Mitchell, “Tocqueville’s Puritans,” 351.

seeking and imposing unity and uniformity where it is not fitting to the matter. Rather, it means recognizing and upholding the particularities of those spheres and modes of life, while also appreciating that those spheres are porous, permeable, and the moral formation that occurs in each will influence the others.

This project began with an exegesis of Tocqueville's theory of *intérêt bien entendu* and made the argument that it was not only compatible with virtue but that it both reflects and could lead to a form of Christian virtue, the "love of God that makes men virtuous." The project throughout has emphasized that Tocqueville considered democratic politics to have extended specific characteristics of Christian philosophy and Christian morality, despite being somewhat (and increasingly) distanced from theology itself. Christian charity applied to politics was what he designated the optimal form of welfare policy. Tocqueville did not claim to know the inside of Americans' hearts and the substance and genuineness of their beliefs, nor given his Jansenist predisposition would he have assumed he could ever discern them. We see only through a glass darkly. And yet, he might say as a good social scientist and as a complicated Catholic, we can know something of the insides of things by their works, by their external effects. He was, if not a thoroughly sincere and believing Christian, at least a philosophical one and a practical one.¹⁰ But

¹⁰ This project has largely eschewed diving into the extensive literature surrounding Tocqueville's own personal faith and its possible connection to his political theory. This project has operated under the premise that at the very least Tocqueville was his whole life, in Lacordaire's words, a kind of "philosophical Christian," if not more than that after his complicated fashion as attested to by Armand de Melun, Sophie Swetchine, and his end-of-life sacraments. See Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, "Discours de réception à l'Académie française le 24 janvier 1861, » (Paris : Vve Poussielgue-Rusand, 1861), <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb307091946>. Joshua Mitchell considers Tocqueville Catholic. See Mitchell, *Fragility*, 24-25. "What must not be forgotten is that Tocqueville the Catholic, who had etched in his mind the painful memory of the temporal prerogatives usurped by the Roman Church in Europe, recognized both the danger and need of Christian religion within a democracy." See also Doris S. Goldstein, *Trial of Faith: Religion and Politics in Tocqueville's Thought* (New York: Elsevier Press, 1975), 5-11. Galston contests Jack Lively's famous functionalist interpretation. "Tocqueville's most functionalist argument for reconciling liberalism and religion is not a functionalist argument at all. It is rather a substantive argument: that the Christianity of the Gospels is in some important sense true, and that liberalism represents the application of Gospel principles to contemporary circumstances (505-506). See William Galston, "Tocqueville on Liberalism and Religion," *Social Research*, 54, 3 (1987): 499-518. Another approach to Tocqueville's religiosity and its possible significance is Luk Sanders, "The strange belief of Alexis de Tocqueville: Christianity as philosophy,"

one does not need to be a professing, sincere Christian to notice the kinds of phenomena and ask the kinds of questions towards which Tocqueville was inclined. We also do not need to comprehend what has been outlined in this project as an apology for a specific esoteric Christian message supposedly undergirding Tocqueville's political philosophy. But we would be remiss not to notice patterns where they arise. We would also be remiss not to observe with some scholarly and moral seriousness that absent (to cite Brian Danoff) a "notion of what freedom is *for*, a notion of what it means to lead a good life, a notion which goes beyond self-interest," the task of educating democracy in its true interests seems not just superficial but futile. Absent a holistic vision of flourishing that can serve as a target or standard for individuals and the communities in which they participate, the democratic social state is prone to miscomprehend its well-being with possibly despotic political consequences.¹¹ This is clear from the structure of *Democracy* Volume II: it begins with the ideas and the stability and instability of intellectual authority. This may be among the reasons why Tocqueville, despite doing "theoretical heavy lifting" for a "pluralist conception of politics" via association, lacks "real *moral* pluralism."¹² *Intérêt bien entendu* is in fact "incomplete" without a referent, without an idea of the good that would make it *bien*

International Journal of Philosophy and Theology, 74 (2013)1: 33-53. Sanders applies Kant to Tocqueville; of course the problem with this interpretation is that Tocqueville emphasized to Gobineau that a religion is not a philosophy and must be treated differently. This of course does not mean that Tocqueville did not adopt Christian teachings and did not consider them as truthful. See *Lettres Choiesies*, 525-529.

Mary-Ann Glendon, with quite a bit of humor, suggests that Tocqueville's biographers Brogan and Jardin do him a disservice by suggesting Tocqueville's doubts made him not a Christian. "It does not seem to have occurred to either biographer that struggle with doubt is a normal feature of Christian life, famously afflicting even the Apostles."

Mary-Ann Glendon, "Alexis de Tocqueville," in *Great Jurists in French History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 276-292.

It is a good question whether Tocqueville's relationship with Christianity is such a heated subject within the literature because for him to be a sincere or professing religious believer would seem to undercut his legitimacy as a political philosopher or would suggest by example that, contrary to the position of many liberals and illiberals alike, sincere religious belief can coincide with liberal politics.

¹¹ Brian Danoff, "Alexis de Tocqueville and authority in America."

¹² Villa, "Hegel, Tocqueville, and 'Individualism.'"

entendu, however much that fact may be forgotten or obscured because of the discomfort a shared notion of the good might bring to our pluralistic democratic society.¹³ Instead, it might be argued, we overcome such discomfort by effectually forgetting we depend on such an idea, so that we may contract and relate to one another in a register that is more tolerant of difference. However open such tolerance of difference seems though, as Bloom emphasized, it might mask a deeper isolation, alienation, and individualism. Individualism is principally a moral phenomenon, not an intellectual phenomenon. The distinctive characteristic of individualism is that it closes off the democratic heart to those beyond one's most immediate sphere of interest. But for Tocqueville (and Bloom), individualism will not be without an effect on our ability to encounter one another on the level of ideas, to discuss ideas of the good. For, "Sentiments and ideas are renewed, the heart grows larger, and the human mind develops only by the reciprocal action of men on each other."¹⁴

That such a referent, such a standard, such a guide, would be derived or inspired from Christianity, if not itself Christian, is far from impossible. In fact, it is entirely consistent with Tocqueville's way of thinking. As a matter of historical fact, it also cannot be doubted that Christianity once served as that referent, whatever it may be now. This leaves us citizens in a substantially different, more pluralist America than the one Tocqueville himself experienced with the question whether we can have something like *intérêt bien entendu* and the many goods that flow from it without such a referent or with a different one. We might also ask what has been lost and gained in the face-to-face encounters of civil society and the substance of political life as a result, and ask, just as Gobineau asked Tocqueville, what was valuable in having a shared theism

¹³ See also Brian Danoff, "Asking of Freedom Something Other than Itself: Tocqueville, Putnam, and the Vocation of the Democratic Moralist," *Politics & Policy*, 35, 2 (2007): 165-190.

¹⁴ DA, 900.

or a common idea of spiritual transcendence through communion with others as that referent. That scholars describe Tocqueville as democracy's spiritual director is not only accurate, but – for anyone familiar with the Catholic practice of spiritual direction – incredibly revealing, even humorous in its aptness. It is fitting therefore to conclude with Tocqueville writing to us in the guise of democracy's clever spiritual director. Tocqueville suggests you cannot just “enlarge” your soul or open up your heart “like your house,” but perhaps “The means that, to a certain point, allow men to do without religion, is perhaps after all the only one that remains to us for leading humanity back by a long detour toward faith.”¹⁵

¹⁵ DA, 968. DA, 1089-1092. Again, note the echo with Augustine in his *Confessions*. “The house of my soul is too small for you to come in. May it be enlarged by you. It is in ruins; restore it. In your eyes it has offensive features, I admit it, I know it, but who will clean it?” Augustine, *Confessions*, 6.

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