But for the highest forms of human excellence, Tocqueville adds, that universal love of money can be devastating. No class in America thinks of itself as free from material influences for more noble, leisurely, and spiritual pursuits. Education becomes merely middle-class or practical or merely technical, and there is no audience for what the best human beings can accomplish in art, music, philosophy, theology, and so forth. In that sense, Tocqueville says that there is almost no genuinely higher education in America. Even literature becomes an industry. What disappears in middle-class democracy is everything that flows from the proud opinion that human beings are made for purposes higher than mere work, and prosperity or material success is no longer understood as a means for the good life but as the end of life itself. Prosperity and justice can coexist with a boring sort of workaholic decency that may push every manifestation of great human individuality from the stage. Tocqueville’s main worry is not that equal freedom of middle-class Americans may lead them to pursue forbidden pleasures and dangerous liaisons. Instead he worries that their materialism will be altogether too decent, or purged of the great longings that animate the most remarkable human minds and imaginations.

Middle-class democrats do not share the opinion of ancient democrats and classical philosophers that leisure is the basis of culture, a vigorous and principled political life, and individual or civic greatness. The middle-class view is that politics is just an extension of economics—a clash of interests that might be reconciled or compromised without noble exertions, deep thought, or any concern for moral goods human beings share in common. Tocqueville, finally, is less concerned with the absence of the leisure class in America than with the people who thought so little of themselves that they did not believe that they were made, in part, to devote themselves to the pursuit of the truth about God and the good.

The omnipresence of this middle-class moral and intellectual opinion is part of the tyranny the majority exercises in America over thought. Tocqueville goes as far as to explain that the reason America has no great writers is that literary excellence depends on freedom of the mind, and there is no such freedom in America. The American method of imposing this tyranny is simply to isolate or ostracize anyone who would really exercise intellectual freedom. That method is effective; it is almost impossible to have the courage to speak the truth all by oneself. Not so long ago, American writer Walker Percy confessed to having Solzhenitsyn envy. The Russian dissident, anticommmunist writer was taken seriously enough by his country to be branded a criminal and thrown in prison. America’s genuinely radical literary critics live freely but are ignored and marginalized. Socrates in America would not have been condemned to death; his life might well have passed by completely unnoticed. The gadfly would not have effectively irritated anyone of any importance. The majority loves those who flatter the people by saying that the cure for what ails democracy is just more democracy. But it tends to quickly dismiss as useless and authoritarian even friendly antidemocratic criticisms like those given by Solzhenitsyn, Socrates, and Percy.

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7Democracy in America, 2, 1, 14.
8Democracy in America, 2, 2, 11.
9Walker Percy, Lost in the Cosmos (Baltimore, Maryland: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983).
The majority, Tocqueville concludes, can pretty much do whatever it wants, and so assertive majority opinion clamps down hard in America on those who might be capable of singular greatness. Even the diversity \textit{The Federalist} says is protected by our constitutional institutions is a diversity of \textit{interests}; that limited diversity presupposes uniformity among a middle-class people who think primarily in terms of material interests. But majority tyranny is tempered in America, Tocqueville adds, by the absence of administrative centralization (which keeps the majority tyranny from being all that effective), the spirit of the legal profession (the closest thing in America to an aristocracy), and juries (which allow particularly talented lawyers and judges to instruct ordinary citizens to respect legal forms and limits).\footnote{Democracy in America, 1, 2, 8.} The Americans are better than it first seems in moderating the form of tyranny specific to their way of life.

\textbf{VOLUME II: THE DEMOCRATIC MIND AND HEART}

While the concern of Volume I is the threat that an assertive majority poses to liberty, Volume II is far more concerned with the surrender of human assertiveness or free individuality. Tocqueville’s fear is that democracy will culminate in the soft or seemingly benign despotism of mediocrities; schoolmasters who will control every facet of lives so apathetic and passive that they will have fallen below the level of humanity. A prelude to that despotism is the deference of isolated and disoriented individuals to the rule of public opinion—or the rule of no one in particular. To be ruled by someone is an offense against democracy, a degrading submission to some form of personal, aristocratic authority. But being ruled by no one or by “forces”—such as public opinion, fashion, technology, “history,” or scientific expertise—enslaves us all equally. No person with aristocratic pretensions tells any of us what to do.

People might become so passive, Tocqueville warns, that they will readily be seduced by deterministic theories that proclaim that human individuals—even or especially great human individuals—have no real effect at all on our personal or collective destiny. People will fatalistically believe that their futures are not in their hands. The democratic destruction of aristocratic respect for tradition caused people to lose concern for their past; the next step is the surrender of the future. Tocqueville imagines a people so isolated that each of them is more or less trapped alone in the present. Thinking of himself as liberated from every form of personal authority or dogma for self-determination as a free and equal individual, where will the democrat get the point of view to resist the various degrading forces that threaten to envelop him? Radical self-determination—making oneself by oneself out of nothing—is rather obviously impossible.

The topic of Part I of Volume II is the democratic mind. There Tocqueville says that \textbf{Americans are Cartesians} without ever having read a word of the philosopher Descartes.\footnote{Democracy in America, 2, 1, 1.} As their way of deconstructing aristocratic privileging, they habitually apply the Cartesian or skeptical method to everything. Skeptical of the soul-based distinctions as aristocratic illusions, the Americans turn their minds exclusively to the body and its enjoyments. So they prize scientific knowledge far less for its own sake
incapable of ruling themselves or others. We cannot help but notice how far we have
gone to redefine citizenship in terms of rights without any corresponding duties, and
we seem to have done the same with indispensable social institutions such as marriage.
Obviously the America we see is both considerably more democratic and considerably
more individualistic than the one Tocqueville observed, and the democratic descriptions in Democracy’s Volume II generally become truer over time, as Tocqueville
predicted.

The movement from the assertive tyranny of the majority to apathetic individualism as the chief threat to human liberty from Volume I to Volume II in Democracy actually mirrors the direction of American history. The founding generation was
primarily concerned with protecting minority rights from an aroused majority. And
they regarded the strong institutions of government as the equivalent of political
Prozac: Democracy will not be compatible with liberty unless we can calm people
down and make them less moody. Today some Americans still believe that the chief
threat to our liberty is an aroused majority. Some members of the American Civil
Liberties Union and other liberals worry about the “theocratic” threat of the religious
right, but those critics are generally thought to worry too much about an very unlikely
democratic possibility.

The dominant concern today, which is expressed both from the left and the right,
centers on citizen’s political apathy and degrading dependence on forces they do not
even try to control. The worry is about the inability to arouse most Americans morally
or politically for any reason. Against the stupefying, individualistic influences of
fashion, technology—particularly the preference for the virtual reality of the computer
screen over real human contact—the increasingly vulgar and idiotic electronic media,
globalization, the market and our application of market reasoning of contract and
consent into every area of life, and multiple dimensions of peer pressure—we need to
be fortified by some equivalent of political Viagra.

The left bemoans our selfish withdrawal from compassionate social concern, our
creeping and sometimes creepy libertarianism. Citizens no longer care enough to take
responsibility for one another. The right complains that people no longer take care of
themselves. Conservatives say that we no longer honor those who provide for their
own futures. Our conservative president may talk about an “ownership society,” but
he is actually provided unprecedented entitlements. Our “heart disease” has become
so severe that we are creeping toward the birth dearth that already plagues Europe,
and the radical individualism that fuels much of Europe’s immersion in an ultimately
self-destructive, postpolitical, postfamilial, and postreligious fantasy seems to be
emerging here. The democratic Europeans, as Tocqueville feared, seem to have
stopped thinking about the future.

AMERICAN COMBAT AGAINST INDIVIDUALISM

We have to add, of course, that the conclusions that Americans today no longer think
of themselves as citizens and are no longer concerned with their individual or national
futures are rather large exaggerations. Americans, in fact, might be distinguished in
the world today by their concern both for their nation and their obsession with their
personal futures. Tocqueville himself distinguishes between democratic tendencies
and American reality. He presents Americans as having identified the problem of
DESPOTISM, which by its nature is suspicious, sees in the separation among men the surest guarantee of its continuance, and it usually makes every effort to keep them separate. No vice of the human heart is so acceptable to it as selfishness: a despot easily forgives his subjects for not loving him, provided they do not love one another. He does not ask them to assist him in governing the state; it is enough that they do not aspire to govern it themselves. He stigmatizes as turbulent and unruly spirits those who would combine their exertions to promote the prosperity of the community; and, perverting the natural meaning of words, he applauds as good citizens those who have no sympathy for any but themselves.

Thus the vices which despotism produces are precisely those which equality fosters. These two things perniciously complete and assist each other. Equality places men side by side, unconnected by any common tie; despotism raises barriers to keep them asunder; the former predisposes them not to consider their fellow creatures, the latter makes general indifference a sort of public virtue.

Despotism, then, which is at all times dangerous, is more particularly to be feared in democratic ages. It is easy to see that in those same ages men stand most in need of freedom. When the members of a community are forced to attend to public affairs, they are necessarily drawn from the circle of their own interests and snatched at times from self-observation. As soon as a man begins to treat of public affairs in public, he begins to perceive that he is not so independent of his fellow men as he had at first imagined, and that in order to obtain their support he must often lend them his cooperation.

The Americans have combated by free institutions the tendency of equality to keep men asunder, and they have subdued it. The legislators of America did not suppose that a general representation of the whole nation would suffice to ward off a disorder at once so natural to the frame of democratic society and so fatal; they also thought that it would be well to infuse political life into each portion of the territory in order to multiply to an infinite extent opportunities of acting in concert for all the members of the community and to make them constantly feel their mutual dependence. The plan was a wise one. The general affairs of a country engage the attention only of leading politicians, who assemble from time to time in the same places; and as they often lose sight of each other after being loosed, lasting ties are established between them. But if the object be to join the moral affairs of a district conducted by the men who reside there, these persons are always in contact, and they are, in a manner, forced to be acquainted and to adapt their lives to one another.

It is difficult to draw a man out of his own circle to interest him in the destiny of the state, because he does not clearly understand what influence the destiny of the state can have upon his own lot. But if it is proposed to make a road cross the end of his estate, he will see at a glance that there is a connection between this small public affair and his greatest private affairs; and he will discover, without its being shown to him, the close tie that unites private to general interest. Thus far more may be done by entrusting to the citizens the administration of minor affairs than by surrendering to them in the control of important ones, toward interesting them in the public welfare and convincing them that they constantly stand in need of one another in order to provide for it. A brilliant achievement may win for you the favor of a people at one stroke; but to earn the love and respect of the population that surrounds you, a long succession of little services rendered and of obscure good deeds, a constant habit of kindness, and an established reputation for disinterestedness will be required. Local freedom, then, which leads a great number of citizens to value the affection of their neighbors and of their kindred, perpetually brings men together and forces them to help one another in spite of the propensities that veer them....
democratic moralist can only preach to at least understanding one’s own interest well, and that means cooperating intelligently with others as the only way to effectively achieve one’s own goals.

All moral doctrines, Tocqueville shows, are a form of bragging about one’s own freedom. Aristocrats are vain when it comes to their exaggerations concerning their selfless transcendence of the domain of interests; democrats boast that they never lose their heads or stupidly forget their interests. The aristocratic point of pride is to never be animated by interest, and the American’s is to never not be. Aristocrats claim to be free from self-interest, as God is. Democratic Americans claim to be free from both brutish determination by natural impulse—unconscious or instinctive enjoyment—and from imaginary, aristocratic illusion through the rational and willful calculation about what’s best for themselves. The doctrine of interest is basically middle-class—or the moral self-understanding of free beings that are constantly at work for themselves. And it serves justice: The truth is that one way in which we are all equal is that nobody is above and nobody is below having interests. Every self-conscious being with a body, in truth, has interests.

Tocqueville’s praise of the moral doctrine of interest acknowledges its justice. But it is still a form of bragging, not an accurate description of how Americans really live. A life constantly in pursuit of but never actually enjoying happiness would be the definition of hell. Americans, Tocqueville shows, actually take a certain pride in their misery and restlessness, but that pride is not at all adequate compensation for the life of love or enjoyment. If Americans got too close to living the way they say they do, they would surely surrender their freedom as unendurably miserable. Their excessive restlessness could easily become a cause of their surrender to the apathy of individualism.

Americans take pride in explaining, Tocqueville observes, how their enlightened self-interest leads them to give up some of their time and wealth to the service of each other and their political community. They enjoy claiming that their democratic citizenship has nothing to do with love or self-sacrifice. They believe that their “philosophy” has led them to resolve the age-old tension between civic duty and individual self-interest. But Tocqueville claims that what they say does not actually account for why they do what they do. They often do themselves less than justice by sometimes giving way to the natural impulse that all social beings have to love and serve others. The truth is that their actions are, like all people’s, partly selfish and partly not. And Tocqueville, of course, has already explained how free local institutions transform calculated sacrifices into instinctive or intrinsically enjoyable ones.

So the big question turns out to be this: Why does Tocqueville encourage the Americans to embrace a moral doctrine that does not tell the whole truth—or anywhere near it—about their experiences? Their bragging is really a cover or disguise. The fact of their affection for or emotional dependence on their fellow citizens offends their democratic pride in their individual liberty. They are reluctant to acknowledge their dependence, which limits their liberty; so they need a doctrine that exaggerates how free they are. With that verbal disguise, it becomes easier for them politically to combat individualism by arousing the love and friendship citizens can have for one another. The paradox Tocqueville displays is that a heartless moral doctrine serves to protect what enlarges the heart.
Women’s shaping of souls through religion is so fundamental for the effective exercise of political liberty that Tocqueville does not hesitate to call that effort, in its way, a political institution.

According to Tocqueville, religion, properly understood, indirectly but powerfully both encourages and limits the political imagination. It helps teach human beings to be citizens. And it shows them that they are more than free beings who work. By connecting individuals to one another through God, it opposes both the extreme assertiveness and the extreme passivity that come through the experience of moral isolation. Democracy’s final discussion of religion—in the section about the democratic heart—adds that religion allows Americans to sometimes experience the Creator’s (and so their own) personal greatness and goodness. Through religion they experience themselves as created and their souls as immortal.

Six days of the week, Tocqueville observed, Americans work constantly or restlessly pursue prosperity. They feverishly avoid leisure. The opinion that fuels their constant effort is that each individual is on his own: God does not provide, and leisurely reflection would only make them miserably conscious of His absence. That excessive restlessness is too hard; that is why we can stand in danger of surrendering their individual assertiveness to the apathetic judgment of individualism. But Americans are saved by Sunday. On the seventh day of restlessness is replaced by a deep repose, and the rest is something to be leisurely praised by the aristocratic philosophers that the soul finally comes to itself, and meditates upon itself, and it finds it experience pleasurable.

On the seventh day, Americans think and act as if the soul has needs that must be satisfied—as if the restless avoidance of leisure on the other days is an error. They believe that there could be true happiness in the practice of virtue for its own sake, so their moral doctrine of interest rightly understood is also an error. They believe that God has guaranteed that their desire for immortality is satisfied. Religion diverts the individual American from what he often believes he really knows; it is an indispensable momentary escape into an ideal world beyond his ordinarily earthbound and time-obsessed existence.

But American religion is not merely a diversion. It teaches a real and ennobling truth that aristocrats proudly knew and we unreasonably modest democrats so easily forget or disparage: We really are more than material beings, and the belief that our transcendent longing for immortality is satisfied in some way or another is what leads us to perform all sorts of great deeds that stand the test of time. Today our believers perform the truthful, aristocratic service of insisting that the Darwinian view of the individual as an insignificant accident in an indifferent cosmos is an unrealistic (or unreasonably skeptical or democratic) denial of what we can see with our own eyes about individual importance or greatness.25

For Tocqueville, the truth about the beast with the angel in him stands somewhere between the two rather incompatible images the American individual has of himself. One is excessively material, the other excessively spiritual. (Consider here the very philosophic Little House on the Prairie books: Pa spent the week in restless movement away from civilized limitations into the isolation of the wilderness, but on Sunday he sat still—except when he turned to his fiddle—and would not even let his little girls play.)

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25This point is defended ably and at length, with extensive use of Tocqueville, by Carson Holloway in The Right Darwin? Evolution, Religion, and the Future of Democracy (Dallas, TX: Spence, 2006).