

THE CHALLENGE OF SUSTAINING FREEDOM AND MORALITY IN A DEMOCRACY:
INSIGHTS DRAWN FROM TOCQUEVILLE'S *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA*

Elizabeth C' de Baca Eastman

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ABSTRACT

In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville explains that he looked to America to study democracy because he found there the image of democracy: its penchants, its character, its prejudices, and its passions. These very things coupled with the equality of conditions that Tocqueville found so prominently on display in America may threaten freedom and morality under certain conditions. My discussion focuses on the specific threats to freedom, including extreme individualism, majority tyranny, and despotism, and the various ways that America has checked those threats as explained by Tocqueville.

The Challenge of Sustaining Freedom and Morality in a Democracy:
Insights Drawn from Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*

Introduction

Tocqueville's work on democracy in America is devoted primarily to a discussion of the political practices, the moral and intellectual state, and the institutions of the American people. Among Tocqueville's stated goals in writing *Democracy in America* are to make the phenomenon of the democratic republic that exists in the United States understood, to make the reader feel the importance of the mores of the American people (which he explains as the whole moral and intellectual state of a people), and to combat the penchants of the people that lead them toward despotism.¹ Foremost among the topics that he discusses in his inquiry into democracy are freedom and religion. In fact, Tocqueville announces that the key to almost the whole work and the seed of what is to follow is in the second chapter of *Democracy in America*; the two themes that emerge in his discussion in this chapter are the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom.²

Tocqueville traces the development of religion and freedom by studying the early settlers who came to this country, including their reasons for settling in America, their beliefs and practices, and their manner of governing themselves once in this country. He continues the discussion of freedom and religion throughout his work in his effort to comprehend the underpinnings of American democracy. The relationship between freedom and religion is a fundamental part of Tocqueville's work and worthy of study in itself. For the purposes of this

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 264, 295, 275, 643.

2. Tocqueville, 29, 43.

paper, however, I shall discuss it briefly as a prelude to the topic of my inquiry: the challenge of sustaining morality and freedom in a democracy.

Tocqueville highlights throughout much of his work the very things that would end the freedom enjoyed by Americans or any people attempting to introduce democracy into their government. Freedom is not an end in itself, but according to Tocqueville is the source of all moral greatness.³ Freedom permits the individual to make choices and act on them; these choices and actions can in turn be judged moral or immoral. In addition to this, present in American democracy is a complementary relationship between freedom and religion that would imperil the successful perpetuation of American democracy if freedom and religion were diminished.

Tocqueville looked to America to study democracy because he found there the image of democracy: its penchants, its character, its prejudices, and its passions.⁴ These very things coupled with the equality of conditions that Tocqueville found so prominently on display in America also threaten freedom and morality under certain conditions. My discussion focuses on the specific threats to freedom, including extreme individualism, majority tyranny, and despotism, and the various ways that America has checked those threats as explained by Tocqueville.

Freedom and Religion

Tocqueville acknowledges that those who settled this country had different goals and reasons for coming and that they governed themselves in different ways, but he also finds some common features among them and focuses on these in his early chapters. Foremost among the common features were the desires to be a free people and to practice their religion. “The Puritans

3. Tocqueville, 11.

4. Tocqueville, 13.

sought a land so barbarous and so abandoned by the world that they might yet be permitted to live there in their manner and pray to God in freedom.”⁵ Puritanism was one of the prominent religions among the settlers in New England and one sees how the necessity to govern themselves in a new land and the practice of religion overlapped. “Puritanism was not only a religious doctrine; it also blended at several points with the most absolute democratic and republican doctrines.”⁶ The religion of the people served as a basis for the penal codes that were used to maintain order and also provided a moral code by which the people governed their own lives. Coupled with this strong religious influence was the principle of freedom that was rooted in the reasons that the settlers came to this country and fostered by their experiences in governing themselves. Tocqueville’s explanation suggests that it was not an accident that freedom and religion were united, but that it was intentional. “The reader will doubtless have remarked the preamble of these ordinances: in America, it is religion that leads to enlightenment; it is the observance of divine laws that guides man to freedom.”⁷

Tocqueville acknowledges that religion and freedom have often been at war, but that in America they were successfully incorporated into one another and combined marvelously.⁸ He devotes many chapters throughout his work to exploring the relationship between freedom and religion, but begins by sketching how the two elements complement one another. They in fact are part of two different worlds: the moral world and the political world. The political world is described by Tocqueville as agitated, contested, and uncertain; the moral world is classified,

5. Tocqueville, 32.

6. Tocqueville, 32.

7. Tocqueville, 42.

8. Tocqueville, 43.

coordinated, foreseen, and decided in advance. The political world is where innovation is permitted and where one can satisfy the desire for material wealth, well-being, and freedom; the moral world permits moral satisfaction and turns the attention of the believer toward Heaven. The political world permits independence, contempt for experience, and jealousy of every authority; the moral world requires passive though voluntary obedience. After listing these contrasting characteristics, Tocqueville observes that, “far from harming each other, these two tendencies, apparently so opposed, advance in accord and seem to lend each other a mutual support.”⁹ These two elements seem to encompass the whole of man’s existence. I quote at length to capture the unique relationship that Tocqueville highlights:

Religion sees in civil freedom a noble exercise of the faculties of man; in the political world, a field left by the Creator to the efforts of intelligence. Free and powerful in its sphere, satisfied with the place that is reserved for it, it knows that its empire is all the better established when it reigns by its own strength alone and dominates over hearts without support.

Freedom sees in religion the companion of its struggles and its triumphs, the cradle of its infancy, the divine source of its rights. It considers religion as the safeguard of mores; and mores as the guarantee of laws and the pledge of its own duration.¹⁰

The key to the whole work that Tocqueville announces in the second chapter, expressed in the simplest terms, is the active role that religion and freedom play in the lives of the inhabitants of America.

Tocqueville incorporates the themes of religion and freedom throughout his work as he describes American political institutions and the practices of the people. For example, he describes how on the seventh day of each week the people turn from their work and attend religious services. This allows them the opportunity to turn from the everyday activities of their lives and enter the realm of the divine. He follows with this remark:

9. Tocqueville, 43.

10. Tocqueville, 43-44.

In another place in this work I sought the causes to which one must attribute the maintenance of American's political institutions, and religion appeared to me one of the principal ones. Now that I am occupied with individuals, I find it again and I perceive that it is not less useful to each citizen than to the entire state. Americans show by their practice that they feel every necessity of making democracy more moral by means of religion. What they think in this regard about themselves is a truth with which every democratic nation ought to be instilled.¹¹

This brief discussion of freedom and religion gives some sense of the importance that Tocqueville attributes to them. He places a great deal of emphasis on the origins of a people, arguing that the circumstances that accompanied their birth greatly influence their development. Freedom and religion figure prominently in the origins of the Americans. I now turn to the challenges that threaten freedom and morality in a democracy.

The Challenges

The people are the primary focus in a democracy because they are sovereign. Throughout Tocqueville's work the people are viewed both as individuals and as a group. The challenges that arise in a democracy are centered on the people in their different capacities. Individualism can lead to isolation from the society at large. The majority of the people can represent a threat when it becomes tyrannical. When the people no longer govern themselves and another power takes charge of directing their fate, the people are diminished in such a manner that they not only lose their freedom, but also the possibility for any type of moral exercise because they have lost their independence and freedom to act.¹²

Individualism finds fertile ground in a democratic society, particularly one such as the United States in which equality of conditions is prevalent. The principle of equality gives rise to the belief that there is no one above the individual who can direct him; therefore it is incumbent

11. Tocqueville, 517-18.

12. Tocqueville, 663.

upon him to decide matters on his own. Democratic society loosens the bonds between citizens and between generations and spurs the movement toward individualism.

Tocqueville contrasts individualism with selfishness. Selfishness is described as follows: “[it] is a passionate and exaggerated love of self that brings man to relate everything to himself alone and to prefer himself to everything . . . [it] is born of a blind instinct . . . [it] is a vice as old as the world. It scarcely belongs more to one form of society than to another.” Individualism is described as “a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him . . . it proceeds from an erroneous judgment rather than a depraved sentiment. It has its source in the defects of the mind as much as in the vices of the heart.” Whereas selfishness “witheres the seed of all the virtues; individualism at first dries up only the source of public virtues; but in the long term it attacks and destroys all the others and will finally be absorbed in selfishness.”¹³

Tocqueville describes this individualism as a sort of confinement in the solitude of one’s heart. This in itself is a sad prospect, but moreover there are consequences that go beyond the individual misfortune that such a state brings. Tocqueville speaks of a “presumptuous confidence in their strength, and not imagining that from now on they could need to call upon the assistance of those like them, they have no difficulty in showing that they think only of themselves.”¹⁴ Virtue is imperiled when individualism becomes prevalent because a consequence of the retreat of the individual is a restriction of his interaction with his fellow citizens, thus limiting opportunities for behavior that redounds to the benefit of others, i.e. virtuous behavior.

13. Tocqueville, all quotations in this paragraph from p. 483.

14. Tocqueville, 484.

In an earlier chapter in a discussion of administrative decentralization, Tocqueville describes nations where an inhabitant considers himself a kind of colonist who is indifferent to the destiny of the place that he inhabits. The description is worth quoting at length because the colonist has a striking resemblance to the person who is plagued by excessive individualism.

The greatest changes come about in his country without his concurrence; he does not even know precisely what has taken place; he suspects; he has heard the event recounted by chance. Even more, the fortune of his village, the policing of his street, the fate of his church and of his presbytery do not touch him; he thinks that all these things do not concern him in any fashion and that they belong to a powerful foreigner called the government. For himself, he enjoys these goods as a tenant, without a spirit of ownership and without ideas of any improvement whatsoever. This disinterest in himself goes so far that if his own security or that of his children is finally compromised, instead of occupying himself with removing the danger, he crosses his arms to wait for the nation as a whole to come to his aid. Yet this man, although he has made such a complete sacrifice of his free will, likes obedience no more than any other. He submits, it is true, at the pleasure of a clerk; but it pleases him to defy the law like a defeated enemy, as soon as force is withdrawn. Thus one sees him swinging constantly between servitude and license.¹⁵

While there are differences between the colonist and the isolated citizen, the result is similar. Neither has any meaningful connection to the society in which they live, nor to their fellow citizens. Freedom is lost when one does not hold onto it and neither the colonist nor the isolated citizen behaves in a way that is actively keeping a grasp on their freedom.¹⁶

In contrast to the individualism that arises in a democracy, the majority, when it becomes tyrannical, poses a threat as well, but in a different manner. Tocqueville describes the empire of the majority as absolute in democratic governments; its moral empire is “founded in part on the idea that there is more enlightenment and wisdom in many men united than in one alone, in the number of legislators than in their choice” and “on the principle that the interests of the greatest

15. Tocqueville, 89.

16. Tocqueville, 480.

number ought to be preferred to those of the few.”¹⁷ The danger posed by the majority is that once it has formed an opinion, its power is so great that it cannot be stopped. This power affects the governing of the people insofar as the legislature is elected by the people and obeys the will of the majority by enacting laws that they desire. The executive also answers to the people and must execute the laws passed by the legislature although he maintains some independence through the veto power. Possessing the power that the majority has does not necessarily mean that all of its desired actions are right. Tocqueville regards the maxim that the majority of a people have the right to do everything as “impious and detestable.”¹⁸ Tocqueville invokes the principles of humanity, justice, and reason as being above the majority in the moral world and he claims that when he refuses to obey an unjust law, he is making an appeal from the sovereignty of the people to the sovereignty of the human race. That the majority has a legitimate existence in a democratic government is not the issue; the problem is when there is no restraint that can be imposed on the majority. There are ways to prevent a majority from becoming tyrannical, and they will be discussed in the second part of this paper, but here I focus on another aspect of the majority tyranny that poses a direct challenge to the morality of the people.

Beyond the influence that the majority has in governing the nation, it also has great power over the thoughts of the citizens. Tocqueville vividly contrasts how a despot strikes the body in order to reach the soul as a means of ruling over the citizens and the manner in which the absolute tyranny of the majority strikes:

[I]n democratic republics, tyranny does not proceed in this way; it leaves the body and goes straight for the soul . . . You are free not to think as I do; your life, your goods, everything remains to you; but from this day on, you are a stranger among us. You shall keep your privileges in the city, but they will become useless to you; for if you crave the

17. Tocqueville, 235-37.

18. Tocqueville, 240.

vote of your fellow citizens, they will not grant it to you, and if you demand only their esteem, they will still pretend to refuse it to you. You shall remain among men, but you shall lose your rights of humanity. When you approach those like you, they shall flee you as being impure; and those who believe in your innocence, even they shall abandon you, for one would flee them in their turn. Go in peace, I leave you your life, but I leave it to you worse than death.¹⁹

This lengthy description is summed up in one phrase: “there is no freedom of mind in America.”²⁰ The attempt to deviate from the will of the majority is almost impossible.

Tocqueville likens it to renouncing one’s rights as a citizen and one’s quality as a man. Whereas the colonist and the isolated citizen previously described willingly assumed those postures, being subsumed by the power of the majority is of a different order. Tocqueville draws an analogy between what occurs in a majority tyranny and what occurs with a despotic government: “despotism depraves the one who submits to it much more than the one who imposes it.”²¹ The challenge to the morality of the people is much more pervasive in a majority tyranny. Having the courage to think independently of the majority is done at great personal cost to the quality of one’s life and submitting to the majority results in moral debasement. The nation also suffers when its people are debased: “a nation cannot long remain strong when each man in it is individually weak.”²²

There is another challenge to the morality of a people that is indirectly related to the tyranny of the majority and that is the tendency to diminish the power of individuals. In Tocqueville’s discussion of historians in democratic centuries, he remarks that most do not attribute influence to the individual. While they are right to highlight general causes in the

19. Tocqueville, 244.

20. Tocqueville, 245.

21. Tocqueville, 247.

22. Tocqueville, 672.

history of a people, they wrongly deny the particular actions of individuals. The reason why Tocqueville is critical of this tendency is because he argues that the freedom of the people—and of individuals—to act and direct their own destiny is called into question. “As it becomes very difficult to perceive and analyze the reasons that, acting separately on the will of each citizen, in the end produce the movement of the people, one is tempted to believe that this movement is not voluntary and that, without knowing it, societies obey a superior, dominating force.”²³ He further explains that the denial or refusal to recognize individual involvement or the actions of a few in affecting the destiny of a people gives rise to the notion of an inflexible providence or to a sort of blind fatality. We can couple this idea with another that Tocqueville puts forth and that is when the equality of conditions become more pronounced. “Individuals appear smaller and society seems greater, or rather, each citizen, having become like all the others, is lost in the crowd, and one no longer perceives [anything] but the vast and magnificent image of the people itself.”²⁴

These two ideas combined, diminishing the power of individuals and making individuals appear smaller when measured against society as a whole, present a great challenge to the morality of a nation insofar as the citizens begin to doubt their ability to act. If one does not believe that it is within his power to make choices and decisions about his life, whether it is due to the tyranny of the majority, the refusal to recognize individual achievement or involvement, or because equality has dampened individual spirit, the moral and intellectual state of a nation suffers. Vitality is lost amongst the people and powerlessness sets in.

At the end of Tocqueville’s discussion of tendencies of historians in democratic centuries, he refers to the souls of men and underscores the importance of fostering a sense of

23. Tocqueville, 471.

24. Tocqueville, 641.

one's independence in the face of the majority, within a greater society, and among equals. ". . . [O]ur contemporaries are only too inclined to doubt free will because each of them feels himself limited on all sides by his weakness, but they still willingly grant force and independence to men united in a social body. One must guard against obscuring this idea, for it is a question of elevating souls and not completing their prostration."²⁵ Another reference to the soul is made in the discussion of the tyranny of the majority regarding the general abasement of souls that results from those who speak about the weakness of the people. The diminishment of the soul, whether an individual's soul or the soul of a people, is precisely contrary to what should be occurring in a nation and amongst a people. The elevation of souls encourages a free people to make choices that are not base, mean-spirited, or selfish, but choices that improve the lives of all and reflect well on the individual member of society.

Tocqueville begins his work by commenting that nothing struck him more vividly than the equality of conditions that he saw in America. While there are certainly advantages to having equal conditions among the people (for example, Tocqueville notes that there has never been a class of peasants in America), equality can also present a direct challenge to the freedom of a people because of the passions that it incites among men. Tocqueville explains that when equality engenders a manly and legitimate passion it encourages men to want all to be strong and esteemed. It can, however, instill a depraved taste for equality in the human heart. The result is the weak wanting to draw down the strong to their level. The former is far more conducive to sustaining freedom than the latter. The desire for equality can become so strong and pervasive that, according to Tocqueville, it reduces men to preferring equality in servitude to inequality in freedom.

25. Tocqueville, 472.

Tocqueville again discusses the theme of equality and freedom in volume two of *Democracy in America*. He articulates the ideal towards which all democratic people tend: all citizens concur in the government, each has an equal right to concur in it, men will be perfectly free because they will all be entirely equal, and they will all be perfectly equal because they will be entirely free. This ideal portrays equality and freedom in balance yet in a later passage Tocqueville suggests that there is a fundamental difference between freedom and equality that may prevent this ideal from ever being reached if a people does not prominently embrace morality. Tocqueville explains that democratic peoples have a natural taste for freedom, but an ardent, insatiable, eternal, invincible passion for equality. A taste will only triumph over a passion or be held in balance with it when individuals are able to moderate their passions. Sustaining freedom requires some sacrifices. Moreover, the benefits and gains of freedom and equality are realized in different order: “The goods that freedom brings show themselves only in the long term, and it is always easy to fail to recognize the cause that gives birth to them. The advantages of equality make themselves felt from now on, and each day one sees them flow from their source.”²⁶ Sustaining equality as a manly and legitimate passion will permit the taste for freedom to develop and be present among the people and the ideal that Tocqueville proposed may be realized; allowing equality to degenerate to an insatiable passion will only put freedom at risk and may destroy it.

The loss of freedom leads to despotism and without freedom the whole moral and intellectual state of a people suffers and is greatly diminished. The topic of despotism is one that recurs frequently in *Democracy in America*, given that one of Tocqueville’s stated goals in writing the book was to combat the penchants that lead to despotism. Remaining a free people

26. Tocqueville, 481.

requires a great deal of involvement and effort on the part of the citizens. According to Tocqueville, “there is nothing harder than the apprenticeship of freedom.”²⁷

Tocqueville believed Americans to be a commercial people because they saw commerce and industry as a means to satisfy their desire for well-being. There are certain passions associated with commerce that influence the behavior of individuals. “They love order, without which affairs cannot prosper, and they particularly prize regularity of mores, on which good houses [of business] are founded; they prefer the good sense that create great fortunes to the genius that often dissipates them; general ideas frighten their minds, accustomed to positive calculations, and among them, practice is more in honor than theory.”²⁸ The love of well-being coupled with a means to earn the wealth to satisfy one’s desires risks making the preoccupation with one’s private affairs all consuming. “Private life is so active in democratic times, so agitated, so filled with desires and work, that hardly any energy or leisure remains to each man for political life.”²⁹

For Tocqueville, the sole political passion that arises from these habits born of a commercial nature is that of love of public tranquility. Tocqueville argues that this desire for public tranquility leads the citizens to increase the central power of government. The movement toward central power is movement toward despotism and ultimately the loss of freedom. “Despotism often presents itself as the mender of all ills suffered; it is the support of good law, the sustainer of the oppressed, and the founder of order. Peoples fall asleep in the bosom of the

27. Tocqueville, 229.

28. Tocqueville, 273.

29. Tocqueville, 643.

temporary prosperity to which it gives birth; and when they awaken, they are miserable.”³⁰

Sustaining freedom is an ongoing concern.

These challenges to morality and freedom all lead to the same result. Whether it is the loss of the freedom to think, to act, or to participate in the governance of one’s life, the loss is such that one’s ability to act morally is seriously impaired and one’s freedom is limited or lost. With respect to extreme individualism, it eventually turns to selfishness, which “withers the seed of all the virtues.”³¹ It brings about the isolation of individuals that leads to the abandonment of society and these individuals are at risk of becoming completely occupied with material enjoyments because their entire focus is on themselves and not others. Such individuals are completely consumed with their own affairs (extreme individualism) and therefore voluntarily remove themselves from the moderating influences of civil society. They are made to believe that their contributions are of little or no significance or they are powerless (the historians’ interpretation and one of the effects of the leveling of all according to the principle of equality) and therefore they do not choose to participate in governance. It is nearly impossible to act or think independently (in the face of a tyrannical majority) and one therefore is exiled in a manner of speaking if he is not part of the majority. With respect to despotism, which involves a giving over to another authority rule over one’s life, there is no freedom to act or make moral choices or participate in political life. A common feature of all these threats is that the individual no longer participates in governing and democracy is thus lost in the process. Based upon these examples, we can infer that holding on to freedom requires active involvement in political life, in governing, in those activities that directly and indirectly affect one’s life, and having the

30. Tocqueville, 229.

31. Tocqueville, 483.

understanding that occupying oneself with the affairs of the whole has a beneficial effect on one's own affairs.

While this discussion has ranged across many chapters from Tocqueville's work, the focus has been on those aspects of life in a democracy that may result in the loss of freedom. Tocqueville also devotes much of his work to discussing how to counter these threats and challenges, keep them in check, or prevent them from arising at all.

Remedies and Counters

In the early chapters of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville gives an historical introduction that describes the early emigrants to America and the reasons why they left their home countries. Of the different ways that the British government settled the colonies, the one that was most conducive to freedom was when the emigrants were given the right to form themselves into a political society and to govern themselves. This was common practice in New England. The township was the form of government that was predominant among the emigrants in this area.

Tocqueville explores the institution of the township at length in the early chapters of volume one because he saw in it the principle and the life of American freedom. The institution of the township was crucial to nurturing the growth of freedom because of what it permitted and required and because of its limited scope. "Interests, passions, duties, and rights came to be grouped around the township's individuality and strongly attached to it. In the heart of the township one sees a real, active altogether democratic and republican political life reigning."³²

The township both required and permitted its citizens to govern themselves. This involved enacting laws, judging disputes, taxing themselves to fund and maintain the upkeep of

32. Tocqueville, 40.

their township, and educating the youth, just to name of a few of the requirements for ordering their lives. The limited scope (Tocqueville estimates between two and three thousand inhabitants,) permitted and required the citizens to be involved in the administration of their township.

Tocqueville extols the benefits of townships at length. He likens them to a school where people learn the habits of freedom: the institutions of a township “make them taste its peaceful employ and habituate them to making use of [freedom].” The inhabitants do not create the freedom, however; rather, it is born of itself. “It is the continuous action of laws and mores, of circumstances and above all time that comes to consolidate it.” Sustaining freedom within the township is not easy either. It is too small to fend off any encroachment from a larger governmental body; freedom can only be sustained when the institution has been among the people and its existence is part of their habits and customs. “In order to defend themselves successfully they must have completed all their developments and have been mixed with national ideas and habits.”³³

The township may seem a sort of humble beginning for the venue where freedom originates, grows, and insinuates itself into the ways and habits of the people. Yet there seems to be no better institution that teaches people that their surroundings and their governing body in which they are able to participate directly have a bearing on their happiness and freedom. Tocqueville gives a description of the township inhabitant that underscores the opportunities that are present in such a life.

The inhabitant of New England is attached to his township because it is strong and independent; he is interested in it because he cooperates in directing it; he loves it because he has nothing to complain of in his lot; he places his ambition and his future in it; heminges in each of the incidents of township life: in this restricted sphere that is

33. Tocqueville, all quotations in this paragraph from p. 57.

within his reach he tries to govern society; he habituates himself to the forms without which freedom proceeds only through revolutions, permeates himself with their spirit, gets a taste for order, understands the harmony of powers, and finally assembles clear and practical ideas on the nature of his duties as well as the extent of his rights.³⁴

The experience that the emigrants had in the township was prominent primarily in New England, yet Tocqueville argues that what was present in New England spread to neighboring states and that the two or three principal ideas that form the bases of the social theory of the United States that were combined in New England “*penetrated* the entire confederation.”³⁵ The freedom that was cultivated among the New Englanders became a part of the habits of the nation. This point cannot be given too much emphasis. In Tocqueville’s later chapter on the principal causes of maintaining the democratic republic in the United States (I.2.9), he points to mores, which he understands as the habits, opinions, usages, and beliefs of the people, as regulating and directing the democracy of the United States.³⁶ The experience of the township instilled in the emigrants the habit of governing and the love of freedom that Tocqueville saw as crucial to sustaining the democratic institutions.

I began this paper with a discussion of the various threats or challenges to the freedom enjoyed by Americans (including individualism, majority tyranny, and despotism). This freedom was found in the township, the most fundamental of all governing bodies. Tocqueville advances his inquiry into democracy in America with a discussion of the other governing bodies of in the

34. Tocqueville, 65.

35. Tocqueville, 31.

36. Tocqueville explains that he intends to invoke the ancient sense of the word *moeurs*, which is loosely translated as mores. “Not only do I apply it to mores properly so-called, which one could call habits of the heart, but to the different notions that men possess, to the various opinions that are current in their midst, and to the sum of ideas of which the habits of the mind are formed. I therefore comprehend under this word the whole moral and intellectual state of a people” (275).

United States—the county, state, and federal governments. Concurrent with these explanations are descriptions of those practices among the people that allow for the direct involvement in all facets of public life that are not part of the formal governing institutions, but that are crucial to contributing to governance. Foremost among these are political and civil associations.

There are different reasons why people form associations. They may come together because of common interests or for social reasons and the desire for fellowship. The aspects of association on which Tocqueville focuses are more specifically related to countering the independence and weakness of the citizen in a democracy and providing the means for citizens to be involved in public affairs in an orderly manner. He saw in America a wide-ranging scope of associations: “they associate for the goals of public security, of commerce and industry, of morality and religion.”³⁷ Tocqueville distinguishes between political and civil associations, but for the purposes of this paper I am going to focus on how associations in general respond to the challenges to freedom.

Associations form the basis of a response to extreme individualism, majority tyranny, and despotism. First, they provide the means to prevent people from becoming isolated. By drawing people together, whether to advance an intellectual idea or to accomplish a practical goal, the association strikes a balance that permits individuals to maintain their integrity and yet gives them a power that is beyond their reach as individuals. It is not about forcing any one to associate, but providing the opportunity to come together to act. Second, associations provide the means to challenge the majority. The association is constituted outside of the majority and provides a forum for the minority to be heard and perhaps persuade those who make up the majority. Third, associations provide the means to prevent a central authority from consolidating

37. Tocqueville, 181.

power that would restrict and maybe even end their freedom. The solitary citizen is limited in what he can accomplish. There are two alternatives to remedy this: he can either work with others to address his needs and the needs of the community or he can submit to a central authority that will direct his life. Tocqueville asks the salient question: “What political power would ever be in a state to suffice for the innumerable multitude of small undertakings that American citizens execute every day with the aid of an association?”³⁸ Tocqueville fears that an “insupportable tyranny” would emerge, “for a government knows only how to dictate precise rules; it imposes the sentiments and ideas that it favors, and it is always hard to distinguish its counsels from its orders.”³⁹

Beyond meeting the challenges to freedom, Tocqueville also argues that people are generally improved by associating with others: “Sentiments and ideas renew themselves, the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed only by the reciprocal action of men upon one another. I have shown that this action is almost nonexistent in a democratic country. It is therefore necessary to create it artificially there. And this is what associations alone can do.”⁴⁰

A successful association is dependent upon individuals coming together, yet what can prompt someone to take the trouble to work with others or to be part of the give and take of a larger social body? Tocqueville poses two slightly different questions earlier in the work in his discussion of townships: Why does the individual obey society? and What are the natural limits to his obedience? He gives two reasons: “He obeys society not because he is inferior to those who direct it or less capable than another man of governing himself; he obeys society because

38. Tocqueville, 491.

39. Tocqueville, 492.

40. Tocqueville, 491.

union with those like him appears useful to him and because he knows that this union cannot exist without a regulating power.”⁴¹

The usefulness of the union with those like him, whether it takes the form of participating in an association or occupying himself with the governing of his local community, is a central concept in Tocqueville’s work and is referred to as self-interest well understood. The doctrine of self-interest well understood expressed in the simplest terms by Tocqueville is combining one’s own well-being with that of his fellow citizens. This is initially accomplished by finding the overlap between the particular interests of the citizens and the general interests of the greater community. Tocqueville does not believe that this will lead citizens to be virtuous, but that there will be a beneficial effect on the citizens: “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.”⁴²

Conclusion

I began this paper by discussing the relationship between freedom and religion. I conclude by suggesting an additional challenge to freedom, that of taking away the very moral foundation that supports it; in other words, if the members of a society stop practicing religion or if they are prevented from practicing it. The members of society suffer and freedom is at risk:

When religion is destroyed in a people, doubt takes hold of the highest portions of the intellect and half paralyzes all the others. Each becomes accustomed to having only confused and changing notions about matters that most interest those like him & himself; one defends one’s opinions badly or abandons them, and as one despairs of being able to resolve by oneself the greatest problems that human destiny presents, one is reduced, like to a coward, to not thinking about them at all. Such a state cannot fail to enervate souls; it

41. Tocqueville, 61.

42. Tocqueville, 502.

slackens the springs of the will and prepares citizens for servitude. Not only does it then happen that they allow their freedom to be taken away, but often they give it over.⁴³

Among the challenges that religion expressly counters are those that equality and democracy present. For example, love of material enjoyments, isolation from others, and self-absorption are held in check by religion because, as Tocqueville explains, religion places man's desires beyond and above earthly goods, it calls upon him to do good works and deeds for his fellow human beings, and shifts the focus of his attention from himself to others. "Religious people are therefore naturally strong in precisely the spot where democratic peoples are weak; this makes very visible how important it is that men keep to their religion when becoming equal."⁴⁴

Tocqueville saw that freedom and religion provided a basis for living and governing one's private and public life. Successfully combined, they also meet the challenges presented by the worst features of equality and democracy. If freedom is lost, then the existence of religion is called into question; if religion is lost, then the perpetuation of freedom is called into question. Tocqueville offers a candid assessment of the chances of one surviving without the other: "As for me, I doubt that man can ever support a complete religious independence and an entire political freedom at once; and I am brought to think that if he has no faith, he must serve, and if he is free, he must believe."⁴⁵ The title of this paper is "The Challenge of Sustaining Freedom and Morality in a Democracy." I have only introduced some of the challenges and suggested a few of the means to counter them or at least hold them in check. The challenge of sustaining freedom and morality in a democracy is an ongoing endeavor in the face of many threats.

43. Tocqueville, 418.

44. Tocqueville, 419.

45. Tocqueville, 419.

Tocqueville makes the following remark in the context of countries near despotism that is also relevant to the challenge of sustaining freedom and morality. “Nations do not grow old in the same manner as men. Each generation born within them is like a new people that comes to offer itself to the hand of the legislator.”⁴⁶ The efforts among the people to be free and moral must therefore be constantly renewed.

I have referred to passages from throughout the two volumes of *Democracy in America*, but I close by referring to the first chapter of the work that has a description of the land and of the current and the prior inhabitants who do not trace their origins to the European settlers. The geographical description of the United States in the opening pages of the first chapter gives way to the description of the numerous native tribes inhabiting the vast wilderness of America who are experiencing what Tocqueville describes as an inevitable destruction. In this first chapter, Tocqueville attributes two reasons for their demise. The first reason is that they did not possess the land; they did not cultivate the soil, but they hunted. The second reason relates to their character: “Their implacable prejudices, their indomitable passions, their vices, and perhaps still more their savage virtues, delivered them to an inevitable destruction.”⁴⁷ In addition to the native tribes and the Anglo-Americans, Tocqueville also refers to another people who lived in America hundreds of years prior, whom he describes as more civilized and more advanced. There are no records or memories among the peoples currently living in these regions, only implements and utensils that have been unearthed in various places.

Tocqueville thus begins his work with a description of three people with different fates: one that is judged superior, at least with respect to the tools they fashioned for themselves, but of

46. Tocqueville, 89-90.

47. Tocqueville, 27.

whom there is no further trace or mark on civilization; one that is judged doomed at the hands of the recently arrived settlers; and finally one that is described as having transplanted the democratic principle on the shores of the New World and that will be judged in the subsequent pages of Tocqueville's work. Whether Tocqueville is simply being thorough in his representation of America as he found it or if he is trying to convey to the reader a general lesson about the unpredictability of the longevity of civilizations of human beings is left for the reader to decide. His reason for writing the book is clearly stated in the introduction. What he saw on his travels in America was similar to the situation that was present in Europe: the equality of conditions becoming ever more apparent as well as the rise of democracy. He lamented the fact that in Europe democracy has been left to its "savage instincts" and he saw in America a place where he could "find lessons" to counter those instincts.⁴⁸

The reader is easily swept up by Tocqueville's analysis of all facets of American political and civil life and readily engages in the inquiry that he pursues with such eloquence. There is almost a sense of excitement that envelops the reader as he analyzes the influence of democracy on the moral and intellectual state of the American people, yet there is always a sober backdrop to Tocqueville's work, which is underscored in the first chapter. Tocqueville never misleads the reader into thinking that the institutions that the Americans have made their own or the freedoms that they enjoy will always be in existence. The three groups described in the beginning pages of the book represent the three stages of a people: one that is no longer in existence, one that is on the decline, and one that is emerging. Tocqueville himself was living amidst a people caught between the decline of an old way of life and the emergence of a new one that had many new facets but whose outcome was uncertain. He looked to America to gain insights that he could

48. Tocqueville, 7, 12.

apply to Europe's situation, but we, too, can learn lessons from his work that may well be valuable to us as we deal with our own current situation. Sometimes it takes an outside observer to identify both the strengths and weaknesses of a civilization. As Tocqueville himself observed in his discussion of the omnipotence of the majority, "the majority lives in perpetual adoration of itself; only foreigners or experience can make certain truths reach the ears of the Americans."⁴⁹

49. Tocqueville, 245.

Bibliography

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