

Tocqueville on Intellectual Independence, Doubt, and Democratic Citizenship

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Abstract: Some contend that politics functions best when deference is given to tradition and authoritative community norms, while others argue for the importance of independent thought and doubt about received sources of authority. Insight into this question can be found in the work of Alexis de Tocqueville. While Tocqueville is often taken to regard the doubt characteristic of intellectual independence solely as a pathology, I show that he also saw it as a potential precursor to conversation, a stimulus to self-assured conviction, and a counter to distortionary abstractions. Nonetheless, Tocqueville also elaborates the destructive outcomes of too much doubt and intellectual independence. I identify the ways in which he seeks to discipline and educate the drive to independent thought so as to attain its benefits without falling victim to its pathologies. In doing so, I demonstrate the ways in which Tocqueville can be a guide to navigating the perennial tension between intellectual inquiry and authoritative community norms.

The intellectual habits most conducive to healthy politics have been an enduring topic of debate in the history of Western political thought. Some argue that politics functions best when deference is given to the putative wisdom contained in custom, tradition, and faith. Others counter that reliance on rational first principles arrived at through independent thought is best. René Descartes is an originator of the latter approach. Descartes's advocacy of rules of reason reached through the application of relentless doubt towards beliefs handed down by custom, tradition, and faith would come to be the norm in the political sphere with the spread of the Enlightenment. Indeed, many people today would affirm the merit of thinking for oneself rather than deferring to the authority of received practices or putative experts. Yet, while an unwillingness to defer slavishly to traditional practices may

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be a virtue for democratic citizens given that modern democracies emphasize open debate, a refusal to recognize any authoritative customs or norms at all can corrode the basis of social order. In their extreme forms, both deference and critique are potentially pathological. Insight into the intellectual disposition best suited to democratic citizens can be found through study of one of the most famous theorists of democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville merits our attention because he refuses to frame the question in terms of a binary choice between thinking for oneself and submitting to authority. Instead, he shows how both are necessary, and, if held in the proper balance, can moderate the excesses of each other.

Tocqueville observes in *Democracy in America* that Americans are Cartesian without having ever read Descartes because they live in accordance with the principle that one ought to “seek on one’s own and in oneself alone the reason for things.”¹ In his view this disposition to intellectual independence² can manifest itself for good or ill—a judgment encapsulated in his statement that he sees in equality a tendency that leads people to “new ways of thinking” as well as one that induces them to “give up thinking voluntarily” (DA 492). I will draw out Tocqueville’s strategy of tempering intellectual independence with intellectual authority and educating it with salutary social practices in order to realize the positive potential of this disposition and avoid its pathologies.

In elaborating Tocqueville’s account of the positive potential of intellectual independence and the willingness to doubt that is characteristic of it, I am challenging the prevailing view that he saw doubt exclusively as a pathology.³ To be sure, this view expresses a partial truth. Tocqueville’s private

¹Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004), 483. Cited henceforth as *DA*.

²In his notes for *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville uses both the phrase “intellectual independence” and the phrase “intellectual individualism” (Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition of De la démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer, vol. 4 [Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2010], 3:710a, 3:713d). I consistently use “intellectual independence” because it highlights the connection between Tocqueville’s treatment of the phenomenon and his broader argument that a high degree of independence is associated not with strength but with weakness (DA 490, 497, 569, 596, 667, and 756). His more favorable references to individual independence elsewhere (DA 796, 822–23, 830) indicate that his opposition is not to independence as such, but to the pursuit of *complete* independence.

³Roger Boesche contends that when Tocqueville insists on the need for moral authority, he is projecting onto the world “his own personal torment” and painful experience of doubt (Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987], 186); Sheldon Wolin argues doubt was “Tocqueville’s equivalent of hell” (Wolin, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003], 81); and Dana Villa holds that doubt was for Tocqueville “a personal enemy of long standing” (Villa, *Teachers of the People: Political Education in Rousseau, Hegel, Tocqueville, and Mill*

correspondence attests to the psychological anguish his doubt, especially his doubt about religion, sometimes caused him.⁴ *Democracy in America* also identifies the pathological consequences that arise when an unmediated form of doubt prevails across an entire society.⁵ Yet focusing solely on these passages from his letters and published work obscures Tocqueville's characterization of doubt as a stimulus to conversation and a precursor to the acquisition of reflective, self-assured conviction (*DA* 293, 213). It also neglects his declaration that to demand absolute certainty in the matters of greatest concern to us is to demand the impossible, and his disavowal of any doctrine that holds that we must refrain from acting on account of this fact.⁶

My argument proceeds in four parts. First, I show how what Tocqueville calls the "democratic social state" generates a proclivity to intellectual independence while at the same time constraining what people can achieve through this way of thinking.⁷ Scholars who have analyzed Tocqueville's account of what he calls "the philosophic method of the Americans" often

[Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017], 210). The only scholar that I am aware of who departs from this consensus is Olivier Zunz, who, in a critical review of Wolin's book, contends that Tocqueville "thrived on doubt; only religious doubt tormented him." But, given that Zunz's review touches on many aspects of Wolin's argument, he does not develop this claim further. See Zunz, "Holy Theory," review of *Tocqueville between Two Worlds*, by Sheldon Wolin, *Reviews in American History* 30, no. 4 (Dec. 2002): 569.

⁴See his ranking of doubt as one of the three greatest miseries human beings can suffer, alongside death and disease (Tocqueville, *Ceuvres complètes*, ed. J. P. Gallimard et al., 18 vols. [Paris: Gallimard, 1951–2003], 5 [1]: 183; 15 [2]: 29), as well as his account of being plunged into an all-encompassing doubt as a young man upon delving into his father's library of Enlightenment philosophy, which he analogizes to an earthquake (*OC* 15 [2]: 513).

⁵See, for example, *DA* 213–14, 345–47, 502–3.

⁶Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. Roger Boesche, trans. Roger Boesche and James Toupin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 64. In this article I treat notes and correspondence as being of comparable weight to Tocqueville's published texts. The notes and letters often find Tocqueville expressing himself more frankly than he does in published material, and thus provide insight into his thought process. Moreover, the notes reveal Tocqueville acknowledging the interconnectedness of different ideas in *Democracy in America* that the discursive nature of the argument in that work sometimes obscures.

⁷Here I build on scholarship that identifies the centrality of the concept of "social state" in Tocqueville's thought. See Michael P. Zuckert, "On Social State," in *Tocqueville's Defense of Human Liberty: Current Essays*, ed. Peter Augustine Lawler and Joseph Alulis (New York: Garland, 1993), 3–21; Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, trans. John Waggoner (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 1–11; and Steven Bilakovics, *Democracy without Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

neglect the social origins of this disposition, instead considering it in relation to leading figures in early modern philosophy.⁸ But taking intellectual forces to be determinative of social ones in Tocqueville's analysis obscures the extent to which he reveals their reciprocal influence on each other. My contention here is *not* that Tocqueville thinks that social forces are determinative of philosophers' teachings. Part of the richness of Tocqueville's social science is his account of how social and ideational forces are interrelated in a manner that defies linear causation.⁹

Second, I show that Tocqueville identifies pathologies that arise from the pursuit of complete intellectual independence. In his account, this pursuit paradoxically ends up producing its opposite: herd-like deference to majority opinion. Such a scenario stifles human diversity, and obstructs social and cultural development.¹⁰ Moreover, an excess of doubt, the expression of intellectual independence, leads people to become alienated from moral principles that might anchor political commitments, thus accelerating the withdrawal

⁸See, for example, David Lewis Schaefer, "Montaigne, Tocqueville, and the Politics of Skepticism," *Perspectives on Political Science* 31 (2002): 204–12; L. Joseph Hebert Jr., "Individualism and Intellectual Liberty in Tocqueville and Descartes," *Journal of Politics* 69 (May 2007): 525–37; and Laurence D. Cooper, "Every Man a Socrates? Tocqueville and the Conceit of Modernity," *American Political Thought* 1 (Fall 2012): 208–35. Jack Lively is an exception. See *The Social and Political Thought of Alexis de Tocqueville* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 72–79. I expand on his contribution by treating the issue in greater detail, as well as showing how remarks from sections of *Democracy in America* other than the one where Tocqueville discusses the "philosophic method of the Americans" further illuminate his view of this theme.

⁹In an 1852 speech, Tocqueville does assign primary responsibility for social change to intellectuals. See "Speech Given to the Annual Public Meeting of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences on April 3, 1852," trans. L. Joseph Hebert Jr., in *Alexis de Tocqueville and the Art of Democratic Statesmanship*, ed. Brian Danoff and L. Joseph Hebert Jr. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 17–29. Nonetheless, the more complex analyses in *Democracy in America* and *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution* belie the straightforwardness of this account. In *Democracy in America* Tocqueville contends that it was the preaching of Jesus that first made people understand that all members of the human race are equal, but then asserts a few pages later that people's shared status as "weak" and "small" subjects of the vast Roman Empire was key to making them receptive to this notion (*DA* 496, 505). This suggests that ideas cannot spread widely if social conditions are not conducive to people accepting them. In a note to a draft of this passage, Tocqueville indicates that he had not decided for himself whether the social state was the result of ideas, or ideas the result of the social state. See *De la démocratie*, 3:749f.

¹⁰Tocqueville's account of democracy's tendency to produce conformity and stagnation is well known; for his clearest statement of this point, see his argument on why intellectual revolutions will be rare in democracy (*DA* 753–60). As I will show, though, it is a mistake to think that this is a more pressing concern for him than an excess of intellectual independence, *precisely because it is an excess of intellectual independence that causes these effects.*

from public life that Tocqueville so fears. Third, in order to situate Tocqueville's insistence on the need to moderate intellectual independence within the context of his view of human reason, I consider passages where he indicates that, though our moral and political knowledge is unavoidably imprecise, it is nonetheless real and worth pursuing.

Fourth, I analyze the strategies Tocqueville offers to guide the tendency to doubt and independent-mindedness that he argues is characteristic of democratic peoples. I consider his arguments for the necessity and desirability of dogmatic beliefs concerning religion, and identify why Tocqueville was so wary of submitting religious claims to the scrutiny of individual reason. I also consider passages from his notes and private correspondence in which he shows some openness to the possibility that a moderate skepticism about religious claims could be beneficial. Additionally, I demonstrate how what Tocqueville calls "forms" can sustain people's attachment to ideas that reason cannot reliably underwrite. Finally, I show how participation in practical affairs can break up the monolith of received opinion and prevent objects of social consensus from becoming too dogmatic. It is through this sort of active experience that Tocqueville thinks that democratic peoples' proclivity to imprecise and distortionary general ideas about politics can be mediated, and a healthy form of doubt sustained. Current scholarship on Tocqueville's endorsement of participation focuses on its moral benefits; with this discussion, I identify the ways in which he thought it had intellectual benefits too.¹¹ In the conclusion, I indicate some implications of Tocqueville's analysis for contemporary theories of civic education.

How Democracy Engenders and Impedes the Pursuit of Intellectual Independence

Tocqueville's analysis emphasizes how the democratic social state generates Americans' habit of "seeking on one's own and in oneself alone the reason for things" (DA 484).¹² This is what he means when he argues that America "is one of the countries in which Descartes is studied least but his precepts are respected the most" (DA 483). He indicates that this way of thinking characterizes democratic societies more broadly, and proceeds to enumerate several causes rooted in the democratic social state that account for this intellectual habit. Each requires examination in order to identify its relationship to equality of conditions, the "generative fact" of democracy from which

¹¹Villa and Boesche note that participation has intellectual benefits, but do not develop a sustained account of what those benefits are, or how they come about. See Dana Richard Villa, *Public Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 44, and Boesche, *Strange Liberalism*, 154–55.

¹²In a note for a draft of the beginning of volume 2, Tocqueville writes that "audacious doubt is eminently democratic" (*De la démocratie*, 3:834h, emphasis in original).

“all particular facts emerge.”¹³ Elaborating what Tocqueville sees as the social basis of a democratic people’s disposition to independent-mindedness counters the prevailing tendency in recent scholarship to treat what Tocqueville calls the “philosophic method of the Americans” as a product of the writings of Enlightenment philosophers.¹⁴ Moreover, showing why Tocqueville thinks that social conditions in democracy generate this disposition to independent-mindedness separately from anyone’s conscious efforts to promote it underscores the importance of understanding both the salutary and the negative potential latent within this habit of thought.

The first social basis for a democratic people’s tendency to independent-mindedness that Tocqueville identifies is the “constant state of flux” which loosens or breaks the “bond that ties generation to generation” (DA 484). As a consequence of this, people “lose track of the ideas of their ancestors or cease to care about them,” and become more inclined to form their own ideas. This “constant state of flux” arises from the restlessness that Tocqueville says is natural to people when, because of the equality of conditions, each person sees the same chance of rising (DA 359). The second social basis for a democratic people’s tendency to independent-mindedness is the absence of fixed social classes. This mutability of social relations that arises from equality of conditions stands in contrast to aristocracy, which “linked all citizens together in a long chain from peasant to king.” Democracy, however, “breaks the chain and severs the links,” leaving individuals unconnected to networks of interaction or enduring social groups from which they might draw their beliefs (DA 359).

By referring to “the elimination of any uncontestable mark of greatness or superiority,” the third social basis for the philosophic method of the Americans, Tocqueville highlights how democracy’s equality of conditions renders people unwilling to defer to someone else. As he explains, “what is destroyed is not only confidence in any particular individual but also the readiness to believe anyone solely on the basis of his word” (DA 484). This indicates that people living in democracies may still be persuaded by their fellow citizens, but only after subjecting the other person’s claim to the scrutiny of their own reason. Later, Tocqueville makes a remark about scientists in democratic nations that appears applicable to democratic peoples more broadly: they “are not easily impressed by the mere name of any of their fellow human beings,” and are “unlikely to swear by the teachings of any authority” (DA 522).

¹³Goldhammer translates *le fait générateur* as “the original fact”; I translate it more literally so as to better express the sense of causal origin that Tocqueville is trying to convey.

¹⁴See note 8 above for examples of recent works of Tocqueville scholarship that focus on the intellectual rather than social origins of the democratic tendency to independent-mindedness.

Stepping back, we can say that the distinguishing characteristics of this intellectual outlook—being free of “the yoke of habit, family maxims, class opinions, and ... national prejudices” and especially seeking “on one’s own and in oneself alone the reason for things”—would be desirable qualities of mind for a people living in a political regime that emphasized debate, given that they together constitute an emphasis on independent, critical judgment. By freeing people from excessive reliance on received opinions, such habits would facilitate the deliberation widely seen as a core part of democratic politics. Here it is worth recalling Tocqueville’s statement in the introduction to *Democracy in America* about the need to “bring democracy’s advantages to the fore” and his tempered but real enthusiasm for reasoned debate (DA 8, 578). The drive to think for oneself that the democratic social state engenders clearly possesses the potential to be one such advantage.

Yet just as the democratic social state engenders a rejection of traditional authority and a reliance on one’s own reason, it also produces consequences that constrain the exercise of individual reason. Tocqueville’s assessment of how democracy limits people’s intellectual progress provides context for his warnings about the ways in which this disposition can be destructive if pursued to excess.¹⁵ While he often frames these claims in terms of the acquisition of knowledge in spheres such as philosophy or natural science, they show by implication how the proclivities that democracy engenders hamper people’s truth seeking in a public context, too.

For example, consider Tocqueville’s claim that democratic peoples tend to focus on reason’s practical applications while largely ignoring more theoretical aspects of human knowledge. In his telling, multiple causes account for this. Primary among them is that meditation is necessary for the cultivation of higher sciences, but nothing is less suited to meditation than “the circumstances of democratic society,” because in such a society, almost everyone restlessly pursues wealth and power, leaving little time for calm repose (DA 523). He earlier acknowledged that this restlessness can impel people to pursue “the labors of the mind.” He indicates, however, that they will pursue them not for their perceived intrinsic merit but rather as a means to the aforementioned ends of wealth and power, as well as fame. Tocqueville clarifies this by distinguishing between a desire to use knowledge and a “pure desire to know.” He says it is the latter drive, the “ardent, proud, disinterested love

¹⁵Although Tocqueville thinks that democracy limits most people’s intellectual progress, he indicates that it may not necessarily always limit everyone’s. At one point he states that though democracy does not encourage people to cultivate science for its own sake, “it does vastly increase the number who do cultivate it. It is inconceivable that from such a vast multitude there should not on occasion arise a speculative genius impassioned solely by the love of truth. One can rest assured that such a genius will strive to penetrate nature’s deepest mysteries regardless of the spirit of his country and his times. There is no need to aid his development; it is enough to stay out of his way” (DA 527).

of what is true" which propels humans toward the "abstract sources of truth" from which fundamental ideas are drawn (DA 521, 523). While aristocracy's fixed inequality of conditions pushes individuals to seek these "abstract sources of truth," the focus on personal advancement that the fluidity of the democratic social state engenders encourages them to pursue only science's useful applications.

Tocqueville also shows how the democratic social state fosters habits of thinking contrary to those requisite for significant intellectual endeavors. He observes that "when everyone is active, there is a general tendency to place too much value on quickness of mind and superficial concepts, and too little on deeper but slower exertions of the intellect" (DA 524). He argues that one of the characteristics of democratic centuries is a taste for easy successes and instant gratifications, which he notes can be observed in people's intellectual pursuits (DA 498). Somewhat paradoxically, the democratic human being's curiosity is both insatiable and easily satisfied; he or she wants to know a lot quickly rather than a few things well. Indeed, habitual inattention is a major defect of the democratic mind (DA 718). His observation that "the restlessness and turnover of people [in democracy] disturbs and distracts the mind without stimulating it or elevating it" reinforces the notion that the democratic social state saps the mind's ability to focus. Thus, both the fluidity of the social world and the preference for quick rewards in intellectual endeavors impede people's ascent to the "abstract sources of truth."

The connection between democracy and envy that Tocqueville posits presents another way in which the democratic social state promotes the exercise of individual reason while at the same time impeding it.¹⁶ He introduces this theme in a discussion of why men of talent are rare in American politics. Tocqueville asserts that "what democracy lacks ... is not always the capacity to choose men of merit, but the desire and taste to do so." This unwillingness to recognize and defer to superiority, he says, derives from the fact that "democratic institutions develop the sentiment of envy in the human heart to a very high degree." In Tocqueville's analysis, this is

not so much because such institutions give everyone the means to equal everyone else as because those means continually prove unavailing to

¹⁶Tocqueville's treatment of the connection between democracy and envy has not figured prominently in the secondary literature, and the authors who do examine it do not consider it in relation to democratic peoples' habit of independent-mindedness. See, for example, Michael Locke McLendon, "The Politics of Sour Grapes: Sartre, Elster, and Tocqueville on Frustration, Failure, and Self-Deception," *Review of Politics* 75 (Spring 2013): 262, and Jon Elster, *Alexis de Tocqueville: The First Social Scientist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 62–71. Recognizing the connection between these different portions of the text helps us better perceive Tocqueville's nuanced understanding of democratic psychology.

those who employ them. Democratic institutions awaken and flatter the passion for equality without ever being able to satisfy it to the full. No sooner does full equality seem within the people's reach than it flies from their grasp, and its flight, as Pascal said, is eternal. The people passionately seek a good that is all the more precious because it is close enough to be familiar yet far enough away that it cannot be savored. The chance of success spurs them on; the uncertainty of success vexes them. They struggle, they tire, they grow bitter. ... *No form of superiority is so legitimate that the sight of it is not wearisome to their eyes* (DA 226, emphasis mine).

Tocqueville repeats this idea in volume 2, stating that "the constant tension that exists between the instincts to which equality gives rise and the means it provides for their satisfaction torments and tires the soul" (DA 627). That this claim appears in both volumes attests to its importance. Tocqueville sometimes speaks about envy as arising from inequalities of wealth (DA 243–44). But as the italicized section of the quoted passage makes clear, democratic envy extends to *all* claims of superiority and merit.¹⁷ Tocqueville elaborates a political consequence of this when he observes that people can become so attached to equality that they will more readily explain others' ascent to higher status in terms of criminality than excellence (DA 253). Envy thus constitutes both a cause of a democratic people's proclivity to intellectual independence and a limitation of it. That is, one reason why they rely on their own reason rather than deferring to the judgment of others is that they resent claims to superiority. But this resentment limits their receptivity to the wisdom of others, which impedes their intellectual development. Envy operates in conjunction with democratic peoples' focus on material rewards and difficulty achieving sustained focus to limit what they can achieve through their reliance on individual reason.

Indeed, the most noteworthy way that democracy impedes people's drive to think for themselves arises not *despite* the factors that stimulate them to pursue intellectual independence, but *because* of them. As Tocqueville tells it, the demand for complete intellectual independence is pathological because it is self-undermining. In the following section, I will explain why,

¹⁷Elster construes Tocqueville's understanding of envy in democracy unduly narrowly, arguing that, for Tocqueville, it mainly arises from differences in wealth. See Elster, *Alexis de Tocqueville*, 62. In Tocqueville's account, one exception to Americans' unwillingness to recognize superiority is the deference accorded to the legal profession (DA 302–11). He speaks about how lawyers and the legal spirit moderate democracy's negative tendencies, but says little about how this class of people is able to escape the lack of deference to superiority that he highlights elsewhere. Given his emphasis on the importance of America's debt to the English common law system, it may be that the deference accorded to lawyers arises from America's particular cultural heritage.

as well as consider his description of the other pernicious consequences of a reliance on individual reason as the sole source of truth.

The Potential Pathologies Arising from Democratic Intellectual Habits

As we have seen already, people in democracy purport to recognize only one intellectual authority: their own reason. But Tocqueville shows how this commitment is expressed in a manner that is perverse. Specifically, the ostensible repudiation of external intellectual authority ends up meaning the rejection of old authorities in favor of an even more powerful, indeed tyrannical, new authority: public opinion.¹⁸ Tocqueville's description of democratic peoples' tendency to defer to majority opinion immediately follows his account of how in most activities of the mind they rely solely on their own individual reason—a shift that seems paradoxical, if not outright contradictory. But, despite this impression, these two chapters exhibit an underlying continuity of thought—the same factors that lead people to pursue intellectual independence put them at risk of a new form of intellectual servitude.

In chapter 2 of the first part of volume 2 of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville reminds us of his earlier observation that as citizens become more equal, “each individual's tendency to believe blindly in a certain man or certain class diminishes.” He adds, though, that in conjunction with this, the disposition to believe in the mass increases. In times of equality, people have no faith in one other because of their similarity, but that same similarity gives them almost unlimited confidence in the judgment of the public, because it seems unlikely to them that, everyone being equally enlightened, truth should not lie with the greater number (*DA* 491). Indeed, the majority's moral ascendancy is based in part on “the theory of equality applied to intelligence” (*DA* 284). Thus, it is democratic peoples' very unwillingness to defer to specific individuals that makes them especially prone to defer to the beliefs they impute to the abstract mass of their fellow citizens.

In Tocqueville's view, it is not just a trust in the putative views of the majority that leads people to surrender their intellects to the tutelage of common opinion. It is also a *lack* of trust in oneself as an arbiter of truth when one stands at odds with the majority. As Tocqueville observes, when someone in a democratic society compares himself to his fellow citizens, he feels proud that he is their equal, but when he contemplates his fellow citizens as a group, “he is immediately overwhelmed by his own insignificance and weakness” (*DA* 492). Seeing that he is in no way set apart or distinguished

¹⁸Cooper, “Every Man a Socrates?,” 212.

from his fellow citizens, he “loses confidence in himself when they combat him.” Not only does he doubt his strength, but he also “begins to doubt his rectitude and comes very close to admitting he is wrong when most people say he is” (DA 758). As Pierre Manent observes with respect to this aspect of Tocqueville’s analysis, the aspiration to intellectual independence expresses itself as vanity, and specifically the sentiment that “I am as good as another.”¹⁹ But this same vanity makes us not want to be shunned by the majority for flouting its dictates.

Thus, the same decline of individual influence that makes people rely on their own reason also makes them particularly disposed to go along with what they think their fellow citizens believe. As Lucien Jaume notes, it is “precisely because equal individuals are incredulous that they will adhere to a powerful faith.”²⁰ Indeed, so great is the power of putative majority opinion over thought that it can continue to elicit conformity when a literal majority no longer believes in it (DA 758). This new form of servitude is particularly insidious because people often do not even see it as servitude. Tocqueville thinks this pervasive conformity is dangerous because it stifles freedom of the intellect, which he sees as “sacred.” It also makes intellectual revolutions rare, to such an extent that he fears that humanity “will cease to advance” (DA 493, 760). The paradoxical connection between democratic peoples’ pursuit of intellectual independence and the danger of oppressive conformity that stifles human advancement requires careful reading to draw out. Nonetheless, it is worth observing that, in a note on a draft of his discussion of democratic peoples’ intellectual habits, Tocqueville himself explicitly acknowledges their connection, stating that this passage contains the “foundations” for much of what he says in the subsequent discussion of the rarity of intellectual revolutions and the fixity of common opinion.²¹

In volume 1, we find a brief but complex passage in which Tocqueville gives another account of the potential consequences of intellectual independence and doubt. It merits examination in order to see how it supplements the analysis we have considered previously. Near the end of a chapter on press freedom, Tocqueville refashions a maxim of Pascal’s, asserting that “deep convictions are found only at the two ends [of knowledge], and ... in the middle lies doubt.” He then enumerates “three distinct and often successive states of human intelligence.” The “deep conviction” of the first state is thoroughly unreflective, and can fall prey to doubt when faced with objections. Doubt itself constitutes the second state. In the third and final state, one lays one’s doubts to rest and “begins to believe again”; this happens “in many cases.” He describes the state of settled belief using language of

¹⁹Manent, *Nature of Democracy*, 40.

²⁰Lucien Jaume, *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 67.

²¹*De la démocratie*, 3:700f.

purposiveness and illumination, stating that an individual who has attained this sort of conviction “no longer clings to a truth plucked at random from the darkness, but stares truth in the face and marches directly toward its light” (DA 213).

While the initial formulation situates the states of intelligence within individual minds, Tocqueville proceeds to map two of the three states onto societies. He indicates that when a free press, and by implication the free exchange of ideas, arises among people in a state of unreflective conviction, it does not immediately overturn their tendency to believe uncritically, but instead “changes the object of their belief from one day to the next.” This intellectual freedom, though, can turn against itself. Tocqueville indicates that over time “nearly the whole range of ideas is explored,” and “doubt and universal mistrust” seep in. Tocqueville deflates any hope that a majority of people can ascend from here, declaring that most will remain in either credulous conviction or pervasive doubt, while only a few will attain “the reflective, self-assured conviction that grows out of knowledge and emerges from the agitation of doubt itself” (DA 214). This assertion seems to revise the more hopeful statement he made earlier when he posited that an individual may succeed in putting his doubts to rest “in many cases.” “Many cases” may nonetheless constitute a distinct minority of a whole people, however.

Tocqueville deepens the pessimistic tenor of these remarks by further underlining how overzealously pursued critical questioning can paradoxically end up impeding debate. He contends that, in centuries of doubt, since social theories are contested one after another, “anyone who adheres to one of them holds onto it not so much because he is sure that it is good as because he is not sure that anything else is better” (DA 214). This remark suggests that, possessing no decisive basis for holding firmly to their own views, and doubting that the truth can be known at all, modern democratic individuals are less open to persuasion by the reasons offered for contrary views.²² Tocqueville also posits that, when opinions are endlessly contested, people turn to instinct and material interest to guide them, because these are “plainer to see, easier to grasp, and ... more permanent than opinions” (DA 214). That is, someone can be made to doubt the choiceworthiness of a contested ideal more readily than the desirability of comfort and security. This passage from volume 1 supplements the previously discussed account of how limitless intellectual independence induces stifling conformity by showing how the doubt and critical questioning associated with intellectual independence can contribute to a withdrawal from and indifference to political life.

In the discussion of the “three stages of human intelligence,” Tocqueville expresses a pessimistic view of the ability of skeptical questioning to improve human existence, and even postulates a pathological outcome of

²²Hebert, “Individualism and Intellectual Liberty,” 528.

this approach in which free discussion ends up weakening beliefs rather than fortifying them. Though this would surely be good when the beliefs in question are false or harmful, Tocqueville's worry here seems to derive from an awareness that the recognition of ignorance and the acquisition of knowledge are distinct. Uncertainty about one's beliefs may promote moderation, but it can paralyze, too. Moreover, when one is doubtful not only about one's own beliefs, but about the ability of the mind to attain better and worse approximations of the truth, debate and persuasion are undermined.

In interpreting the "three stages of human intelligence" passage, though, we must remain attentive to its nuances. Tocqueville may express wariness of the doubt characteristic of intellectual independence, but he does not reject it completely. Indeed, he actually indicates its positive potential. On one hand, "doubt" may be harmful for self-government when characteristic of the intellectual state of an entire society. On the other hand, Tocqueville also indicates in this same section that doubt provides the stimulus that generates "reflective, self-assured conviction" in an individual. Elsewhere, he shows how this can happen on an interpersonal level, too: in a description of the power of the majority over thought, he states that "as long as the majority remains in doubt, people talk, but as soon as it makes up its mind once and for all, everyone falls silent" (DA 293). Thus, taking into account the nuances of the "three stages of human intelligence" passage from volume 1 of *Democracy in America*, as well as considering it in the context of the work as a whole, it seems that it is an illustration of the dangers of shallow or poorly applied manifestations of intellectual independence and doubt in politics, rather than an outright repudiation of them. Part of Tocqueville's task is to preserve democratic citizens' pride while also making them aware of their own limits; his stance towards intellectual independence is of a piece with this larger agenda.

Tocqueville on the Limits of Human Reason

This formulation raises the question of what Tocqueville thinks the limits of human reason are. We have already seen the ways in which the democratic social state impedes one's ascent to the heights of intellectual achievement. But Tocqueville indicates that this ascent is difficult for everyone, regardless of what sort of regime they inhabit. He argues that the necessity to work for a living limits most people's intellectual progress, given that such progress requires substantial time and effort. Tocqueville reinforces the importance of sustained leisure for the heights of intellectual achievement when he asserts that "only minds truly emancipated from everyday preoccupations ... can break through to necessary truths, and then only with a great investment of time and care" (DA 501). This would seem to be especially the case in democracy, given Tocqueville's suggestion that in this type of regime, people's minds are universally preoccupied with bodily needs and comforts (DA 617).

Tocqueville goes on to assert that even the greatest philosophers must “adopt many beliefs without discussing them in order to delve more deeply into the small number [they have] singled out for scrutiny.” Strikingly, even philosophers such as these, who have broken through to “necessary truths,” are still “almost always surrounded by uncertainties,” and have so far been able to discover “only a small number of contradictory notions” (DA 501).²³ This prompts us to ask to what extent Tocqueville thinks humans can grasp enduring, fundamental truths at all, and what significance reason’s limitations have for politics. Doing so helps further clarify what Tocqueville saw as the positive potential of the doubt accompanying intellectual independence.

In his published writings and his private correspondence, Tocqueville indicates his skepticism about the human mind’s ability to grasp certain knowledge about morality and politics, a fact which he confesses sometimes tormented him. “The deeper one goes into any subject, the vaster it becomes, and behind every fact and observation lurks a doubt,” he writes to a friend during his travels in America. In another letter, he states that he convinced himself that the search for “absolute, demonstrable truth” was an effort “directed toward the impossible,” because for the great majority of points that it is important for us to know, “we have only probabilities, almos.” Yet the uncertainty that Tocqueville regards as one of the “most inflexible laws of our nature” does not lead him to renounce political engagement. He explicitly rejects the idea that one must not act because one cannot be sure of anything, and insists that “it is better to risk entering quickly and vigorously onto a bad path than to remain in uncertainty or act weakly.”²⁴ While the acquisition of “absolute, demonstrable truth” may be impossible, he nonetheless insists that there exist a few truths which merit our “complete conviction.” These remarks from his private correspondence add a new layer of meaning to the “three stages of human intelligence” passage discussed above. Specifically, they suggest that those who are rendered apathetic by their own doubt end up in this state because they cleave to a mistaken expectation that reason should generate apodictic certainties in moral and political matters. Part of Tocqueville’s mission seems to be to disabuse people of this notion.

Tocqueville never elaborates how a belief might merit our complete conviction while at the same time not being certain. One suspects that he thinks that there are some ideas, such as the possibility of freely chosen human action and the choiceworthiness of freedom, that there are grounds for believing in, but that nonetheless do not admit of incontrovertible demonstration. As he wrote in a note to himself, “a difference must be made between absolute

²³Goldhammer makes this passage more dramatic than it is in French by translating *environnés* as “plagued” rather than “surrounded.”

²⁴Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 64, emphasis in original.

affirmation [certainty] and Pyrrhonism [absolute skepticism]. ... The system of probabilities is the only true one, the only *human* one."²⁵ In other words, warranted belief, though uncertain, may sometimes be enough to anchor human action. At least some people can live with uncertainty without being troubled by it, or (as seems to have been the case with Tocqueville) can live their lives *despite* sometimes being troubled by it. Significantly, this note is appended to a draft of the final chapter of *Democracy in America*, in which Tocqueville, after acknowledging the inevitable partiality of his perspective, states that he still has hope for the future of democracy despite his fears.

Tocqueville's own intellectual life demonstrates how he carried this attitude regarding the importance of cultivating a mean between absolute affirmation and absolute skepticism into practice. Though he doubts whether human reason can acquire certain knowledge about the questions of greatest concern to us, this does not lead him to renounce thinking about politics entirely. Instead, in both *Democracy in America* and *The Ancien Régime*, he eschews a priori theorizing and instead grounds himself in analysis of the everyday experiences of political life. Unlike early modern political philosophers such as Hobbes, Tocqueville's theoretical enterprise does not consist of an absolute perspective that seeks to guarantee the correctness of political choices by reference to a system of rules. Rather, it has a greater kinship with Aristotle, who insists in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that knowledge of moral and political affairs does not admit of mathematical exactitude, and who begins not with a set of axioms but an investigation of common opinion.²⁶

While Tocqueville rejects the attempt to find an Archimedean point from which to assess political life, he does indicate that there exists a divine standard of justice by which all human conceptions of justice could be judged and found deficient (*DA* 833). In one passage he even remarks that aristocratic and democratic societies are like "two distinct humanities," and are "so extraordinarily different as to be incomparable." Yet his political thought is ultimately not irreducibly historicist. He refers at one point to "simple notions of the just and unjust that exist everywhere," and states unambiguously that democracy is "more just" than aristocracy (*DA* 725, 833). Our access to moral and political knowledge may be provisional and incomplete, but it is still real, and it is worth pursuing.

Nonetheless, because our knowledge of these issues is only approximate, our attachment to them must be tempered by a recognition of their partial character. If too much doubt is pathological for human beings, a complete absence of it is, too. In a note to a draft of *Democracy in America*,

²⁵*De la démocratie*, 4:1281e.

²⁶See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b11–27, 1095a30–b14, 1098a20–b8. For a discussion of similarities between Tocqueville and Aristotle, see Stephen G. Salkever, *Finding the Mean* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 244–62.

Tocqueville writes that, because people grasp fragments of the truth, but never truth itself, every man who presents a complete or absolute system “is almost certainly in a state of error or falsehood,” and if he wants to impose such a system on others by force he must be considered “an enemy of the human species.” Indeed, so sure is Tocqueville that all ideas have their limits that not to see the limit of something “is the surest sign of the weakness of the human mind.”²⁷ In this account, a willingness to doubt and question provides a bulwark against the tendency to become blindly attached to imprecise or distortionary abstractions.

Tocqueville’s sense that that the world in its totality eludes the mind’s grasp is evident in his discussion of general ideas. While general ideas are necessary and valuable because they “allow the human mind to make rapid judgments about a great many things at once,” the notions they provide “are always incomplete, and what they gain in breadth they lose in exactitude.” Indeed, general ideas “attest not to the strength of the human intellect but rather to its insufficiency,” that is, its inability to cognize the world in its particulars (*DA* 494). Tocqueville grants that general ideas are to some extent necessary for civic life (*DA* 186). Nonetheless, he also emphasizes that a taste for them in politics—something like what we might today call overly ideological thinking—can be dangerous if removed from practical experience and the tincture of doubt it provides.²⁸

Thus, contrary to those such as Roger Boesche, Sheldon Wolin, and Dana Villa, who focus exclusively on the passages in his writing where Tocqueville describes being tormented by doubt, there are also ways in which he experienced doubt as a positive force. Doubt provides the stimulus to pursue further knowledge and attain reflective, self-assured conviction. It also prompts one to recognize the imprecision of all human knowledge, and therefore moderates attachment to general ideas as well as countering prophecies of an absolutely certain human future. Indeed, Tocqueville has hope for the future of democracy precisely because he is uncertain how it will turn out.

This sense of doubt’s positive potential is directly connected to Tocqueville’s cautious but real optimism for intellectual independence. He offers a constructive critique of the growing tendency toward this disposition to think for oneself, rather than opposing it outright.²⁹ As has been shown already, Tocqueville thinks that poorly applied critical questioning can lead to apathy and disengagement from political life, and that the pursuit of complete intellectual independence risks becoming self-undermining. Other parts of *Democracy in America*, however, give indications of the conditions

²⁷*De la démocratie*, 3:715f, 762d.

²⁸Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 129.

²⁹Note how one of the pernicious effects of the future form of despotism he fears is to rob citizens of their ability to think on their own (*DA* 821).

under which Tocqueville thought that a moderate form of intellectual independence could be sustained and a salutary practice of doubt cultivated.

Tocqueville's Resources for Preserving a Moderate Form of Intellectual Independence

The first part of Tocqueville's strategy for engendering a moderate and constructive form of intellectual independence consists of cultivating and preserving salutary dogmatic beliefs, that is, beliefs that are accepted on faith and without discussion. This shows that Tocqueville thinks intellectual independence, while valuable, should not be absolute. Dogmatic beliefs are necessary, he argues, because people lack both the time and the ability to prove for themselves all the truths on which they daily rely. In his view, "if society is to exist, and, *a fortiori*, to prosper, the minds of all citizens must be drawn and held together by certain leading ideas." He also posits that "without common ideas, there is no common action, and without common action, men may still exist, but they will not constitute a social body" (DA 489–90). It is worth noting that the emphasis in this passage is not on dogmatic beliefs constraining action but rather on making collective action *possible*. Tocqueville couples his endorsement of dogmatic beliefs with a statement about the impossibility of eliminating them, for they are a natural product of social life (DA 490). Thus, the task for those who would "educate democracy" is to promulgate and preserve dogmatic beliefs that support freedom rather than consigning society to servitude or stagnation.

Tocqueville adds that dogmatic beliefs regarding religion are the most desirable of all, and argues that these sorts of ideas are the ones "most appropriately shielded from the usual action of individual reason" (DA 501). Tocqueville's insistence that individual and collective well-being requires accepting dogmatic beliefs, and religious dogmas specifically, has been criticized by some scholars who see it as out of keeping with his own stated desire to preserve political liberty and individual independence. Villa criticizes Tocqueville's social thought on the grounds that it "places far more value upon *integration* and endorsement of community mores, habits, and attitudes than it does on critical thinking and independence of mind."³⁰ While not incorrect, Villa's formulation nonetheless fails to do justice to the fact that Tocqueville sees integration and endorsement of shared mores, habits, and attitudes as necessary in order for critical thinking and independence of mind to be constructive.

Indeed, as Mark Reinhardt observes, Tocqueville "does not valorize consensus as such." Rather, he "seeks to establish a consensus that will

³⁰Villa, *Teachers of the People*, 206. Villa is highly critical of Tocqueville on this point, alleging that he "fears ... the critical questioning of regnant norms and beliefs," and that he "was no rationalist, not even the kind sensitive to historical context" (Villa, *Teachers of the People*, 183, 221).

allow *dissension* to flourish and endure.”³¹ Reinhardt refuses to countenance the specifics of Tocqueville’s vision of “coherent cultural authority and concord” because it requires “intolerable oppression” and is “not ambitious enough for our own diasporic and globalizing late-modern condition.” Nonetheless, he concedes that Tocqueville’s treatment of this theme contains an important lesson: “all communities are necessarily bound together (though not seamlessly, not without cost) by practices of authority.”³² We can build on this observation by examining *why* exactly Tocqueville thought people needed to unquestioningly accept religious dogmas.³³ Though we may end up following Villa and Reinhardt in rejecting the particulars of Tocqueville’s conclusions, we may nonetheless come to see the merit in the concerns underlying them. My treatment here of Tocqueville’s arguments for the necessity of religious beliefs will be somewhat brief, given that many of them are already widely known. A focus on the relationship of these arguments to Tocqueville’s attitude toward intellectual independence guides my consideration of them in what follows.

The first benefit of religious dogmas that Tocqueville identifies is that they enable contestation by limiting it (*DA* 337). This is important because in situations where authority is absent in *both* the religious and political spheres, people “soon become frightened in the face of unlimited independence.” This fear can lead them to willingly submit to despotic rule (*DA* 503). However, Tocqueville indicates that furnishing a baseline consensus is not the only way that dogmatic beliefs enable contestation. He also suggests that the moral foundations they provide enable contestation by motivating people to engage in deliberation. This is implied when he says that when a people’s religion is destroyed, they defend their opinions “badly or give them up altogether.” He says that this occurs because “doubt takes hold of the highest regions of the intellect and half paralyzes all the others”—language that clearly indicates that doubt about religious questions can have a negative effect (*DA* 502).

The second benefit that Tocqueville discerns in religious dogmas is that they limit the power of popular sovereignty (*DA* 337). By asserting the importance of dogmatically inculcating moral principles that provide this limit,

³¹Mark Reinhardt, *The Art of Being Free* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 81, emphasis mine.

³²*Ibid.*, 77, 81–82, 84–85.

³³Despite the emphasis on religion in his published writings, Tocqueville’s private correspondence indicates that he was not a traditional believer. In an 1857 letter, he recounts that he was a devout Catholic until age sixteen, when, after studying the Enlightenment classics in his father’s library, he lost his faith. In a letter written to Gobineau in 1843, he prefaces his defense of the utility and beauty of Christian moral teaching with the declaration that he is “not a believer.” In the 1857 letter, he professes a sort of deism, but admits that sometimes he doubts even that (*OC* 9:57, 15 [2]: 315).

Tocqueville suggests that the proper boundaries of human action are not always manifestly clear, and perhaps are also easily obscured by passion and interest. This point adds to his earlier claim that limitless independence in both the political and the religious realms can frighten people. Here he indicates that that same independence can make them rashly impetuous as well. This suggests that one reason why Tocqueville is disinclined to regard critically questioning religious beliefs as positive is that religiously derived moral teachings control and direct baser human impulses that reason alone cannot reliably restrain.

The third reason why Tocqueville thinks religious dogmas are desirable is that they counteract harmful behaviors that democracy engenders. In his view, religiously derived moral teachings help correct democratic peoples' tendency to isolate themselves from society by imposing on them duties toward their fellow human beings. Similarly, the fourth reason why he insists on the desirability of religious dogmas is that they moderate democratic peoples' tendency to become preoccupied with material well-being by inculcating habits of self-restraint and a taste for immaterial gratifications (DA 503).

The fifth reason why Tocqueville sees religious dogmas as beneficial is that they impart a belief in the immortality of the soul. While this belief supports the moral principles he wants religion to inculcate, its good effects go beyond that (DA 635–36). It also satisfies what he says is a natural human yearning for a transcendent reward (DA 343). Thus, religiously derived beliefs about immortality fulfill an enduring psychological need. Additionally, such a belief supports a people's sense of continuity and futurity, the absence of which saps their willingness to undertake heroic action.³⁴ In this way, religion gives a healthy outlet to people's impulse to self-sacrifice. In keeping with his intention to consider religion "from a purely human standpoint" (DA 502), it seems that Tocqueville wants a belief in the immortality of the soul to lead people to earthly greatness, rather than a self-abnegating pursuit of personal piety. Thus, dogmatic beliefs, especially religious ones, are ultimately a resource for preserving the greatness manifested in human freedom rather than leading people to salvation in a world beyond.

Nonetheless, as important as Tocqueville may think religious beliefs are for a democratic people, he also indicates that such people's proclivity to see individual reason as the sole valid path to truth makes them ill disposed to accept them. He says that equality of conditions "fosters a sort of incredulity about the supernatural and an often quite exaggerated idea of human reason." Because of this, people "want to locate the principal arbiter of their beliefs within the limits of mankind and not beyond" (DA 490). But since the

³⁴Marvin Zetterbaum makes this point in *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1967), 120–21. For the relevant passages from *Democracy in America*, see DA 635–36, 639.

claims of revealed religion cannot be rationally confirmed, democratic peoples, with their attachment to individual reason and empirical evidence, are inclined to dismiss them as false.

In a marginal note to a draft of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville acknowledges the challenge more explicitly, stating that reason and religion represent contrary principles. While a wholehearted embrace of either is “impractical and bad,” both are nonetheless needed.³⁵ Indeed, despite his own wariness of the destructive potential of religious doubt, his writings contain indications of how the conflict between faith and reason could have salutary political consequences if each checked the excesses of the other.³⁶ In a letter to his friend Arthur de Gobineau, Tocqueville indicates that the sole defect of Christianity is that, though it admirably formed a human community beyond national boundaries, it “considerably neglected” the duties of people “in their capacity as citizens.”³⁷ He remarks that the increasing concern for “the public virtues” among modern moralists represents an improvement of Christian moral teachings through the addition of a tincture of classical public-spiritedness. Strikingly, though, he notes that this turn from heaven to earth constitutes the predictable consequence of less fervent religious beliefs and less clear conceptions of the afterlife.³⁸ This remark indicates that the doubting, empiricist orientation of the democratic mind may actually be *positive* when applied to religion if it serves to gently moderate faith’s otherworldly orientation. Though Tocqueville himself never pursued this line of thought, the germ of it is present within his writings.

Tocqueville is equivocal about whether unquestioning acceptance of religion is necessary because of the limitations of *ordinary* human reason or human reason simply. He says that cultivation of knowledge concerning God and human nature is “inaccessible to most,” which implies that it is accessible to some. Moreover, as noted previously, he says that even those who have broken through to “necessary truths” are “almost always surrounded by uncertainties” (DA 501–2). The “almost” here suggests that a gifted few sometimes *can* attain real knowledge.³⁹ These rare individuals would presumably have less need of dogmatic beliefs, and so the limits to intellectual independence would not be uniform across humanity.⁴⁰

³⁵*De la démocratie*, 3:713e.

³⁶Aristide Tessitore makes this suggestion regarding a fructifying tension between faith and reason, but does not elaborate what it would look like. See Tessitore, “Tocqueville and Gobineau on the Nature of Modern Politics,” *Review of Politics* 67 (Fall 2005): 652–54.

³⁷Alexis de Tocqueville, *The European Revolution and Correspondence with Gobineau*, trans. and ed. John Lukacs (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959).

³⁸*Ibid.*, 192, 206.

³⁹Tocqueville declares repeatedly that intellectual inequalities come from God and are beyond the power of human beings to efface (DA 59, 627).

Nonetheless, Tocqueville gives no indication that he thinks anyone can dispense with dogmatic beliefs entirely.

As important as they may be, however, dogmatic beliefs concerning religion are not in themselves sufficient to mediate intellectual independence. More is needed in order to guide people's minds. The first is what Tocqueville calls "forms." "Forms" is an important concept for him, but he never provides an explicit definition of it. Compounding the difficulty of explicating this term is the fact that Tocqueville uses it to denote related but different things. "Forms" often means something like "formalities" or "formal procedures." Indeed, Tocqueville often speaks of forms in the context of the formalized procedures of legal processes (*DA* 84, 303, 315). It is this meaning that Tocqueville seems to have in mind when he extols the importance of forms in the final chapter of *Democracy in America* (*DA* 826). Legal forms are necessary, he says, because they slow down political action. In doing so, they counter the "unthinking passions" of democratic peoples and check their propensity to "hasten impetuously after the objects of each of their desires" (*DA* 303, 826). Thus, "forms" in the sense of legal procedures counter reason's weakness in the face of passions and interest.

But formal procedures are not all that Tocqueville means by "forms." He also uses it to mean ritual, and religious ritual specifically. In the context of a discussion of American religion, Tocqueville asserts that forms are necessary because they "enable the human mind to contemplate abstract truths with a steady gaze and, by helping it grasp such truths firmly, allow them to embrace them ardently (*DA* 506). Thus, forms in the sense of ritual lead people to embrace ideas to which their reason cannot reliably sustain an attachment. Tocqueville notes, however, that equality of conditions is not favorable to convention—a tendency that extends to forms, which he says Americans regard as "useless and inconvenient veils placed between them and the truth" (*DA* 484). He says little about how to preserve them in the face of this hostility, and only insists that doing so is imperative.

Advocacy of the involvement of democratic peoples in practical affairs⁴¹ is Tocqueville's final response to the independent-mindedness characteristic of democratic peoples. Tocqueville's discussion of such involvement indicates that it has not just moral benefits, but intellectual ones also. First, as alluded to previously, it tempers people's attachment to the general ideas that the democratic social state leads them to formulate. As he puts it, "on any subject about

⁴⁰Note also his remark that the only effective way for governmental leaders to honor the "dogma" of the immortality of the soul "is to act every day *as though they believed in it themselves*" (*DA* 636–37, emphasis mine). This formulation implies that at least some of the leaders of whom he speaks may not actually believe in this dogma to which they outwardly express obeisance, but may nonetheless be able to live satisfactory lives.

⁴¹I intend this phrase to encompass both Tocqueville's discussion of democratic peoples' participation in the formal institutions of self-government as well as in civil and political associations, themes he treats separately but that nonetheless have much overlap.

which it is particularly dangerous for democratic peoples to embrace general ideas ... the best cure is to make sure that they deal with that subject in a practical manner on a daily basis." He characterizes general ideas regarding politics as particularly needing to be countered. Practical experience is effective, he says, because people "will have no choice but to delve into the details, and the details will reveal the weak points of the theory" (DA 500).

Tocqueville declares that a hallmark of the democratic intellectual disposition is that each person "retreats within the limit of the self and from that vantage point ventures to judge the world" (DA 484). One prominent benefit of participation in practical affairs is that it draws people *out of themselves* and tempers their "often quite exaggerated idea of human reason" (DA 490). We can say by inference that it inculcates a salutary form of doubt that makes people aware of the imprecisions of their mental concepts and willing to revise them in light of new empirical evidence. Elsewhere in the text, Tocqueville declares that true enlightenment "is primarily the fruit of experience" and praises the fact that in America, "all of education is directed towards politics" – that is, to the practice of politics (DA 351–52).

Moreover, Tocqueville indicates that regular engagement with one's fellow citizens also provides opportunities for intellectual development and helps break up the monolith of common opinion. "Feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart expands, and the human spirit develops only thorough the reciprocal action of human beings on one another," he writes. Indeed, by participating in political associations, "large numbers of people ... see and speak to one another [and] come to a common understanding" (DA 598, 608). One reason why common opinion is so powerful is that its abstract, homogenous nature makes it resistant to engagement. Associating with others who think differently, however, dispels its appearance of homogeneity. By interacting with each other, people are exposed to new ideas, and also discover reasons to doubt and reevaluate their existing commitments. Tocqueville never explicitly makes this point, but it is warranted to say on the basis of these observations that the salutary doubt and independent-mindedness that participation in practical affairs cultivates has the potential to mediate dogmatic beliefs and prevent them from becoming too stultifying or restrictive. Thus, Tocqueville's outline of the intellectual benefits of participation points to a way in which collective life and common purposes can be sustained without requiring the surrender of one's critical faculties.

Conclusion

Many contemporary political theorists concerned with civic education emphasize the importance of intellectually independent, critical thinking so as to make one's commitments authentically one's own and to avoid participation in injustice.⁴² Others push back against this, and argue that the sort of egoistic individualism this outlook promotes erodes tradition, frays community bonds, and creates anxious, unhappy people; theorists of this stripe

advocate a renewal of shared sources of meaning and belonging and call for a revival of common obligations.⁴³ Tocqueville would argue that both groups grasp part of the truth. In his view, seeing intellectual independence and its expression, doubt, either as unqualified goods to be maximized or as potential dangers to be limited creates a misleading and unproductive binary. Intellectual independence can be a source of human greatness. But it must be bounded by some intellectual authority and supplemented by social practices in order for its exercise to be salutary. Moreover, Tocqueville shows how a pursuit of complete intellectual independence paradoxically risks undermining itself, leading to stultifying conformity.

Tocqueville's recommendation concerning how to approach the broader phenomenon of democracy is relevant to the question of how best to encourage intellectual independence. Drawing inspiration from that maxim, we can say that we should seek to "educate and discipline" a people's drive to think independently in order to "attenuate its vices and bring its natural advantages to the fore" (DA 8). Specifically, Tocqueville wants to moderate democratic peoples' drive to intellectual independence and doubting, critical thought by inculcating an awareness both of the limits of human reason and of the fact that our moral and political knowledge is always approximate. This awareness, in his view, ought to temper our proclivity to become overly attached to general ideas, and also prompt us to seek out new information, with respect to both the empirical world and the opinions of our fellow citizens.

Moreover, Tocqueville's proposals for how we ought to "educate and discipline" intellectual independence possess continued relevance for civic education even if they cannot all be readily applied to contemporary society. The most notable example of this is Tocqueville's insistence on the need for people to accept shared religious dogmas, a stance which is incompatible with the secular, pluralist character of contemporary America. Be that as it may, though, his arguments about the political benefits of faith suggest that we ought heed Tocqueville's call to accommodate and respect religious belief that still exists, rather than undermining it or dismissing it as superstition (DA 635–36).

Furthermore, his remarks about the importance of "forms," especially in the sense of rituals, warrant attention. Though Tocqueville confines his remarks to a discussion of religious rituals, it is worth thinking about whether the ceremonial aspects of secular events can be emphasized. This

⁴²See, for example, Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 30, and Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues: Citizenship, Virtue, and Community in Liberal Constitutionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 267–69.

⁴³Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1980); Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

might offer a way to attain some of what he sees as the benefits of ritual without arousing too much of democratic peoples' resistance to artifice and formality. Additionally, his consistent emphasis on the importance of formalized procedures suggests that we ought to be cautious about discarding long-standing political norms for the sake of short-term gain, especially in a time of heightened polarization.

Finally, the discussion of the value of involvement in practical affairs merits particular attention. Approaches to civic education often emphasize the sorts of beliefs democratic peoples should hold. Underlying this is a sense that what we think shapes how we act. While recognizing the truth of this, Tocqueville shows that it is not the whole picture. How we act also determines what we think. Thus, he would contend that civic education ought to involve not just the inculcating of ideas regarding political life, but the cultivation of practices and habits concerning it, too, especially those that involve collaborating with other people from diverse backgrounds. Tocqueville suggests that doing so moderates overly ideological thinking, and stimulates us to think through our foundational commitments rather than adhering to them unreflectively.