Tocqueville, Religion, and Modernity
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The contributions to this symposium shed light on Tocqueville’s ambiguities. His approach to political philosophy combines both ancient and modern elements, both aristocratic and democratic tendencies.

Alexis de Tocqueville is an ambiguous figure in the history of political thought both in relation to his position on the substantive issues that he addressed (“What did he think?”) and in relation to his status (“What kind of thinker was he?”)

The former ambiguity is captured well by frequent musings about whether Tocqueville is properly understood as a “conservative liberal” or a “liberal conservative.” In other words, was he fundamentally at peace with the new democratic world, but nevertheless mindful that it could learn some important lessons from its aristocratic predecessor? Or was he instead, in his heart of hearts, a proponent of the old feudal Europe, but nevertheless reconciled to the fact that it was gone forever? The latter ambiguity shows itself in occasional discussions about whether Tocqueville was really a political philosopher in the strict sense. After all, he does not seem to confront the question of human nature as directly as political philosophers usually do, preferring instead a careful description and interpretation of democratic and aristocratic regimes.

The interesting and insightful contributions to this symposium shed helpful light on both these ambiguities. Gary Glenn, Paul Rahe, and Peter Lawler’s pieces all explicate, in different and valuable ways, Tocqueville’s ambiguous relationship to the modern, democratic world. They all reveal him as being somehow in modernity, but not quite of it. Glenn observes that Tocqueville’s analysis incorporates elements reminiscent of medieval Catholic thought even as he accommodates himself considerably to some assumptions of modern political philosophers in the individualist mold of John Locke and Thomas Hobbes. Rahe suggests that Tocqueville’s deepest political principles might be adequately expressed in the Declaration of Independence, but he also notes that Tocqueville seems to believe that the need to resist soft despotism requires that he emphasize instead the older, Christian ground for the principle of equality. And Lawler shows how Tocqueville, while embracing political equality, thinks that the individualism
springing from the regime of equality needs to be moderated by appeals to Christianity and aristocracy.

The Tocqueville that thus emerges from these papers occupies an almost unique, but nevertheless eminently defensible, position in relation to modernity. He is not a simple proponent, as were Hobbes and Locke. On the other hand, his criticisms do not point to a radical rejection of modernity, either in a reactionary direction, or in the direction of a visionary future state that transcends all known human existence, as one finds in Marx and Nietzsche. Tocqueville is rather the friendly but nevertheless radical critic of modernity: willing to accept it, but also willing to look beyond it (to the aristocratic and religious past) to develop his diagnosis of its distempers as well as to devise cures, or at least palliatives, for them.

What, then, of the second ambiguity, the one regarding Tocqueville’s status as a thinker? Is he a political philosopher or not? The essays in the symposium do not directly address that question, but they at least, by their explication of Tocqueville’s thought, implicitly answer it—or at least dispose of it—for us. These pieces suggest that it does not finally matter much whether Tocqueville should be called a political philosopher or not. If he does not openly articulate a theory of human nature, it is nevertheless clear that his critique of modern democracy is not made at random but is informed by a coherent view of human nature and human flourishing. Moreover, while Tocqueville does not explicitly engage the questions of human nature and the best regime, he certainly does, like a political philosopher, show the ability to think beyond the intellectual limits imposed by actual regimes: Hence his appreciation of both the strengths and weaknesses of both democracy and aristocracy. Finally, at least from the standpoint of a Catholic, the understanding of human nature implied by Tocqueville’s regime analysis—an understanding that recognizes the human soul’s yearnings for nobility and eternity—is closer to the truth than the individualist and materialist understandings of human nature explicitly worked out by some figures who undoubtedly are political philosophers. In sum, if Tocqueville is not a political philosopher, it is nevertheless the case that one can learn as much or more of the truth about human beings from him as from many other thinkers who are political philosophers.

Tocqueville’s ability to think beyond the modern world in which he found himself, and to do so helpfully, is reflected in his lack of attention to the Declaration of Independence. As Paul Rahe notes, this neglect has earned Tocqueville the criticism of some scholars of the American regime. Following Lincoln—and, it must be conceded, recognizing an indisputable truth—they regard the Declaration as the theoretical foundation stone of the American regime. How, they wonder, can Tocqueville claim
to give an account of that regime without attending to this foundation? Rahe suggests a very plausible explanation and defense of this omission. Tocqueville’s work was not primarily addressed to Americans but to the French. France, however, had suffered a great deal from the revolutionaries’ dogmatic application of abstract principles to political life. Therefore, Tocqueville wisely concluded that, for such an audience, it would be better to offer a work that was not, explicitly at least, guided in its judgments by abstract principles.

I would add that attention to the principles of the Declaration is also not particularly useful to Tocqueville’s larger project of identifying and treating the defects of democracy in general—defects that can be found in America, France, or any democratic society, regardless of how dogmatic its democratic revolutionaries were, or even whether it had a democratic revolution or instead evolved gradually into a democracy. To put it more bluntly, the principles of the Declaration are not evidently helpful in countering the kinds of bad tendencies of democracy that Tocqueville thinks must be restrained if human dignity and freedom are to be preserved under democratic conditions. This is not to say that the principles of the Declaration are false or bad. Tocqueville no doubt regarded them as true and helpful in responding to certain evils, such as slavery, as Rahe suggests. Nevertheless, it may be that the principles of the Declaration, though true as far as they go, create a kind of society prone to certain ills that cannot be remedied by appealing back to those principles.

To be more specific, Tocqueville was concerned that democracy was prone to excessive individualism and materialism. Equality of social conditions, he argues, breaks the chain of obligation that links all ranks in an aristocracy. Accordingly, democrats tend to confine their sense of obligation to a narrow sphere of family and friends. This equality also fosters a certain materialism, here understood not as a philosophical theory (although it may foster that, too, in different ways) but a moral disposition: the love of physical comforts. According to Tocqueville, the social mobility that equality of conditions establishes creates a predominantly middle-class nation in which people can win enough material comforts to develop a taste for them but not enough to be satisfied, with the result that the acquisition of such comforts becomes the dominant national taste.

These tendencies are bad, Tocqueville holds, both because of what they do to the soul and what they do to the political community. Individualism and materialism turn the soul from higher, nobler things like generous, self-forgetting service of others and contemplation of man’s eternal destiny. Moreover, individualism and materialism distract citizens from their political duties, which opens the door to despotism. As Tocqueville
observes, citizens who are preoccupied with narrow interests feel that they cannot be bothered to attend carefully to politics. Yet when citizens are not vigilant, an ambitious individual or a determined minority can find it relatively easy to direct the government contrary to the views of the majority.

Tocqueville seeks a remedy for these tendencies in religion, which, as Peter Lawler observes, he considered democracy’s most precious inheritance from aristocratic times. Religion imposes certain social duties on men and thereby counteracts democratic individualism, and, by laying emphasis on the spiritual nature of the soul, it restrains democratic materialism. For these reasons, Tocqueville regards religion as essential to maintaining human dignity and freedom under modern democratic conditions.

In light of these considerations, it seems to me that those who criticize Tocqueville for failing to mention the Declaration of Independence are imposing their own agenda on him rather than properly understanding his undertaking as he understood it himself. To criticize him successfully from within, as it were, they would need to show that in omitting the Declaration he was neglecting an important resource that could be deployed to restrain democratic individualism and materialism. This would be difficult to do, however. It would go too far to say that the Declaration teaches individualism and materialism as Tocqueville understands them. Nevertheless, it surely contains little by which to combat them. It gives an account of the rights of men without specifying the ends for which those rights should be used. It therefore gives minimal guidance as to what constitutes human flourishing. Yet Tocqueville would seem to require some account of human flourishing in order to combat individualism and materialism. It is true that the Declaration speaks of a certain solidarity that transcends individualism and materialism when its signers pledge to each other their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor. All the same, this solidarity seems intended primarily for the present crisis of the Revolution, a crisis in which the individual rights of all are threatened. Thus the solidarity is aimed to re-establish a society in which individual rights are secure, a society in which it is not clear whether there will be much of a need for or place for such solidarity.

Alternatively, such critics of Tocqueville might contend that his neglect of the Declaration is unjustified because his account of democracy is addressed to problems that are unreal or unserious. They could contend that democracy is not really prone to individualism and materialism. Or they could contend that these tendencies do not result, as Tocqueville feared, in a degradation of the soul and a neglect of politics that clears the way for despotism. Put another way, they could argue that the kind of society established by the Declaration—one characterized by equality of
conditions, or equality of basic rights—tends to go on just fine by itself. Such an argument would hardly be credible, however, at least for the very scholars who tend to criticize Tocqueville for his neglect of the Declaration. For such scholars themselves tend to believe that America has drifted dangerously far in the direction of precisely the soft despotism that Tocqueville feared.

Some of the foregoing remarks also suggest to me a slight modification of Gary Glenn’s presentation of Tocqueville. Glenn contends, again, that Tocqueville’s account of democracy combines elements similar to Catholic medieval political thought with elements more characteristic of modernity. One way in which Tocqueville moves closer to modernity, Glenn suggests, is in his acceptance of the acquisitiveness of Americans. Medieval Catholic thought would have regarded such unlimited acquisitiveness as the sin of avarice, while modern political philosophy generally seeks to liberate acquisitiveness from traditional moral limits and therefore implicitly denies that excessive acquisitiveness is sinful. Tocqueville, however, concedes that religion is “often powerless” to moderate the Americans’ desire to enrich themselves. His apparent lack of concern over this tendency suggests that Tocqueville has accepted one important part of modernity, the emancipation of acquisitiveness.

Glenn is here, it seems to me, mostly but not quite exactly right. Tocqueville does accept this spirit of acquisitiveness as a part of democratic culture that cannot be fundamentally reformed, and he even warns democratic moralists not to condemn it as sinful, since in doing so they would simply be destroying their own credibility with, and therefore their ability to influence, the people. Nevertheless, I think it would go too far to say that Tocqueville is completely at peace with the spirit of unlimited acquisition. As I noted before, he does see a threat to human dignity and human freedom in the extreme preoccupation with physical comforts, and he praises American religiosity for its ability to restrain this tendency. There would seem to be some overlap, however, between the love of physical comforts and the spirit of acquisitiveness. Tocqueville is not so medieval as to hope that he might convince modern democrats to regard avarice as a deadly sin; but he is enough of one to hope that he might convince them to see it as belonging to a lower part of their nature, and therefore to realize that it cannot, on its own, fully satisfy the longings of their souls. In this respect he distances himself from the likes of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke.

These observations admittedly leave Glenn’s general characterization of Tocqueville intact. His thought is a mixture of modern and medieval concerns, and on this issue in particular (acquisitiveness) he is closer to the moderns than to medieval Catholicism, just as Glenn says. Nevertheless,
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Tocqueville’s concern about the dangers of an excessive love of physical comforts does move him slightly back in a pre-modern direction. Moreover, the basis of this concern—his conviction that the human soul possesses by its nature a longing for eternity, or for goods that transcend those of this world—is a view of human nature that moderns such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke would not find consistent with their own.