Response to Gary Glenn and Kenneth Grasso: Tocqueville, Catholicism, and the Art of Being Free
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This paper discusses the erosion of the conditions of American civic education and engagement described by Tocqueville, the connection between Tocqueville’s understanding of democracy and the teachings of the Catholic Church, and the contribution of both civic and religious decline to the threat of democratic despotism as discussed by Gary Glenn and Kenneth Grasso in their symposium papers. It concludes by asking what students of Tocqueville and of Catholic social doctrine can learn from one another about questions of God, human nature, and the proper influence of the social state on our understanding of moral and political duties and rights.

It’s a great honor for me to participate in this symposium, in part because of the importance of its topic and also due to the excellence of its three papers. I have the pleasure of responding to two of these papers: Gary Glenn’s “Tocqueville’s Democratic Despotism and Pope Benedict’s Dictatorship of Relativism,” and Kenneth Grasso’s “Catholicism and ‘the Great Political Problem of Our Time’: Tocqueville, Vatican II, and the Problem of Limited Government in the Age of Democracy.”

Let me begin with why I consider the topic so important. Tocqueville himself requires no defense. He is almost universally regarded as one of the greatest commentators on modern democratic politics, although the frequency with which he is praised and cited does not mean that, in general, the wealth of his insights into the promises and perils of modernity—or the practices most likely to realize those promises and avert those perils—is adequately appreciated or mined. This is particularly evident when we consider the problem addressed in this symposium of what limits ought to apply even or especially to democratic government. As Tocqueville himself remarked, the question of how to define the nature, purpose, and scope of government in general, and of federal, state, and local governments in particular, is central to any adequate understanding of the foundations of American political society, the strengths and weaknesses he observed in Jacksonian America, and the struggles that still lay in our future when he wrote.

In his day, Tocqueville observed, the ordinary American possessed a remarkable command of the basic yet complex theory of multi-layered
government in which he was proud to participate. Tocqueville attributed this fact largely to the capacity of administrative decentralization to draw citizens into political life and provide them with a real if rudimentary education in the art of government—an art necessarily emphasizing the importance of personal and local self-government, and one indispensable to the cultivation of that most difficult but precious art of being free in the context of modern democratic society.¹

Clearly, the conditions of American civic education and engagement described by Tocqueville no longer hold today; indeed, as Tocqueville predicted, the bases on which liberty in general, and the limitations of governmental authority in particular, rested have become increasingly attenuated. As noted by the contributors to this symposium, Tocqueville’s account of the administrative despotism modern democratic nations must fear bears an uncanny resemblance to the welfare state that has incubated, grown, and developed over the past century or so in America and elsewhere. Even the most casual glance at today’s headlines will show—whether we consider government regulation, bailouts, and takeovers of industries, administrative mandates dictating the major financial and moral choices of individuals and organizations, government surveillance over citizens and treatment of persons posing real or imagined security threats, the attempt to use government to promote ideologies inimical to traditional religious and philosophical principles of morality, or a host of other controversies—the problem of drawing clear and just boundaries between the spheres of personal, associational, local, state, and federal control is only becoming more urgent and more perplexing with time.

Yet how deeply have we as a society considered Tocqueville’s masterful treatment of these questions? How carefully has the public or its leaders reflected on Democracy’s account of the benefits or harms of getting these limits right or wrong, or on its author’s advice regarding the primary causes or means of success or failure in these crucial matters? Instead, our public debates over these issues seem to be increasingly confined to technocratic or narrowly ideological perspectives that fail to reflect meaningfully on the conditions of our flourishing as persons, communities, or as a political society.

The other point of reference for this symposium might require more of an apology. What does Catholicism have to do with the proper limits of democratic government as Tocqueville understands them? Tocqueville’s emphasis on institutional factors such as checks and balances, federalism, local governmental and nongovernmental associations, freedom of the press, religious liberty, and judicial review are often discussed, though as noted, not always appreciated in their depth and complexity. How can
the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, with its authoritative structures of dogma and governance, cohere in any meaningful sense with Tocqueville’s prescriptions for a healthy liberal democratic order?

It is a great virtue of the papers to which I’m responding that they reveal, clarify, and reflect upon the significance of the very real connection between Tocqueville’s understanding of democracy and the teachings of the Catholic Church, both at the time Tocqueville wrote, and as those teachings have been adapted by the Church itself to subsequent political developments.

Gary Glenn’s paper focuses on similarities between Tocqueville’s account of democratic despotism and recent warnings from Pope Benedict XVI about the present existence and growth of a dictatorship of relativism. Kenneth Grasso’s paper begins with an account of the importance of Christianity as such—in contradistinction to both classical and modern thought—for the recognition of notions such as individual equality and liberty, proceeding to a comparison between Tocqueville’s understanding of the roots of and solutions for modern problems, and the responses of modern popes and the Second Vatican Council to the same issues as they have unfolded in the past century and a half.

As Glenn and Grasso note, Tocqueville saw morality as a necessary restraint on individual liberty, without which a flourishing system of ordered liberty is impossible. As Grasso emphasizes, what we call moral relativism or nihilism is, in Tocqueville’s view, a core motivating force for, and facilitator of the imposition and acceptance of the dehumanizing and infantilizing regime of, an all-invasive and omnicompetent central administrative government. Combating such relativism is therefore a necessary and primary component of Tocqueville’s overall strategy to preserve liberty in modern democratic times.

As these papers also discuss, Tocqueville saw religion as a necessary means of instilling morality in any society, and especially in modern democratic society. And although he wrote of religion from a purely human point of view, without reference to the truth of divine revelation or the existence of supernatural phenomena—and hence cannot be considered a Catholic or Christian thinker in any strict sense—Tocqueville’s thought on religion draws him close to Christianity in general, and Catholicism in particular, in many significant ways. As both papers note, Tocqueville saw several tendencies instilled in citizens by the democratic social state as fostering an atmosphere skeptical of claims based on the extraordinary or supernatural, and therefore corrosive over time of religion and morality grounded in religion. Since Christianity was the only popular religion with historical roots in Europe and its colonies, and since a number of its teach-
nings strike what Tocqueville took to be a salutary balance between faith and reason, the natural and the supernatural, and the concerns of this world and the next, Tocqueville considered it an essential component of modern democratic statesmanship to preserve as far as possible the influence of Christianity over souls in the modern era.

As Glenn and Grasso also discuss, Tocqueville had significant doubts about the ability of Christianity to endure the continual assaults of religious and moral skepticism it would suffer in democratic times. Looking ahead, Tocqueville believed—again for reasons human rather than divine—that Roman Catholicism, with its clearly defined hierarchy and doctrine, was best suited to maintain the essential teachings and moral prescriptions of Christianity in the foreseeable future, at least for those inclined to believe at all; as for whether any force could prevent the eventual dominance of religious doubt and moral relativism, Tocqueville was less than sanguine. Yet if we consider the details of his advice on how best to forestall democratic despotism by shoring up morality through the preservation of religious belief, it should perhaps come as no surprise to find numerous and striking parallels between Tocqueville’s thought and the social and political teachings of the Catholic Church in the modern democratic era.

As noted, Glenn focuses on certain similarities to be found between key arguments in Tocqueville and Pope Benedict XVI. Analyzing Benedict’s concept of a dictatorship of relativism, he notes that a doctrine that purports to offer grounds for toleration—based on the assumption that what we cannot prove to be true cannot reasonably be imposed on others—inevitably becomes grounds for an extreme and implacable form of intolerance, since claims to truth are regarded by the relativist not only with disbelief but also with fear and hostility. Glenn discusses important and striking parallels between Benedict’s argument—also mirrored in certain poignant observations of Leo Strauss—and Tocqueville’s concept of the tyranny of the majority over thought. While these parallels are immediately compelling, one might object that it is not always or even usually the majority that drives present-day ideologies hostile to traditional morality. Indeed, Tocqueville himself appreciated that modern anti-religious sentiment was primarily driven by misguided elites, while peoples as a whole naturally tend toward religious belief.

Nonetheless, Glenn’s argument holds under closer examination, for Tocqueville does identify an unfortunate conflux of forces that threatens to turn the soul-crushing weight of majority opinion against the core ideas and habits without which human greatness is in grave danger of suffocation. The root of this threat can be seen in Tocqueville’s discussion of what he ironically calls the philosophical method of the Americans.
to this method each individual attempts to judge all matters by his own reason alone. But, confronted with the difficulties that have perplexed the greatest minds in understanding the most fundamental questions of human life—especially those pertaining to God, human nature, and morality—he gives up attempting to find truth in these areas and vigorously denies the existence of what he cannot comprehend with his own unaided reason. This intellectual paralysis is in turn the root of the settled yet deadly sentiments of individualism and materialism, which prompt democratic citizens to withdraw from practical as well as theoretical engagement with the common good, becoming absorbed in the private pursuit of wealth and petty pleasures. This apathy and these addictions then provide demagogic elites with the opportunity gradually to construct an administrative apparatus which, while promising to guarantee to each citizen the enjoyment of private material goods, slowly but steadily robs him of the freedom to think and act for himself and with his fellows in matters of genuine moral and intellectual weight. The reflexive relativism of the masses thus combines with the doctrinal relativism of the cognoscenti to justify the aggressive promotion on the part of the latter, and the bemused acceptance on the part of the former, of a web of legal and moral regulations and rules stifling the natural development of the human soul.

In brief, according to Tocqueville, the people, despite their enduring desire to live in relation to a moral order defined by the idea of God and the obligations as well as rights bequeathed to each of us by nature, may nonetheless be drawn, despite themselves, into an exchange of this spiritual birthright for a mess of materialist, individualist, and statist porridge. Since this bargain, such as it is, is made by the majority itself, which retains a sweeping power over the thoughts of all citizens, those who object to its terms will face intense pressure to conform, or—as Nietzsche was later to put it—go willingly to the madhouse. The parallels between this prediction and the acquiescence of millions of professed Christians—and even a majority of Western Catholics among them—in the advancement of contemporary administrative despotism, is a chilling testament to the sagacity of Tocqueville’s warnings.

Grasso’s paper, after developing the close connection between relativism and despotism in Tocqueville’s political science, proceeds to review the numerous close parallels to be found in Catholic social teachings regarding both the nature and threat of despotism and the character and means of achieving a healthy political society in modern times. Of particular note are not only the Church’s identification of and opposition to various moral errors similar to those Tocqueville identifies and combats, but also the Church’s emphasis on the responsibility of citizens to participate
in self-governance and the importance of subsidiarity (closely related to what Tocqueville calls administrative decentralization) in providing maximum opportunity for, and encouragement of, such participation. Grasso also notes the Church’s adoption of a general stance toward modern democracy similar to that of Tocqueville—one that focuses not on praising or condemning modernity as such but rather on identifying its strengths and weaknesses and seeking ways to enhance the former while diminishing the latter. While these parallels are indeed striking, one unfortunately has to ask to what degree problems in the application, enforcement, and even formulation of Church doctrine in recent decades have diminished the contribution of the Church to the preservation and enhancement of genuine liberty in modern democratic society.

I see these papers not only as excellent treatments of a topic of great importance to us today but also as immensely fruitful in stimulating further questions and possibilities, both practical and theoretical. I will mention here only two of these points.

Both papers note the plentiful similarities between Tocqueville’s thought and that of the modern Catholic Church, while acknowledging Tocqueville’s reliance on human nature and human reason alone and noting certain related differences in the tone and content of their respective arguments. Glenn and Grasso especially emphasize the greater hope that pervades Catholic analyses of modern problems, likely in part due to a belief in the existence of supernatural aid. It strikes me that it might be useful to investigate further the nature, grounds, and consequences of Tocqueville’s ambivalence toward religious faith. For example, Tocqueville’s account of religion’s utility in fixing the mind on dogmas about God and human nature accompanies an account of philosophy as essentially probing those very concepts with the use of unaided human reason. In other words, Tocqueville defines religion as not questioning the very things philosophers must question, and defines philosophy as not relying on supernatural aid to answer questions about those same matters, thereby implying that philosophy and religion are mutually incompatible, at least in the same soul, if not in the same society. Might this explain why he also seems so disdainful of theology as a discipline and of any ideas closely associated with theology, such as the idea of natural law, a component of Catholic teaching from which Tocqueville maintains a careful and noticeable distance, despite the many ways in which he borrows from that tradition? And might not his reluctance to discuss natural law contribute to his diffidence in the face of threats to the achievement of our natural human potential? The Catholic intellectual tradition can certainly help us to respond to these features of Tocqueville’s thought. This being so, what
theoretical and practical advantages might emerge from a reconsideration of his stance on these issues?

Conversely, these papers strongly suggest that students of Catholic social doctrine have much to learn from a meticulous consideration of Tocqueville’s account of human nature as it is influenced by the conditions of the democratic social state. If Glenn is correct to say that Tocqueville’s concept of the social state is analogous to the classical notion of politeía or regime—as I think he is—then it behooves proponents of classical natural law theory (among which I would include the Catholic Church) to consider very carefully Tocqueville’s detailed observations and analyses of the way in which the modern democratic social state mediates our relationship to human nature itself. If our society is to reconsider the relativism which these papers persuasively depict as the opening wedge of a new and formidable despotism, to what extent can reflection on the writings of Tocqueville assist us as scholars, teachers, students, and citizens to see and question the forces that may prevent us from thinking freely and rationally about questions of God, human nature, and the proper and improper influence of the social state on our understanding of moral and political duties and rights?

Notes


