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Montaignean Happiness and Tocqueville's Americans

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The Storeys have undoubtedly written a splendid book. Its excellence lies not only in the authors' ability to bring to light the thoughts of their subjects but in their own powerful social criticism folded into the analysis throughout.

Their chapter on Tocqueville completes the book's genealogy and brings it close to home, to America. Tocqueville's claim about Descartes and the Americans is well known: of all the countries in the world, America is the one in which the precepts of Descartes are least studied and best followed. Americans have never read his work because their state of society distracts them from speculative inquiries, but they follow his precepts because this same state of society naturally leads them to do so. The Storeys find in Tocqueville's account of the democratic soul that something similar might be said of Montaigne: his philosophy is not studied but is followed among the Americans. They follow his philosophy for the same reason they follow the precepts of Descartes: "the state of society naturally leads them" to do so (430). The radical Cartesianism of the Americans collapses in on itself because everyone, at least all nonphilosophers, needs sources of belief; the majority supplies beliefs in democracies, and radical independence of mind, therefore, terminates in radical conformism. The Storeys find a similar paradox at work when it comes to the Americans as practical disciples of Montaigne. The all-consuming and democratized pursuit of "immanent contentment" exposes the restlessness endemic to that pursuit.

Of course, Tocqueville's way of describing American Cartesianism seems to give short shrift to the influence of Descartes himself. The "state of society"—equality of conditions—leads Americans to think this way naturally, to adopt Descartes's method. Upon closer examination, Tocqueville seems to have a more subtle view. The Americans may not have read Descartes and Bacon, but they have read Luther (so to speak), and the modern epistemological method comes to the Americans not merely as a result of their material circumstances but through the Protestant theological inheritance. Luther, Descartes, and Voltaire all used the same method, and they differed only in the extent to which they applied it.

Given the character of the Storeys' book as a philosophical genealogy of the modern, Montaignean idea of happiness, it is worth considering how

Tocqueville's Americans came by their Montaignean interpretation of happiness. I suspect the authors would not be satisfied with the explanation Tocqueville seems to settle on, namely, that the Americans' restless pursuit of immanent contentment is ultimately the result of material conditions, or specifically, the equality of conditions. If this were the whole story, it would be a mere coincidence that Montaigne had developed a vision of happiness which material conditions would regenerate in the hearts of Americans two centuries later.

Of course, the happiness sought by the Americans does not perfectly mirror Montaignean happiness. That may be another way of saying that democratizing and universalizing "contentment made immanent" appears to change its character. Tocqueville's feverish, restless democratic man is animated by something foreign to Montaignean contentment: an often debased love of equality. "Nothing," Tocqueville observes, "can satisfy them without equality, and they would sooner consent to perish than to lose it."[1] This tyrannical love of equality takes precedence over even the taste for material enjoyments that otherwise occupies democratic men. Yet the Storeys' chapter on Tocqueville never mentions the love of equality, even though it is the overriding passion in Tocqueville's account and perhaps the primary driver of the inquietude and restlessness that so interest the authors. It could be that the Storeys see the love of equality as assimilable to the Montaignean vision of contentment or as something altogether different. If the latter, I think we would conclude that the Montaignean view of happiness does not shoulder all responsibility for our democratic restlessness as described by Tocqueville and rearticulated by the Storeys.

Tocqueville's contribution to the conversation about happiness, as narrated by the Storeys, appears in some ways the least original of the thinkers surveyed. He appropriates the Pascalian critique of the ideal of the *honnête homme* and applies it to democratic man: Pascal shows that underneath the life of intelligent amusement, the demands of the human heart remain unsatisfied; Tocqueville shows that the democratic quest for immanent contentment produces not a life of Montaignean nonchalance but an endless scramble.

Yet despite his dependence on Pascal, the Storeys observe, Tocqueville shows some originality within the narrative as he jettisons the distrust of forms that Pascal (and certainly Rousseau) had retained and which was so crucial to Montaigne's vision of the good life. Montaigne wished to tear the mask off things and people; Pascal lifts the veil of politeness to find misery beneath; Rousseau longs for unmediated spontaneity and authenticity. In what the Storeys describe as a "decisive departure from the tradtion of the *moralistes*" (154), Tocqueville calls attention to the pathologies created by the disintegration of forms. Here an analysis of Tocqueville's ideas blends

[1]Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 52.

with the Storeys' own ideas about forms. Democratic human beings "engage in pervasive rituals of self-exposure, through which they demonstratively throw off social expectations and encumbrances. In so doing, they often discard intellectual and moral inheritances that their ancestors took centuries to amass. While that heritage can constrain their lives, it can also inform and civilize them" (154). It is nevertheless worth asking: Is Tocqueville indeed looking to reinstitute social expectations and encumbrances? Is this the form his love of forms takes? Or is his defense of forms somewhat confined to the political realm, following Montesquieu, who also declined to accept the *moraliste* contempt for forms?

The Storeys open the chapter promising an account of the politics produced by contentment in the immanent frame. Invoking Aristotle, they observe that a people's vision of happiness gives shape to their politics, and so one has not even taken the first step toward developing an account of modern politics without understanding the concept of happiness that gives rise to and remains inscribed within it. This is all nicely framed, and in the final section of the chapter on Tocqueville, they turn directly to this task.

First, they observe that for Tocqueville, the American system is adroit at managing the clashing desires for immanence and transcendence, according each a limited place. This is the union of the spirit of freedom with that of religion, and for the Storeys, it is consistent with the general strategy of separation and limitation invented by Locke—constraining the scope of government to the immanent concerns of prosperity while leaving the exploration of the transcendent up to the individuals. This is the fundamental separation on which modern liberty is founded. The Storeys find in Tocqueville the suggestion that when the quest for immanent contentment becomes universalized, this most fundamental liberal separation is overrun. When immanent goals are the only sensible and legitimate aims not only of the state but of all private individuals, then the political order that began by separating some room for the self to freely maneuver ceases, as they put it, to understand the need for that room. Public and private are homogenized. Here we are not far from Solzhenitsyn's dark observation that the materialist ethos of the modern West is a direct result of the fact that everything "beyond physical well-being and accumulation of material goods, human requirements and characteristics of a subtler and higher nature," were "left outside the area of attention of state and social systems."[2]

Second, the Storeys argue that when we train our attention obsessively on material ends, public argument increasingly appears as mere performance intended to divert attention from what is real, the conflict of material interests. We cease to believe that people are actually motivated by the principles they invoke, and those who honor principles and forms to limit political conflict sound weak, low-energy, or duplicitous. To respect such forms or limits is to be taken for a fool because one's adversaries will not do so. Vulgarity

[2]Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Harvard Address, June 8, 1978.

then becomes the political vernacular favored by all sides; showboaters and lone wolves dominate in politics; and the human beings that we encounter appear as formless masses to be manipulated by any means necessary. Under such conditions, the Storeys warn that "there is no particular need to handle them with delicacy or respect, or to allow them the freedom to seek a truth that cannot be seared into their brains by social pressure" (174).

Their picture of this dystopian politics in the immanent frame is both vivid and recognizable. Still, one wonders why Tocqueville's greatest political fear —soft despotism—does not feature more prominently in the Storeys' account. The book's penultimate chapter, devoted to Tocqueville, never mentions soft despotism, which is where my mind goes when I think of the political expression of contentment in the immanent frame. The hunt for immanent contentment feeds soft despotism, as democratic men are willing to exchange their political liberty and agency for the comfortable enjoyment of immanent pleasures. The homogenization of public and private noted above reaches its apex as "an immense tutelary power is elevated" by and above American citizens. This power, Tocqueville writes, "willingly works for their happiness; but it wants to be the unique agent and sole arbiter of that; it provides for their security, foresees and secures their needs, facilitates their pleasures, conducts their principal affairs, directs their industry, regulates their estates, divides their inheritances; can it not take away from them entirely the trouble of thinking and the pain of living?"[3] In the face of this dark prospect, the remedies he prescribes are not so much liberal education as religion and the practical exercise of political liberty that habituates men to the republican forms rejected by the *moraliste* tradition this book so elegantly exposits.

[3]Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 663.