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Well-Being and Violence

At this point, we find ourselves moving from Tocqueville’s discussion of American individualism to his discussion of American love of material things. These terms cannot fail to hit home—anyone raised here has heard a thousand contemporary versions of the same accusations. In short: Americans are shallow and self-centered. And yet, let’s not be fooled by the fact that shallowness is Tocqueville’s subject matter. Tocqueville’s exposition of our shallowness might expose some startling depths. We have already seen that at the base of our individualism and self-centeredness is an evaluation concerning eternity. In this paper, I will attempt to show that underlying our most fervent material pursuits is a mania caused by the *lack* of connection to something permanent.

Let us begin by re-assessing where we are. Volume 2, part 2 begins with the chapter begins with the statement: “the first and most lively of the passion to which equality of conditions gives birth, I have no need to say, is the love of this same equality.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This chapter leaves the reader with an undeniable impression that love of equality is the supremely important factor in democratic centuries; he suggests that it is the “principal passion, that in the end attracts and carries along in its course all sentiments and all ideas.”[[2]](#footnote-2) He even suggests that it is the “mother idea” which connects everything in democratic centuries.

And yet, once we have been prepared for a discussion of the consequences of equality on sentiments, we find that discussion never comes. Instead Tocqueville turns to individualism.[[3]](#footnote-3) Chapters 2-8 suggest strongly that in democratic centuries, men “turns all his sentiments toward himself alone”[[4]](#footnote-4) which ultimately results in a peaceful withdrawal from society. The difficulty is getting man to pay any attention whatsoever to his peers. The implication of placing 2 after 1 is that individualism—this drawing inwards—is the quintessential danger of the love of equality.

Chapters 10-20 appear to begin a discrete new section in which Tocqueville discusses the dangers of the taste for material well-being. In Chapter 10, Tocqueville suggests a definition of the taste of material well-being. The love of well being is “the care of satisfying the least needs of the body and of providing the smallest comforts of life.”[[5]](#footnote-5) These goods appear to be in opposition to spiritual, otherworldly, and eternal goods—the “taste for the infinite and the love of what is immortal” characterize the soul’s needs in chapter 12.[[6]](#footnote-6)

It is after this introductory chapter that things get interesting. In the subsequent chapters, particularly 11 and 13, Tocqueville will present two versions of the love of well-being—what I will call a “prosaic” version and a “manic” one.

Chapters 11 and 15 – Prosaic Well-being

Tocqueville begins this chapter by declaring that “one could believe, from what precedes, that the love of material enjoyment must constantly carry Americans along toward disorder in mores, trouble their families, and finally compromise the fate of society itself. But it is not so.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Although the taste for material-well being can be extremely destructive in an aristocracy, “the taste for material enjoyments does not bring democratic peoples to similar excesses.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

In an aristocracy, some aristocrats turn to sensual pleasures because there is no other outlet for their passions. Circumstance “forces [the nobles] to turn away from power and, closing their way to great undertakings, abandons them to the restiveness of their desires; they then fall back heavily on themselves, and they seek *forgetfulnes*s of their past greatness in enjoyments of the body.” Pleasures of the body are pursued, but not so much for their own sake as to numb the soul and induce “forgetfulness.” It is not that the desires of the soul have been destroyed; but rather, it is these very spiritual desires that get pent up and then explosively channeled into bodily pursuits. [[9]](#footnote-9)

Aristocracies end up with a “sumptuous depravity and a brilliant corruption”[[10]](#footnote-10) that and they end up “building vast palaces, of vanquishing and outwitting nature, of depleting the universe in order better to satiate the passions of a man.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Democratic striving is all about “adding a few toises to one’s fields, planting an orchard, enlarging a residence… and satisfying the least needs without effort and almost without cost.” Although “these objects are small… the soul clings to them.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Tocqueville assures us that there will be no analogous crimes in democratic centuries. He assures us that this taste is “not naturally opposed to order… nor is it the enemy of regular mores.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Tocqueville seems to render a general verdict in favor of democracy over aristocracy: “the stronger, more glorious, and freer and aristocracy has been, the more it will then show itself depraved, and whatever the splendor of its virtues has been, I dare to predict that it will always be surpassed by the brilliance of its vices.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

However, something has still been lost. In “striving to seize [these permitted enjoyments], one loses sight of the more precious goods that make the glory and the greatness of the human species. The essential danger of material well-being in this presentation is that the planting of “toises” will complete satisfy men’s souls; one that “softens them and in the end quietly loosens all their tensions.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

We end this chapter at what feels like a familiar crossroads. Justice points us in one direction, the “glory and the greatness of the human species” in the other.

Chapter 13 – Maniac well-being

Certain aristocrats began indulging their bodies for the sake of their souls—these aristocrats attempted to drown themselves in sensuality in order to forget their own impotence and dull their existential agony. This passion was wildly destructive, so we should breathe a sigh of relief: it seems like democratic man is nothing like that!

But that was chapter 11—in chapter 13 Tocqueville suggests that our love of material well-being has a certain existential tinge to it.

In this depiction, the pursuit of well-being has nothing to do with what is being pursued (stuff, posies) and everything to do with what is being avoided (death, or simply being alone with oneself). Fear, death, restlessness—these seem to be the key words in the chapter. To get a small sample of Tocqueville’s morbid turn, let us look at the following:

“The inhabitant of the United States attaches himself to the goods of this world as if he were assured of not dying, and he rushes so precipitately to grasp those that pass within his reach that one would say he fears at each instant he will cease to live before he has enjoyed them…. Death finally comes, and it stops him before he has grown weary of his useless pursuit of a complete felicity that always flees from him.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

The democratic struggle for well-being seems anguished, sisyphusean, and somehow inseparable from his imminent mortality. Tocqueville something at least like the love of well being that characterized aristocracy (the indulgence in pleasure as a means of forgetting or numbing existential pain) to democratic man. Both use sensual pleasures as a sot of vigorous forgetting.

Whereas in 11 it seemed as if desires shrank in the democratic state, here Tocqueville suggests that ambitions and passions are unleashed—democratic men are more manic than their aristocratic predecessors. Tocqueville warns that, in contrast to aristocratic centuries—which one might be temped to describe as more prosaic—there are actually *more* passions: “one must recognize that hopes and desires are more often disappointed, souls more aroused and more restive, and cares more burning.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

The ultimate result is that democratic man is not lead to excessive prosaicness, but instead to a sort of vengefulness that demands a political expression. Tocqueville does not directly say that democratic man will try and avenge his impotence—but the fact that he only nods to this violent potential is actually even more interesting.

Vengeful equality

Surprisingly, on the top of page 513 Tocqueville turns from American pursuit of well-being to a general discussion of equality. After outlining the frustration and pain of the pursuit of well-being, Tocqueville says that “equality leads men by a *still more direct path* to several of the effects that I have just described.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

The quote above is tremendously important. Perhaps we have described a manic love of material well-being contrary to public peace; but the same effects are produced *more directly* by the principal passion of the era, equality.

On this page, Tocqueville proceeds to suggest that the frustration caused by both the love of well-being and the passion for equality leads to violence. It is difficult to reproduce exactly how he does it here, since most of the argument is implicit in the order of paragraphs on 513. But perhaps some key excepts will help.

In a democracy, “the constant opposition reigning between the instincts that equality gives birth to and the means that it furnishes to satisfy them is tormenting and fatiguing to souls.” Democratic man “will always perceive near to him several positions in which he is dominated.” However, “whatever a people’s efforts, it will not succeed in making conditions perfectly equal within itself; and if it had the misfortune to reach this absolute and complete leveling, the inequality of intellects would still remain.” The sequence of 513 implies that democratic man’s “torment” will leads him to at least *attempt* a complete leveling. He will attempt to bring down his prominent peers. [[19]](#footnote-19)

So, when Tocqueville observes, near the end of the page that “the desire for equality always becomes more insatiable as equality is greater,” we have an idea of what this passion looks like. It is the bad form of the passion, the “depraved taste for equality in the human heart that brings the weak to want to draw the strong to their level.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

This vengeful passion is opposed to the political indifference and withdrawal that characterize individualism and the prosaic account of well-being. Democratic man, buzzing with agony, lashes out at his peers. Such a passion conduces him to political activity, not withdrawal—after all, equality can only be gained through participation in politics. On the bright side, at least we don’t have to fear political indifference!

But, most importantly, this violence can issue from the love of well-being, *but primarily from equality itself*. As discussed earlier, Tocqueville’s presentation of part 2 implied that individualism—a passive, gentle withdrawing and softening—was the danger immediately springing from love of equality. But here, nestled away in a discussion of well-being, is a more direct danger in equality. This one doesn’t look so peaceful at all.

It is no secret that a great part of Tocqueville’s project is convincing Europeans that democracy isn’t so bad. Perhaps Tocqueville finds himself in the position where he has to find cures for democracy’s violent impulses without acknowledging that they actually exist.

Well-being revisited

In explaining democratic restiveness in 13, Tocqueville said: “he who has confined his heart solely to the search for the goods of this world is always in a hurry, for he has only a limited time to find them, take hold of them, and enjoy them. His remembrance of the brevity of life constantly spurs him.”[[21]](#footnote-21) This sort of description of the passion for well-being leads me to think that well-being is not just well-being.

It is a stand in for the fact that everything around democratic man is in flux, and because he sees nothing permanent (other than equality), all his striving is violently relegated to this world. Tocqueville told us earlier that “the short space of sixty years will never confine the whole imagination of man; the incomplete joys of this world will never suffice for his heart.”[[22]](#footnote-22) However, democracy, which is characterized by constant movement, seems to give him nothing other than this world to hold on to. The mania, produced by love of well-being or love of equality, comes from profound existential discontent. In 17, Tocqueville expresses what we are observing quite eloquently: “it seems that from the moment [men] despair of living an eternity, they are disposed to act as if they will exist for only a single day.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

This impermanent social state exists because of equality—so it makes sense that manic material-well being could resemble the general woes of equality.

17[[24]](#footnote-24) is the chapter that most explicitly addresses the existential discomfort of democracy. This first becomes clear in its title: “how in times of equality and doubt it is important to move back the object of human actions.”[[25]](#footnote-25) It would have been easy to miss, but *this chapter title has nothing to do with well-being*. It directly states that it is about equality. More than that, it applies to all times of doubt.

It is no accident that danger of “doubt” is essentially the same as that of equality. “When each seeks constantly to change place, when an immense competition is open to all… the image of chance in all its forms presents itself to the human mind. The instability of the social state comes to favor the natural instability of desires. Amid these perpetual fluctuations of fate the present grows large; it hides the future that is being effaced, and men want to think only of the next day.”[[26]](#footnote-26) People are relegated to the present because they simply don’t know what will happen tomorrow. The “manic” potential in democracy results from insecurity about the future.

Here, Tocqueville suggests some solutions. In democratic centuries, “philosophers and those who govern ought constantly to apply themselves to moving back the object of human actions in the eyes of men; it is their great business.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

In addition to prescribing religion, Tocqueville urges leaders of democracies to “banish chance as much as possible from the political world.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Examples of sudden political advancement “serve to hasten its heart down a slope along which everything is carrying it. It is therefore principally *in times of skepticism and equality* that one ought carefully to avoid that the favor of the people or of the prince—which chance favors you with or deprives you of—take the place of *science* and of services rendered.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Here, Tocqueville urges those who govern to make it seem like there is more of a reason and rhyme to democratic life than there is. When everything seems like chaos, after all, people are disposed to live only for the now. As discussed, this is a huge political problem, after all: “it will always be hard to make a man who does not wish to die live well.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

But how exactly would one banish chance from the political world? To give one example, one could write a book of “political science” that suggests that the chaos of Europe is actually part of a universal, providential order. One could conceal any disorder in this march by suggesting that at the end of history lies not wildness, but an oppressively gentle and prosaic life.

1. 479 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 481 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Obviously, there is a connection between individualism and equality, but I do not think that I am wrong when I suggest that 2 is not exactly the logical next step after what is set out in 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 482 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 506 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 510 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 508 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 508 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 508 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 508 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 508-509 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 509 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 509 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 508 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 509 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 512 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. (514) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 513 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 513 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. 52 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. 512 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. 283 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. 523 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 17 is just a boring old number with no special significance whatsoever. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. 522 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. 523 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. 523. Interestingly, this duo – philosophers and those who govern – is an iteration of a slightly different duo we met in chapter 15. “Legislators of democracies and all honest and enlightened men who live in them must therefore apply themselves relentlessly to raising up souls and keeping them turned toward heaven” (518). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. 524 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. 524 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. 504 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)