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The New Republic, June 24, 1996

The Art of Association by Peter Berkowitz

A review of The Fragility of Freedom: Tocqueville on Religion, Democracy, and the American Future by Joshua Mitchell. University of Chicago Press. 273 pp. $34.95.

Political questions in the United States are increasingly turning into moral questions. This resurgence of appeal to moral principle in political argument has by no means been restricted to conservatives: what initially attracted many to the message of the New Democrats in 1992 was Bill Clinton's acknowledgement of the political importance of individual responsibility, the quality of family life and the variety of voluntary associations that nourish public and private virtue. And while the left wing of the Democratic Party has often forsworn the simple language of conventional morality, one would have to be tone deaf or a sucker for euphemism to miss the mixture of moral principle and moralism that has animated its message. In this contest of moralisms, religion seems to have gotten caught in the middle. There is, of course, Patrick Buchanan's rabble-rousing summons to "religious war"; and, more significantly, there is the extent to which the fate of the Republican Party has become bound up with the Christian Coalition, a surprisingly large and broad-based political movement. These developments have done little to improve religion's reputation among liberals. Indeed, the resurgence of religiously driven politics in America has probably only hardened the views of the appallingly large proportion of professors, journalists, and Democratic Party faithful who cannot bring themselves to recognize a theoretical or moral distinction between religion and superstition.

The distrust and the misunderstanding have led to a clash over fundamental convictions about the sources of human dignity. One unfortunate result of this "culture war" is that important policy questions about appropriate means and proper degree --- for example, what government ought or ought not do so as to lend support to inner-city black churches, which have played a crucial role in saving many children from the temptation of the streets --- get pushed aside by the intransigent insistence on furthering this higher end or undermining that perverse principle.

Meanwhile, in the academy, a highly stylized debate about the legitimate forms of political argument marches steadily along, a debate that can easily seem sterile and out of touch with the turbulent spectacle presented by the actual politics of America. According to John Rawls, liberalism embodies an "idea of public reason," and this idea dictates that citizens of a liberal democracy as much as possible avoid making political arguments based on moral and religious principles that their fellow citizens cannot be expected to share. Against this

approach, a chorus of deliberative democratic, civic republican and postmodern critics insist that contemporary liberalism has impoverished American politics by seeking to exclude, or systematically to avoid, questions about first principles, and so they urge the opposite. Opinions sharpen, nerves fray, tempers flare, and so the call for increased public debate about moral and political values seems a bit like trying to put out a fire by dousing it with kerosene.

Who would not wish to see the quality of political debate in America improved? But by seeking to deregulate public debate, as it were, scholarly critics of the idea of public reason have embraced their rivals' dubious premise that the crucial issue is regulation: what is, or is not, permitted into the discussion. In this way both parties have obscured more primary questions about the qualities of mind and character that individuals must exercise to set public discussion in motion, the passions that tend to disrupt actual deliberations among flesh and blood human beings, and the institutional supports of the virtues that enable citizens to keep deliberation on track and running effectively --- the sort of thing that John Stuart Mill had in mind when, at the end of On Liberty, he criticized the temptation to lay down rules defining the parameters of "fair discussion."

In appealing from principles of what was "fair" to what he called "the real morality of public discussion," Mill denied that the restraints governing public debate should come from law or public authority, and he pointed instead toward the individual as the source of restraint. The "real morality of public discussion," in Mill's view, involved the exercise of moral virtue, and intelligent judgment about the qualities of mind and character of one's interlocutors' judgments:

> Condemning everyone on whichever side of the argument he places himself in whose mode of advocacy either want of candour, or malignity, nigotry or intolerance of feeling manifest themselves; but not inferring these vices from the side which a person takes, though it be the contrary side of the question to our own: and giving merited honour to every one, whatever opinion he may hold, who has calmness to see and honesty to state what his opponents and their opinions really are, exaggerating nothing to their discredit, keeping nothing back which tells, or can be supposed to tell, in their favor.

But virtue, as Mill knew, does not grow on trees. What institutions in a democracy foster the virtues on which its public life depends? What effects, good and bad, does the spirit of democracy have on individual character? Such questions, as Mill was one of the first to point out, were usefully and beautifully explored by Alexis de Tocqueville.

When it appeared in France in 1835, the first part of Tocqueville's Democracy in America was immediately hailed as a masterpiece. Across the Channel, Mill proclaimed in a lengthy discussion in the London and Westminster Review that *Democracy in America* "has at once taken its rank among the most remarkable productions of our time." In the United States the initial reception of Democracy in America was mixed, but it was not long before its wisdom

was recognized, so much so that in 1889 the political scientist Woodrow Wilson could write that Tocqueville's ability to illuminate, through a consideration of philosophical principles, the actual workings of American democracy was "possibly beyond rivalry."

Yet his book has never really found a comfortable home in the American mind. There are several reasons for this. For a start, it was the work of a French Catholic aristocrat recording observations gleaned on a nine-month journey through America in 1831. Moreover, the two volumes that compose Democracy in America can at first glance seem to present a congeries of anecdote and speculation on a bewildering array of topics ranging from geography, history and sociology to moral psychology, political theory and theology. And Democracy in America is explicitly addressed by Tocqueville not to Americans but to his own countrymen, to bring to their attention the necessity of the democratic revolution that was underway in America and to provide a knowledge of the new age of equality that would enable them to mitigate democracy's vices and take advantage of its benefits.

Yet the very factors that can seem to make Tocqueville unfit to serve for Americans as a guide to democracy are inseparably connected to the distinctive virtues that he brought to his task, and which have made his observations about the principles of democracy, occasioned by his visit to America, enduring and worthy of careful study today. In democratic and Protestant America, Tocqueville could observe from a revealing angle what was distinctive in American beliefs, practices and institutions. Moreover, by bringing to light the principles that connect history, political institutions and longings of the soul in America, Tocqueville's approach can provide an antidote to the distortions caused these days by the practice in American universities of herding knowledge into isolated and jealously guarded disciplines.

Recent years have witnessed a surge of interest in Tocqueville's thought, but the interest has been highly selective. Much of the new enthusiasm has revolved around Tocqueville's diagnosis of an infirmity of the spirit that he called "individualism" and defined as "a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends." Democracy pushes this tendency to an extreme, so that "each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart." This picture of the isolated American has struck a responsive chord among American political theorists and social scientists, as it seemed to describe an increasingly widespread and menacing experience in American life.

Even more than his diagnosis, one of the remedies that Tocqueville prescribed to combat individualism has captured the imagination of students of politics, and recently has reached beyond scholars to inspire members of Congress, high-ranking White House staff and even the president himself. That remedy is "the art of association." Tocqueville maintained that Americans have a special aptitude for this art. The associations Tocqueville had in mind were not created by the state or the law, but by the initiative of energetic and self-reliant individuals. Their benefits, he believed, extended well beyond the achievement of the immediate economic, moral or political ends for which individuals establish them.

Associational life shifts the gaze of individuals away from themselves toward others; it generates in each an awareness of the needs and the limitations of others; it enlarges self-interest narrowly conceived by making vivid the private advantage that flows from cooperation for the public good; and it teaches the habits of cooperation and self-restraint by giving individuals regular opportunities to practice them.

Tocqueville was talking, in other words, about civil society, which consists of the host of voluntary associations and the various social networks that connect them. This is a topic which of late has generated enormous interest. What is today referred to as "the civil society argument" consists of three theses. The first is the very Tocquevillian thesis that a vibrant civil society supports democracy in America by fostering certain habits of heart and mind. The second thesis, based upon casual observation and empirical study, is that for decades now civil society in America has been on the decline. The third thesis connects theory and empirical observation to policy, declaring that the well-being of democracy in America requires the revivification of civil society.

Enthusiasts of the civil society argument tend to divide into what might be called left Tocquevillians and right Tocquevillians. They differ over government's proper role in the restoration of civil society. The Tocquevillians of the left want government to play an active role by removing the social and economic forces that, they assert, have made people narrowly self-interested and isolated. They sometimes seem to believe that once government removes institutional barriers --- especially social and economic barriers --- citizens will naturally join together in all sorts of common enterprises. The Tocquevillians of the right, espousing a kind of reverse Midas principle, according to which everything that government touches turns to dross, think that the best thing that could be done for voluntary associations in America is for government to do less, to withdraw and create more space for the exercise of personal initiative. They seem to believe that the biggest institutional barrier to associational life in America is government itself, so that once it is removed, citizens will spontaneously seek out one another and cooperate for mutual advantage.

Things are not quite so simple, however, at least not from Tocqueville's own perspective. He did not think that voluntary associations were an all- purpose panacea for the infirmities that democracy fosters. For these associations themselves presupposed particular beliefs, practices and institutions. Too little attention has been paid to the fact that Tocqueville conceived of associating as an "art," a "technique," a "faculty and habit." Accordingly, in order for associational life to improve democratic citizens, democratic citizens must bring to the creation and the maintenance of their associations certain dispositions and skills. Voluntary associations not only generate what Robert Putnam calls social capital ("features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit"), they presuppose it. Before there can be social capital, moreover, there must be moral capital.

Tocqueville envisaged in modern democracy a relationship of reciprocal influence between character and civil society. In America, Tocqueville argued, it was in a certain kind of family, and through the discipline of a specific set of religious beliefs and practices, that the formation of character crucial to political and civic association occurred. Tocqueville believed that the political was dependent on the non-political, and the public on the private; and in this way he established a connection between realms whose integrity, he insisted, must be respected in order for each to benefit the other.

But Tocqueville's emphasis on the political importance of family and religion is a rather disconcerting feature of his argument. It implies that the fate of democracy in America depends upon two delicate institutions which, in a liberal democracy that honors the sovereignty of the individual, are exceptionally difficult to manage and maintain.

In the judgment of Joshua Mitchell, Tocqueville discerns the nonpolitical foundations of democratic political life with almost unrivaled acuity; and this is owed to his understanding of the fundamental tendencies and inherent instabilities of what Mitchell interestingly calls "the democratic soul." It is the striking argument of Mitchell's learned and thought-provoking book that Tocqueville's understanding of the democratic soul, "the kind of soul that has come to dominate in the modern age," and whose dominant passion is the "love of equality," is decisively informed by an "Augustinian conception of the self."

Mitchell's central thesis neither requires nor precludes that Tocqueville was a believing Christian. In speaking of an Augustinian conception of the self, what Mitchell has in mind is primarily a view of human desires and passions. On the view that Mitchell ascribes to Tocqueville --- and that he believes received its classic formulation in the writings of Augustine --- the self oscillates between two sets of extremes, extremes of high and low, internal and external. The self is always in motion, since human beings are composite creatures formed of conflicting elements. Capable of exalted deeds and reaching upward toward heights of devotion, human beings are also prone to self-absorbed despair and depravity.

At the same time, human beings run the risk of succumbing to opposing kinds of selfish forgetting. Easily ensnared in a web of their own memories and imaginings, men and women lose sight of the world outside of themselves and collapse inward into a brooding and narrow egoism. Or, in the attempt to escape from themselves, individuals careen recklessly outward, restlessly seeking satisfaction in physical pleasure, reputation and wealth. The oscillation in the self between high and low, between inner and outer, can be moderated, but it cannot be abolished without also abolishing our humanity.

While Mitchell himself is more inclined to stress its "invisible" or metaphysical foundations, the Augustinian conception of the self can make an impressive claim to being more empirical than metaphysical. Although it speaks of things that do not lend themselves to being counted,

weighed or measured, it is based on observations of the desires and the passions that actually move men and women. For this reason, one need not affirm Augustine's particular account of God, salvation and eternity in order to embrace his moral psychology.

Mitchell hints heavy-handedly that Augustinian theology supplies the answers to the problems that the Augustinian conception of the self poses. Here, if only in his earnest enthusiasm, Mitchell parts ways with Tocqueville. For Tocqueville adopts a conception of the Augustinian self that is austere. His understanding of the self provides no guarantee to the pious that their prayers will be heeded or that their search for transcendence will be rewarded. Nor does it provide particular comfort to rationalists and progressives, since it dwells on the recalcitrance of the material out of which human beings are made. In this way it suggests that there are serious limits to the pursuit of happiness and the cooperation for mutual advantage, limits that are inscribed in human nature and cannot be eliminated by social engineering or psychotherapy.

A useful science of politics, according to Tocqueville, must grasp that the soul, in different ages and under changing conditions, tends toward peculiar forms of immoderation. The defining feature of the modern or democratic age, he maintains, is the fact of equality. Tocqueville did not mean to assert, of course, that everybody is to become equal. He argued instead that there was an irresistible movement toward equality in the modern age. The condition of equality, in his view, gives a distinctive cast and coloring to the movements of the soul. Equality breeds new and impatient desires, rouses passions both petty and tyrannical, makes the heart mild and compassionate, brings about a universal but small-scale ambitiousness directed toward the industrious pursuit of comfort and wealth, fosters a host of small and humble virtues and weakens certain resplendent and useful vices. Tocqueville saw equality as inevitable and just, but he did not believe that all its consequences were good for the human spirit.

Mitchell has an especially keen eye for Tocqueville's analysis of what might be called the dialectic of pride and envy. The democratic soul wishes to stand apart as unique and to be recognized as equal to all. Pride makes each wish to be different, but envy wants nobody to be better than anybody else. Envy, which hates difference, is the more democratic of the two; and where equality is king, envy prevails. The democratic tendency is to extend the rule of equality to every domain, effacing differences, obliterating boundaries and leveling hierarchies. Yet the more that conditions are equalized, the more offensive becomes the slightest hint of inequality. To eradicate the offense of difference, individuals are increasingly forced to rely on the state, for the state alone has the power to eradicate difference and make equality actual. Pride may reassert itself in the demand that difference be respected, but this pride is only a disguised form of envy inasmuch as it calls on the state to enforce equal respect for all differences. Thus does the thirst for equality predispose men and women to exchange liberty for a central power that can impose a comprehensive equality through law. And in this way the democratic passion of envy prepares individuals to consent to a sort of gentle "administrative despotism."

What must be done to combat the discontents of democracy and to remedy the diseases to which it is liable? The short answer of today's Tocquevillians, again, is association; but the short answer must be supplemented with a more precise appreciation of Tocqueville's understanding of the benefits that the art of association confers, and the discipline that it presupposes. For one thing, it is important to see that associations do not so much extend the spirit of democracy as act as a counterpoise to it. Association is a democratic expedient for securing certain advantages of aristocracy. Associations are democratic in the sense that they are not based on hereditary social status and are open to all; but they are aristocratic in the sense that they foster moral and intellectual virtue, and they are suited to do so because "feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon the other."

Still, associational life can only foster moral and intellectual virtue if individuals endowed with a range of such qualities are already in place forming and maintaining associations. Since human beings are not born with the self-reliance, the discipline and the rational understanding that the making of associations requires, such individuals must themselves be made or educated. Indeed, associational life was but one of an integrated set of institutional mechanisms in America that, Tocqueville argued, worked to counteract or to moderate the envy, the restlessness and the individualism that democracy engenders. More basic to the maintenance of democracy in America than associational life, or perhaps the most basic part of associational life, according to Tocqueville, were family and religion.

It was the utility to democracy of family life and religious belief that Tocqueville stressed. Families and religion shaped mores, the fundamental and sometimes half-articulate habits of the heart and mind, which were more important to democracy than good laws, because it was such habits or qualities of character which inclined and enabled citizens to respect, uphold and administer law. In families, women shaped mores, and Americans learned to appreciate simple pleasures, love order, respect enduring ties and understand their happiness in relation both to ancestors and descendants. Christianity in America palliated envy by teaching individuals to appreciate the frailties of human nature and the limits of the institutions men formed, and not to ask too much of the world. By elevating the individual's gaze from the here and now, religion also fostered the virtues of restraint and forbearance, and promoted what Mitchell calls "habits of long-term thinking."

Mitchell shows in convincing detail that Tocqueville's famous doctrine of "self-interest properly understood" presupposes specific qualities of mind and character as well as the institutions that foster them. According to this doctrine, which Tocqueville believed was common wisdom in America, virtue is estimable not because it is beautiful but because it is useful. Promoting the public good is worthwhile not for selfless reasons, but because it can be seen to serve one's private advantage and further one's rational self-interest. But the rub, once again, is that rational men and women are made, not born. Owing to what Mitchell calls the self's "predilection for irrationality," the capacity to grasp one's self-interest accurately and act on it effectively requires a certain discipline of character. It was the taste for order,

the virtue of forbearance and the habit of long-term thinking taught in America by the family and religion that, in Tocqueville's view, were crucial in enabling individuals to overcome destructive passions, see the connections between their own good and that of the public, and sacrifice "a thousand ephemeral pleasures" in the pursuit of a "lasting happiness."

But that was then and this is now. In light of the democratization of the family, the movement of women out of the home and into the marketplace, and the rise of the religious right, it is easy to mock Tocqueville's portrait of enlightened self-interest rooted in domestic bliss and simple religiosity. As Mitchell's instructive book demonstrates, however, it is more useful to understand the logic of Tocqueville's argument, the links he illuminates between democracy, virtue and the non-political institutions. What has changed since Tocqueville wrote is not democracy's need for the virtues that were once fostered by associational life, family and religious belief. What has changed is our capacity to satisfy that need.

The partisans of deliberative democracy will not restore that capacity. They are psychologically naive, in their lack of appreciation of the instability in the human self and their studied obliviousness to the process by which democracy exacerbates the universal human propensities for envy, self-indulgence and the taste for physical pleasure and comfort; and they are sociologically naive, in their opinion that democracy is made more deliberative merely by eliminating the obstacles to equality created by social structure and the economy, as if it were not also vital to identify the institutional mechanisms that must be reestablished or introduced to prepare individuals to master the dangerous passions that equality inflames and to nurture the salutary longings that equality subdues.

Tocqueville's notion of the democratic soul also exposes certain limitations of the civil society argument. Those who describe the dilemma in terms of social capital take their economic metaphor too far and not far enough. They take it too far by demanding a mathematical precision in the study of moral and political life, excluding from analysis what resists being counted, weighed or measured --- such things, that is, as passion and virtue --- as if the realities of moral and political life must be flattened or hollowed out so as to conform to the dictates of right method. And they do not take it far enough inasmuch as they overlook the obvious reality that social capital, like financial capital, can be wisely invested or recklessly squandered, acquired justly or through exploitation and violence. Voluntary associations and civil society have a dark side, which has been tragically illustrated in the recent past by those walking treasure-troves of social capital, Timothy McVeigh and Yigal Amir.

Reflection on the advantages and the disadvantages of social capital, like consideration of the preconditions of effective deliberation, leads directly into the domain of ethics and questions of what is good. And I take this conclusion to be consistent with liberal principles. Liberals can affirm that equality is necessary and just, while acknowledging that democracy has its disadvantages; and friends of liberty can come to democracy's defense by explaining how

democracy depends on virtues that it does not effectively summon and even forcibly discourages. In presenting Democracy in America to "true friends of human liberty and dignity," Tocqueville exhibited the rare friendship that demands that hard truths be spoken.

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