

Free Citizens and Free Men: Alexis de Tocqueville and The Synthesis of Legal and Moral Liberalism

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I spent my summer conducting pre-reading for my senior year honors thesis in the political theory concentration of the Government and Legal Studies department. My goals were to end the summer with a clear plan for my thesis, to read all of the primary texts that would inform that thesis, and to begin writing the first chapter of my project. I hoped these would be straightforward landmarks to hit from the project proposal that I began the summer with. This did not turn out to be the case. Still, I end the summer with my primary objectives completed, and with newfound experience in research setbacks.

My initial project idea consisted of a prolonged study of Alexis de Tocqueville on the topic of human freedom. Tocqueville, who wrote quasi-sociological studies of early American democracy and the French revolution, is one of the rare political theorists who is more well remembered for his practical insights into political institutions and historical events than he is for his theoretical or idealistic analyses of these same subjects. However, it is far from the case that Tocqueville lacked theoretical depth. Undergirding his superlative political pragmatism was a concern for the ideal that made him altogether unlike his liberal democratic predecessors; as Harvey Mansfield once said, Tocqueville's new brand of liberalism was "liberalism with a soul." At the heart of this new 'soul' was a romantic attachment to the ideal of freedom; Tocqueville wrote that his "only one passion is the love of liberty and human dignity." This passion guided his critique of liberal democracy, where he pre-empted many of the concerns that later liberal critics such as Friedrich Nietzsche would raise about liberal democracy's flattening effect on human freedom and dignity, while at the same time remaining optimistic about liberal democracy's potential to overcome these downfalls.

I took interest in Tocqueville's thought as a compelling synthesis of the theoretical or 'soulful' concerns often left unsatisfied by liberal theorists with the practical applicability often abandoned by romantics and idealists; Tocqueville seemed able to have his cake and eat it too. I wanted to study how he melded theory and practice, particularly as it centered around his understanding of 'freedom', which to him seemed to have split meaning as both an immediately practical term and a lofty ideal. I planned to ground this analysis through two of his biggest influences: Montesquieu, a highly practical liberal thinker, and Rousseau, a highly theoretical one.

To begin my summer research I re-read many of Tocqueville's writings, read Keegan Callanan's 2003 Honor's Project on Tocqueville and Nietzsche, and acquainted myself with the thought of Hannah Arendt as Tocqueville influenced it. Although I enjoyed all of these pieces individually, I increasingly doubted my ability to procure any theoretical analysis of freedom from Tocqueville's writings. This doubt culminated above all in the following quote from Tocqueville in a section of his oeuvre that approaches him at his most theoretical: "What do they lack to make them free? What? The very desire to be so. Do not ask me to analyze this sublime desire, it must be felt." This was, unfortunately, exactly what my project was 'asking' Tocqueville to do. Whatever his abstract or 'soulful' understanding of freedom was, I did not think myself up to the task of pinpointing it if Tocqueville did not intend to help me.

I thus began my search for a new project. I turned to the ancients after reading Xenophon's *The Education of Cyrus* and finding him to be asking many of the same questions I was previously interested in about the intersection between theory and practice. I then read Xenophon's *Hiero* and Leo Strauss's commentary *On Tyranny*, before I turned to Plato and re-read Plato's *Republic*, *Phaedo*, Allan Bloom's interpretive essay on the *Republic*, Leo Strauss's *City and Man*, parts of Ronna Burger's commentary *The Phaedo: A Platonic Labyrinth*, and finally Plato's *Hipparchus*, *Minos*, *Lovers*, *Alcibiades Major*, and *Symposium*. I finally found my Honor's project at the intersection of the *Alcibiades Major* and *Symposium* on the nature of Alcibiades' longing for greatness and its relationship to philosophy. I ended the summer with a plan for each of my chapters and the first few pages of my first chapter.

Faculty Mentor: Jean Yarbrough

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