# Liberal Democracy Reexamined: Leo Strauss on Alexis de Tocqueville

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This article explores Leo Strauss's thoughts on Alexis de Tocqueville in his 1954 "Natural Right" course transcript. One of the significant features of this transcript is that it contains an original interpretation and tentative critique of Tocqueville's political philosophy. Although Strauss considered Tocqueville to be an indispensable observer of modern liberal democracy, he saw significant limits to Tocqueville's thought. By comparing him with Aristotle and Nietzsche, among others, Strauss criticizes Tocqueville's understanding of justice, history, and democracy. Strauss concludes that Nietzsche offers a more profound critique of liberal democracy, but one that leads to right-wing extremism. Strauss urges his students to be satisfied with Tocqueville's more moderate and humane criticisms. Although Strauss's tentative critique is illuminating and worth careful consideration, I challenge his interpretation and offer a Tocquevillian response to his overly intellectualized conception of social and political change.

Critics of liberalism are drawn to the political thought of Alexis de Tocqueville (Brown 2015; Deneen 2018; Manent 1996; Vermeule 2018; Wolin 2001). Yet one of the most influential critics of liberalism, Leo Strauss, only mentions Tocqueville once in all his published writings.[1] This is a perplexing fact because Strauss considered Tocqueville to be one of the most perceptive and sensible observers of modern liberal democracy. Although Strauss saw significant limits to Tocqueville's thought, he nonetheless urged many of his students to be satisfied with the moderate and sober position that Tocqueville represents. This opinion of Tocqueville has become evident following the recent publication of Strauss's 1954 "Natural Right" course transcript, which contains an original interpretation and tentative critique of Tocqueville's political philosophy.[2] These lectures have hitherto been available to few scholars, and none have explicitly engaged with the lectures in print. The aim of this article is to make these lectures more widely known and to illuminate their significance for thinking through crucial debates surrounding liberal democracy.[3]

In the winter of 1954, one year after the publication of *Natural Right and History*, Strauss offered a course titled "Natural Right" at the University of Chicago. Like the latter parts of *Natural Right and History*, this course is primarily concerned with the problem and crisis of modern natural right—namely, the diminishment of reason as a normative standard and the eventual adoption of history as a new standard. In contrast to the book, however, Strauss discusses in much greater detail the thought of late modern thinkers such as Thomas Paine, Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche. He discusses these thinkers to elucidate the crisis of modern natural right and the theoretical foundations of liberalism, communism, and fascism. Throughout the course, Tocqueville is described as a sober mean between the political extremes of the Left (Paine and Marx) and the Right (Edmund Burke and Nietzsche). Overall, Tocqueville is presented as a moderate and sympathetic observer of liberal democracy.[4]

The originality of Strauss's interpretation is twofold. First, he makes a provocative, even counterintuitive, interpretation that Tocqueville, like Burke, was ultimately captive to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's political philosophy.[5] Although Burke and Tocqueville are postrevolutionary liberals who reject Rousseau's radicalism, they are reliant on his ideas of how history transforms human beings and reveals the true character of political justice. According to Strauss, Burke and Tocqueville ultimately modify Rousseau's teaching by giving meaning to the historical process. History, rather than abstract natural right, becomes the new standard. Second, Strauss attacks Tocqueville for being a sociological thinker. According to Strauss, Tocqueville minimizes the importance of theory by believing that social conditions are more fundamental in shaping our world than philosophic ideas. The problem with this approach is that it insufficiently takes into account the

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transformative character of philosophic ideas and advances the crisis of natural right. Overall, Strauss's tentative critique of Tocqueville as a limited thinker who follows the general nineteenth-century trend of subordinating reason in favor of history raises important questions regarding the lasting significance of Tocqueville's liberal political philosophy.

What, one may ask, is the broader significance of explicating Strauss's interpretation of Tocqueville? First and foremost, this article advances scholarship on the important theme of liberalism. Scholars of various hermeneutical approaches argue that the theoretical foundations of liberalism are flawed (Brown 2015; Deneen 2018; Manent 1994; Milbank and Pabst 2016; Wolin 2001). Similar to Strauss, various scholars depict early modern philosophers as redirecting human life toward individual self-interest and away from communal flourishing. Because Tocqueville echoes these concerns, scholars are drawn to his thought. Tocqueville, it is argued, is a thinker who offers us a different kind of liberalism that is worth saving (Atanassow 2022, 4–6; Boesche 2006, 27–50; Herold 2021, 14; Sandel 2022, 320, 347–48; Wolin 2001, 6). Others argue that he is a thinker who paves the way toward a new postliberal order (Deneen 2018, 173–78; Vermeule 2018, 202). Strauss's interpretation points to the limits of using Tocqueville for refounding or overcoming liberalism. By engaging and responding to Strauss's tentative critique of Tocqueville, scholars will be prompted to see the debate over liberalism in a new light.

Strauss's provocative 1954 "Natural Right" course also disrupts a prevailing scholarly interpretation of Tocqueville. Scholars influenced by Strauss have often sought to fit Tocqueville's thought into Strauss's broader theoretical narrative and to portray him as a critic of modern political philosophy. They often overemphasize the extent to which Tocqueville's liberalism resembles classical political thought, particularly Aristotle's. According to Robert Eden (1990, 382), Strauss sees Tocqueville as "an exemplar of classical political philosophy" and "an exemplar of ancient liberalism." Stephen Salkever (1987, 254–64) contends that Tocqueville offers "an Aristotelian approach" to reconceiving liberal democracy. Harvey Mansfield (2010, 3) argues that "Tocqueville seems rather to agree with Aristotle, the premodern philosopher opposed by … modern theorists." Although these scholars recognize important differences between Tocqueville and Aristotle, they tend to depict Tocqueville as grounded in an updated version of classical political thought (Mansfield 2014, 208). Strauss, unlike many of his students, emphasizes how Tocqueville was ultimately captive to modern philosophic ideas and lacked a classical perspective.[6]

Scholars influenced by Strauss are not monolithic, however. By following Strauss's hermeneutic approach, or perhaps through some familiarity with these lectures,

scholars have arrived at similar interpretations of Tocqueville as a modern thinker deeply indebted to Rousseau (Koritansky 1986, 10–11, 148; West 1991, 177; C. Zuckert 1991, 122; M. Zuckert 1993, 15–16). Thomas West (1991, 176–77) argues that beneath Tocqueville's "historical approach lies a radical account of man, nature, and society" that was possibly inspired by "Rousseauean radicalism." Likewise, Michael Zuckert (1993, 7) argues that Tocqueville had a "sociological theory" that attempted to supersede the "older political science of human nature." Zuckert sees a "Rousseauean core" within Tocqueville's thought, which enables him to create a novel theory of the social state to analyze politics (16–17). These scholars are closer to Strauss's interpretation of Tocqueville and even go beyond his tentative claims. My critique of Strauss's interpretation will cast doubt on these more radical Rousseauean readings of Tocqueville.

The overall ambition of this article is to show that Strauss's provocative reading of Tocqueville is worth careful consideration and response. To fully understand and defend liberal democracy, Tocqueville's political philosophy must undergo careful scrutiny. Strauss's x-ray vision aids this effort. By responding to Strauss's tentative critique, I argue that Tocqueville is indeed a modern thinker, but not one who completely abandons natural right or human nature in the name of history or a new sociological approach. I find that his approach provides important insights into the crisis of liberal democracy and presents a fruitful challenge to Strauss's intellectual history.

This article begins by examining Strauss's unpublished lectures on Tocqueville. In this section, I uncover Strauss's praise and critique of Tocqueville and focus on how he compares him to other canonical thinkers, specifically Rousseau, Burke, and Nietzsche. I then examine Strauss's published and posthumously published writings to contextualize his comparison of Tocqueville and Nietzsche, and to better understand his critique of liberal democracy. Finally, I challenge Strauss's interpretation of Tocqueville and offer a critique of Strauss's overly intellectualized conception of social and political change.

## Strauss's Lectures on Tocqueville

Strauss (1954, 7) begins his 1954 "Natural Right" course by offering high praise of *Democracy in America*:

> One could say that a work like Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is perhaps the last great book which reflects [the] primary meaning of political philosophy. It reflects it in the first place in the comprehensiveness of his political analysis. There is no aspect of democracy which is neglected. Secondly, the question of whether democracy is good or bad is the crucial question for Tocqueville.

In contrast to many contemporary political scientists, Tocqueville does not simply accept that democracy is

good or that it is the best regime. Its goodness must be interrogated, even challenged. This clarifies Strauss's (1959a, 81 n. 2) sole published remark on Tocqueville. Strauss is not calling Tocqueville a modern echo of classical political philosophy; he is simply showing how Tocqueville belongs to the broader tradition of political philosophy as distinguished from present-day political science.

For Strauss (1954, 189), Tocqueville's political science is of "utmost interest" because it is guided by an awareness of a fundamental alternative to liberal democracy. Strauss believes that the analysis of contemporary political scientists is inadequate because it often contrasts liberal democracy with communism or fascism. These regimes are "most unattractive alternatives from which we learn nothing except self-complacency."[7] Tocqueville's political science, in contrast, juxtaposes liberal democracy "with a respectable alternative, and that is what makes him so valuable" (193). Aristocracy, for Tocqueville, is a respectable alternative that produces magnanimous souls, towering intellects, and refined cultures.

Strauss (1954, 189) is astonished at how perspicacious and profound his analysis is despite his relatively short stay in America: "I believe that no book comparable in breadth and depth has ever been produced afterward. I believe in no other case in regard to any other country; that a man after such a short sojourn in a country could give such a comprehensive and profound analysis." Strauss argues that part of the reason why Tocqueville was such a good observer was that he had excellent teachers: Montesquieu and Rousseau. This intellectual inheritance allowed him to offer a profound "philosophic analysis" (189).[8] Although Strauss (1966, 62) finds Tocqueville's thought to ultimately be derivative of these two thinkers, he sees *Democracy in America* as a first-rate elaboration of their thought. As a result, he believes that it is absolutely "necessary [for every student of political science to read] Tocqueville's work" (Strauss 1954, 192).

Despite Tocqueville being an "excellent observer" of modern liberal democracy, Strauss (1954, 190) believes that "he had in his head a certain notion of what democracy is from the French democratic tradition, especially Rousseau" (see also Jaume 2013, 21–35). Rousseau framed Tocqueville's conception of equality, of how it is more natural and just than inequality, and of how it has a historical trajectory. These Rousseauean insights deepen Tocqueville's analysis, but Strauss (1954, 190) argues that Tocqueville was "sometimes misled by his preconceived notions of democracy."[9]

Strauss (1953, 286) implies that Tocqueville, following Rousseau, sees democracy as more natural than aristocracy. Democracy is more natural because it liberates man from the conventional bonds that aristocracy creates. Aristocracy creates an unnatural and fixed inequality in society and in the family. Democracy overturns the barriers erected by aristocracy and returns individuals to a state that more closely resembles natural equality in society and the family (Strauss 1954, 190–91). For this reason, Strauss quotes Tocqueville's ([1835–40] 2012, 1040) famous remark about democracy strengthening natural bonds and weakening conventional bonds (see also Manent 1996, 71). The implication of this is that Tocqueville, following Rousseau, sees democracy as the regime that best approximates natural equality.[10]

Strauss also notices that Tocqueville's analysis of the "democratic temper" resembles Rousseau's description of natural man. Rousseau's state-of-nature account memorably portrays natural man as having two guiding principles prior to the development of reason: self-preservation and pity. Early man is like a timid animal, concerned with preservation and unconcerned with harming others. Strauss (1954, 190) claims that Tocqueville adopts this doctrine of "systemic egoism" and "compassion" when describing modern democratic man. Similar to Rousseau's depiction of man in the state of nature, Tocqueville ([1835–40] 2012, 993) states that democratic individuals do not "inflict useless evils, and when, without hurting themselves very much, they can relieve the sufferings of others, they take pleasure in doing so." Tocqueville goes on to state that equality of conditions makes individuals independent but also acutely aware of their weakness. This state of affairs leads citizens to unite with one another out of self-interest and to have a general compassion for all members of the human race. While general human sympathy for others increases, great devotion or self-sacrifice for one's country decreases. Strauss sees this as a restatement of Rousseau's doctrine.

Rousseau undergirds not only Tocqueville's understanding of democracy but also history.[11] Strauss's 1954 course transcript, like *Natural Right and History*, argues that Rousseau introduced the idea of history into the modern natural right tradition. According to Strauss's (1954, 208–9) interpretation of Rousseau, man acquires his humanity over time, through the historical process. Moreover, the bitter experience of despotism ultimately "made men wise" and allowed them to discover and establish just governments. History, thus, gives man his humanity and shows him true political legitimacy. Strauss provocatively argues that Burke and Tocqueville were "captive" to Rousseau's historical philosophy (179). Although Burke and Tocqueville ultimately reject Rousseau's radical political proposals, they are reliant on his ideas of how history transforms human beings and reveals the true character of political justice. Even in rejecting Rousseau's more abstract proposals, they both do so in the name of history. A new civil equality that reflects natural equality—what Rousseau sought to establish through his political philosophy—does not require a radical remaking of human nature; no revolution based on abstract

principles is needed. History already tends in the direction of equality. Strauss (1954, 188) succinctly encapsulates Burke's (and, by implication, Tocqueville's) modification of Rousseau's historical teaching as follows: "[T]rust in the historical process rather than in 'abstract principles.'"[12]

According to Strauss, Burke and Tocqueville's modified Rousseauean historical perspective eventually leads to a secularized understanding of providence. Strauss argues that Burke attempts to save aristocracy from being over-turned by revolutionary democracy, but realizes that the principles of the French Revolution and of democracy itself may be the future, possibly even ordained by God. Quoting from the last paragraph of Burke's *Thoughts on French Affairs*, Strauss reveals how Burke ultimately con-cedes that the revolution of modern society may be the workings of providence.[13] Burke ([1791] 1907, 375) states that those who "persist in opposing this mighty current in human affairs, will appear rather to resist the decrees of Providence itself, than the mere designs of men." After quoting this passage, Strauss reminds his students that Tocqueville states something similar about the democratic revolution in the introduction to *Democracy in America.* Echoing Burke, Tocqueville ([1835–40] 2012, 10) states that this movement is "a providential fact"; to resist it is to resist God himself. Strauss (1954, 179) appropriately remarks that "where Burke stops, Tocqueville begins." The acceptance of the modern dem-ocratic revolution as a providential fact is the start of Tocqueville's political philosophy.[14]

Unlike Burke, who ultimately settles for "conservative aristocracy," Tocqueville supports a form of "anti-revolutionary democracy" or "conservative democracy." Tocqueville thus "accept[s] democracy, but imbue[s] it with the moderate spirit of Burke" (Strauss 1954, 179; cf. Lakoff 1998).[15] Strauss is sympathetic to Tocque-ville's conservative defense of liberal democracy, but ultimately finds his philosophic analysis to be inade-quate. Strauss (1954, 196) contends that students of Tocqueville must be aware of "the enormous power of the tradition of democratic theory over the mind of Tocqueville." This influence, he contends, misdirected Tocqueville's observations and his general analysis. Although Tocqueville saw "the dangers inherent in democracy, perhaps more clearly than any other demo-cratic writer" (107), Strauss still considered him to be beholden to the democratic tradition. To elucidate this flaw, Strauss examines why Tocqueville ultimately decides in favor of democracy, even while seeing the threat it brings to human freedom and excellence.

According to Strauss, Tocqueville provides three differ-ent reasons for why democracy should not be resisted. The first is that democracy is a historical or "providential fact": we have no choice but to accept it.[16] Strauss (1954, 202) finds this argument to be inadequate because the historical fact of democracy does not mean that it is good nor that it comes from God. Democracy "could very well be divine punishment inflicted on men for their sins." This argu-ment is "not the theological understanding of providence, but what is loosely called the secularized version of prov-idence, meaning an understanding according to which the ways of God are not inscrutable."[17] According to the theological understanding of providence, the ways of God are inscrutable; man cannot know that God wills democracy (202).

The second argument in favor of democracy is that it is rooted in Christianity. Strauss characterizes this posi-tion as being "of a more serious nature." For Tocque-ville, liberal democracy brings to fruition Christian principles of freedom, equality, and charity. Liberal democracy is, as far as Tocqueville (1959) is concerned, an effective means of accomplishing the Christian ideals of freedom and equality for all (see also Galston 1987, 505–6). Or as Strauss (1954, 202) states: "[M]odern democracy fulfills the will of the New Testament on political things." The problem with this argument is that it relies on faith, not reason. Simply because democracy fulfills the ideals of Christianity does not make it better than aristocracy.

The third argument that Strauss (1954, 203) is con-cerned with is Tocqueville's claim that "democracy is more just than aristocracy." At the end of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville ([1835–40] 2012, 1282) states that equality is less elevated, but that "it is more just." It is this justice that gives democracy its grandeur and beauty. According to Strauss (1954, 203), this is "a very peculiar notion of justice." Strauss states that "one could say in Aristotelian language [that] he dogmatically accepts the democratic notion of justice, justice simply identical with equality, so that the kind of reasonable inequality corre-sponding to merit is not considered" (204; cf. Henary 2014; Tocqueville [1835–40] 2012, 314–17). The issue is that Tocqueville "identifies aristocracy with the ancien régime with all of its residues of feudalism, which are not of course of the essence of aristocracy" (Strauss 1954, 205). For Aristotle, the essence of aristocracy is the rule of the best with a view to the common advantage and according to the standard of virtue, not simply according to property. Tocqueville, of course, recognizes the higher aristocratic claim to rule, but focuses less on virtue. Classical thinkers, according to Strauss (1953, 133–34), argue that a just society is one that leads to human perfection or virtue. Since human beings are *un*equal in their ability to arrive at this end, "equal rights for all appeared to the classics as most unjust" (134–35). Tocqueville appears to accept the modern natural right teaching that conceives of all men as naturally free and equal. A just society, therefore, is one that ensures freedom and equality for all. Freedom and equality take the place of virtue (Strauss 1954, 110, 134). Strauss, in contrast to many of his students, emphasizes the

unclassical and un-Aristotelian character of Tocqueville's political philosophy.

Strauss notices that despite Tocqueville having a philosophical argument for the superior justice of democracy, he ultimately diminishes the power of reason to determine which social state is best. After stating that democracy is more just, Tocqueville ([1835–40] 2012, 1282) states that aristocracy and democracy are "two distinct humanities, each of which has its particular advantages and disadvantages, its good and its evil which are its own." The two societies "are not comparable." Strauss (1954, 203) sees this as an "inability or unwillingness to make a decision between two social systems which both impress him in different ways." Democracy is superior "from the point of view of just" and aristocracy is superior "from the point of view of human elevation." His hesitation to resolve this "insoluble value conflict" shows that "he doesn't see any criterion for deciding the ultimate superiority" of one social state over another. Strauss sees this as an early form of relativism, albeit "a very balanced and moderate 'relativism.'" Reason, the traditional criterion, is abandoned in the name of history. In the introduction to *Democracy*, Tocqueville ([1835–40] 2012, 28) states: "I did not even claim to judge if the social revolution, whose march seems irresistible to me, was advantageous or harmful to humanity." In Strauss's (1956, 148) "Historicism and Modern Relativism" course, he states something similar: "Tocqueville could not decide unqualifiedly in favor of democracy. The decision was made for him, as it were, by history."

Strauss (1954, 205) states that Tocqueville's political philosophy is "sound for most practical purposes," but insufficient from "the point of view of theory." The fundamental problem with Tocqueville is that he is not a philosopher. He "is a sociologist," meaning that for him "the fundamental fact which moves man and society are not so much opinions or ideas, but social conditions" (203).[18] Tocqueville "thinks [that] a fundamental change in social conditions has occurred, [and] that leads to certain theories, and the theories are mere by-products of the social change" (203). A clear example of this is when Tocqueville speaks of enlightened self-interest. Equality of conditions, not any particular accepted philosophic idea, causes Americans to honor this philosophy. Strauss (1954, 194), in contrast, sees a clear line between enlightened self-interest and early American Enlightenment thinkers such as Benjamin Franklin. These Enlightenment theories, not the democratic social state, "are older than the conditions of which Tocqueville speaks and may be said to have brought about these conditions." For Strauss, ideas are more important than social conditions. The problem with Tocqueville is that he is "constantly inclined to minimize the importance of theory" (193–94).

Strauss (1954, 204) ends his interpretation of Tocqueville by touching on the theme of the course, "namely, the problem of natural right." He argues that Tocqueville follows in the modern tradition by diminishing the power of theory and reason to determine what is best. The early modern rationalism and "its natural right doctrine" was "based on a subordination of reason and of the intellect to something nonrational, nonintellectual, sub-intellectual: the fundamental needs of man, and sentiment and so on." Later thinkers (Tocqueville being one of these thinkers) "radicalize this tendency" to subordinate reason. History, not reason or the nonrational needs of man, determines what is best, what is possible. This loss in the power of reason, this minimization of the importance of theory, constitutes the "crisis of modern natural right."

Overall, Strauss admires Tocqueville's sober and thoughtful analysis of liberal democracy, but finds it inadequate on philosophic grounds. He argues that Tocqueville overly relies on Rousseau's understanding of the naturalness of equality and the transformative effect of history. Tocqueville, like Burke, unwittingly modifies and advances Rousseau's historical teaching. Rather than return to Aristotelian moderation grounded in practical reason, Burke and Tocqueville look to history. Tocqueville's secularized understanding of providence is flawed and limits the political alternatives that were once open to classical thinkers, especially Aristotle. Additionally, Tocqueville's modern and Christian conception of justice clouds his judgment of democracy. His overall diminishment of reason and theory prevents him from seeing the problematic character of modern natural right. Liberal democracy, a regime whose raison d'être is the equal protection of individual rights, is not the most just regime. Strauss ultimately agrees with Plato and Aristotle that the best and most just form of government is the rule of the wise, not the rule of the many (Smith 2000). Tocqueville is unwilling to firmly make this judgment. He accepts the historical and providential dispensation of equality. Political philosophy is reduced to a form of democratic theory that attempts to preserve freedom in times of equality. The more capacious ancient horizon offered by Aristotle and other ancient thinkers is neglected. Despite certain classical intimations in Tocqueville's thought, he is unable to escape the modern horizon.

Similar to Strauss's (1976) critique of Carl Schmitt, one could say he believes that Tocqueville's thought remains within "the horizon of liberalism" (1976, 122). Tocqueville's dissatisfaction with modern liberal democracy is restrained by his unconscious acceptance of the modern natural right teaching and Rousseau's historic-democratic theory. Moreover, Tocqueville's secularized Christianity limits his theoretical "horizon" (Strauss 1954, 205): his willingness to accept democracy as a dispensation from God is flawed. As Strauss states, the deepest "limitation of the horizon exemplified by Tocqueville" is that the question of democracy "is settled, the question is settled by the successful establishment of this order" (205). If one wants

to adequately understand the problematic character of the early modern project, one must gain "a horizon beyond liberalism"—a horizon, one could say, beyond Tocqueville (Strauss 1976, 122).

In the following section, I will focus on Strauss's comparison of Tocqueville and Nietzsche in his 1954 "Natural Right" transcript and in his wider oeuvre. Strauss argues that Nietzsche provides a horizon beyond liberalism, albeit a radical one that has its own theoretical and practical limits. His intellectual superiority allows him to see with greater clarity the problematic nature of liberal democracy. Nietzsche attacks early modern liberal ideas of rights, equality, and freedom. Moreover, he makes an unabashed critique of Christian and democratic notions of justice. Strauss does not fully agree with Nietzsche's approach, but he argues that his philosophic analysis is more profound than Tocqueville's.

## Strauss's Comparison of Tocqueville and Nietzsche

In Strauss's (1975, 98) famous "Three Waves of Modernity" article, he argues that Nietzsche's critique of the theoretical underpinnings of liberal democracy "cannot be dismissed or forgotten." Two years after the 1954 "Natural Right" course, Strauss (1995, 305) declared in a lecture: "All rational liberal philosophic positions have lost their significance and power. One may deplore this but I for one cannot bring myself to cling to philosophic positions which have been shown to be inadequate." Although Strauss found the liberal philosophic position to be inadequate, he also found the solutions proposed by Nietzsche and other thinkers to be inadequate. For this reason, he sought to retrieve a form of classical rationalism that could serve as "a solid basis for rational liberalism" (305).[19] Strauss's endeavor to discover a new foundation for liberalism (or some other form of modern political life) required an engagement with Tocqueville and Nietzsche, two of the most perceptive writers on liberal democracy.

In Strauss's 1959 lecture course on Nietzsche, he compares Tocqueville's argument for the justness of democracy with Nietzsche's critique of democracy. Strauss (1959b, 77) notes that Nietzsche, like Tocqueville, sees the link between Christianity and democracy, as well as the contention of democracy being more just by Christian standards. But in contrast to Tocqueville, "Nietzsche turns it around." Democracy is not actually more just: this is simply what the defenders of democracy claim. In reality, the many are resentful of the few, and thus seek to subjugate them to their rule. This so-called justice is nothing more than resentment and revenge. This Christian notion of justice is what Nietzsche calls slave morality. Nietzsche, according to Strauss, presents a powerful philosophic critique of democracy, one that Tocqueville does not adequately address. For this reason and others, he

argues that Nietzsche is ultimately "much deeper and [more] comprehensive than [Tocqueville]" (24).

Despite Tocqueville's limits, his analysis of the democratic phenomenon of mediocrity reminds Strauss of Nietzsche's very similar observations.[20] Democracy produces a certain leveling of society where no great virtue or vice exists. In the 1954 "Natural Right" course, Strauss (1954, 201) quotes Tocqueville's ([1835–40] 2012, 1281) memorable lines regarding this universal leveling:

> Nearly all the extremes become softer and are blunted; nearly all the salient points are worn away to make way for something middling, which is at the very same time less high and less low, less brilliant and less obscure than what was seen in the world.

Commenting on this passage, Strauss states that Tocqueville is describing the phenomenon of mediocrity or philistinism. Strauss sees a link between what Tocqueville describes as degraded democratic individuals and what Nietzsche calls the "last man, namely the man who has little pleasures by day, little pleasures by night, and thinks he has discovered happiness" (201).[21]

Strauss (1954, 201) mentions Nietzsche to show the connection between the "very moderate and humane criticism of the modern development by Tocqueville and the extreme revolt against it which is represented by Nietzsche." Strauss appears to find greater truth in Nietzsche's "extreme revolt" and "a real difficulty in Tocqueville's position" (196). Strauss states that "liberal democracy today has never been so soberly analyzed, and so sympathetically as it was by Tocqueville," but he does not rest satisfied with this moderate analysis of liberal democracy (195). Tocqueville's minimization of the importance of theory prevents him from seeing that there are fundamental flaws in the modern philosophic foundations of liberalism, including his own historically informed liberalism.

The problem that Tocqueville believes to be the result of modern democracy, Strauss believes to be the result of the original principles of modern liberal democracy. For Strauss (1968, 64), the problem of modern liberalism is that it inevitably leads to a "perverted liberalism which contends 'that just to live, securely and happily, and protected but otherwise unregulated, is man's simple but supreme goal' and which forgets quality, excellence, or virtue." The founders of liberalism made self-preservation, rather than virtue, the guiding principle of politics. Rights take the place of duties. One has a right, or freedom, to live as one pleases, but no one has a duty to be virtuous, to be excellent (Strauss 1953, 181–82). This radical transformation of how we think about justice and the purpose of politics was inaugurated by modern political philosophers, not the democratic social state. Tocqueville's supposed lack of philosophic depth and modern concern for liberty blinded him to certain theoretical difficulties inherent in liberalism.

Strauss argues that freedom, not human greatness, is Tocqueville's summum bonum. Although Strauss (1954, 199) recognized and admired Tocqueville's abiding concern for greatness, and his understanding of how freedom is "directly connected with human excellence," he compares it to Nietzsche's radical attachment to greatness. Strauss argues that Tocqueville "sided with democracy in spite of his reservations." Because providence had decided in favor of democracy, the only alternatives are democracy or despotism. Aristocratic greatness was no longer a viable option for Tocqueville. He therefore settled for the greatness that is to be found in a democratic context.[22] "Nietzsche," Strauss argues, "is less concerned with political freedom than with human greatness." He "sees possibilities of human greatness in the nineteenth century which transcend everything possible in the past, in a new type of tyrants, in a new ruling class … of a military character" (255). Strauss disapproves of Nietzsche's glorification of a new aristocracy founded on military strength and atheism, but he admires his unflinching attachment to greatness.[23] This singular focus on greatness allowed him to be a more perspicacious critic of liberal democracy (cf. Herold 2021, 183–84; Mansfield 2010, 112).

Although Strauss believes that Tocqueville's ultimate embrace of modern equality and freedom clouded his judgment, he admires Tocqueville's moderate and practical mind, which prevented him from falling into the same errors as Nietzsche. This moderation is something that Strauss's students find admirable about Tocqueville and perhaps a source of Strauss's qualified embrace of liberal democracy. Strauss (1954, 202) seems to suggest that in practice, it is better to follow Tocqueville's "very moderate and humane criticism" of modern liberal democracy than Nietzsche's extreme rejection of it.

Strauss (1954, 277) makes it clear that Nietzsche's "extreme revolt" against liberal democracy had serious consequences: "Nietzsche in an indirect way prepared the climate in which Nazism would grow." Although "Nietzsche was not a Nazi and would have been the very first to run away from Germany and Hitler," he nonetheless bears some responsibility for that regime being inspired by him. Nietzsche's glorification of subjugation and cruelty, as well as his claim that Christianity is nothing more than slave morality, paved the way for "right-wing extremism." Moreover, Nietzsche's way of writing added fuel to his radical ideas: "You can't write such sentences about the Homeric heroes, that they raped all the women and killed anyone they didn't like, and regard it fundamentally as a students' prank, and presenting that [as something] good" (277). Nietzsche's imprudent lack of decorum and civility was a problem. For Strauss, "there are certain kinds of sentences which a responsible man must never say and write. Nietzsche wrote a lot of sentences which a responsible man should never have written, because they were certain to be misused" (257).

Tocqueville, in contrast, refrained from using such imprudent and cruel language. Perhaps for this reason, among others, Strauss admonishes his students earlier in the course to "be satisfied with the sober, middle-of-the-road position of Tocqueville" (108).

Strauss, one could say, charts a middle course between Tocqueville and Nietzsche. He follows Tocqueville in that he attempts to moderate the democratic spirit rather than radically overturn it. He is more persuaded by Nietzsche's theoretical critique of liberal democracy, but he moderately admires decent liberal constitutionalism. Similar to Strauss's judgment about liberal democracy in his "Three Waves" article, one may conclude that he finds Tocqueville's political philosophy to be good in practice, but inadequate in theory. Tocqueville's moderation, his concern for religion, human greatness, and the life of the mind, and his dread of mediocrity makes him a different kind of modern thinker, one that Strauss admired. But Tocqueville, according to Strauss, is too reliant on history and diminishes the power of theory to shape and decide what is best for a political community. His sociological approach constricts his attempt to understand the origin of contemporary problems and adequately respond to them.

## A Tocquevillian Response to Leo Strauss

Although Strauss's pedagogical critique of Tocqueville is insightful and philosophically astute, I would like to offer a preliminary Tocquevillian response. This response is directed at Strauss, but has broader implications. It provides scholars with a Tocquevillian alternative to contemporary critics of liberalism. This preliminary response is not meant to be exhaustive; rather, it is meant to be an enticement for scholars to put Tocqueville and Strauss in greater dialogue with one another. This effort will contribute to the ongoing debate surrounding liberalism.

One of the most jarring interpretations that Strauss presents is his critique of Tocqueville's providential argument in favor of democracy. Strauss argues that the success of democracy does not prove that God wills it or that it is good: the victory of democracy could very well be divine punishment rather than divine sanction. Despite the illuminating character of this counterargument, Strauss does not take up the rhetorical and historical aspect of Tocqueville's argument. One could argue, as some of Strauss's own students have, that Tocqueville's providential thesis is highly rhetorical (Zetterbaum 1967, 15–19). There was a clear rationale behind Tocqueville's providential rhetoric. Many French aristocrats simply saw democracy as an evil and wanted to return to some version of the Old Regime. A return to throne and altar was not wholly off the table in France. Tocqueville needed to convince conservative Catholics and other parties that democracy was the future. It is surprising that Strauss does not take this into greater consideration when examining Tocqueville's thought.

Strauss overemphasizes Tocqueville's acceptance of democracy based on history. Tocqueville does not fatalistically accept the outcome of history. In his chapter on democratic historians in *Democracy*, he memorably states that aristocratic historians overemphasize the role of great individuals and democratic historians overemphasize the role of a "single great historical system" (Tocqueville [1835–40] 2012, 857). He attempts to find a mean between these two extremes. Strauss, one could say, takes a more aristocratic historical interpretation and attributes to Tocqueville a democratic historical system. Tocqueville, however, denies the idea that societies have no "ability to modify their own fate" and that they are subject to "an inflexible providence or to a sort of blind fatality" (858). He wants to acknowledge the role of grand historical developments, but he does not give history an ineluctable power. He memorably ends *Democracy* by acknowledging that providence/history places certain limits on the destiny of men, but that "within its vast limits, man is powerful and free; so are peoples" (1285). In a letter late in life, Tocqueville criticizes Hegelian historical determinism. The Germans, Tocqueville (1861) writes, embraced Hegel because "his doctrines asserted that, in a political sense, all established facts ought to be submitted to as legitimate; and that the very circumstance of their existence was sufficient to make obedience to them a duty."[24] Tocqueville rejects the idea that history can legitimate any political fact or occurrence. History does not replace reason as the criterion of judgment.

In Strauss's attempt to give a grand historical narrative, he overly generalizes Tocqueville as a sociological thinker who abandons the standard of reason in favor of a moderate form of relativism.[25] Tocqueville is not rejecting reason as a criterion of judgment when he states that aristocracy and democracy each have their own advantages and disadvantages; he is simply asserting a reasonable and commonsensical claim that there are good and bad aspects of each social state, and, more broadly, all governments.[26] Ultimately, Tocqueville's so-called relativism may simply be a form of nuanced prudential calculation that recognizes changing circumstances and therefore the need for a certain flexibility. Tocqueville's ([1835–40] 2012, 955) general idea that there are a variety of means for a fixed end is visible in *Democracy in America*: "All the art of the legislator consists in clearly discerning in advance these natural inclinations of human societies, in order to know where the effort of the citizens must be aided, and where it would instead be necessary to slow it down. For these obligations differ according to the times. Only the end toward which humanity must always head is unchanging; the means to reach that end constantly vary." This passage seems to suggest that Tocqueville maintains a fixed end while allowing for a variety of means to achieve a given end. Tocqueville does not seem to abandon the standard of

reason on historicist or relativist grounds (Arellano 2020, 63; Kuź 2016, 67–72).[27]

Strauss overlooks the fact that Tocqueville's political philosophy is grounded on a fixed understanding of human nature and the longing for transcendence. In *Democracy*, Tocqueville ([1835–40] 2012, 940) memorably states that there is an "unchanging foundation" in human nature and that "the soul has needs that must be satisfied" (Kitch 2016). This normative standard is certainly less robust than what is found in classical or medieval rationalism, but it is still grounded in a form of rationalism that sees nature and transcendent human longing as providing a norm or standard (Herold 2021, 184).[28] In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss (1953, 178) states that Niccolò Machiavelli had no concern for the "natural inclinations of man or of the human soul whose demands simply transcend the lowered goal." The same cannot be said of Tocqueville. The demands of natural inclinations and of the human soul play a vital role in his political philosophy.

Strauss may have been unfamiliar with some of Tocqueville's later pronouncements that suggest a fixed understanding of human nature. In a lecture before the French Academy of Moral and Political Sciences in 1852, Tocqueville (2011, 17–18) states that there are two parts to the "science of politics": "one fixed and the other in motion." The first is "founded on the very nature of man," on "his needs as revealed by philosophy and history," and "on his instincts, which change their objects according to the times without changing their nature, and which are as immortal as his race."[29] This first theoretical aspect "teaches us what laws are best adapted to the general and permanent condition of humanity." The second aspect of politics is the practical side that provides for "the passing needs of the moment." Tocqueville, thus, makes a distinction between theory and practice and grounds his politics on a normative theoretical account of human nature that is unchanging. He believes that there are aspects of our humanity that never change and others that are subject to variation. He does not give a detailed account of what is mutable and what is fixed in human affairs; nevertheless, within *Democracy*, he gives some examples of where he retains a nonrelativistic account of justice.

In *Democracy*, when speaking of the plight of Native Americans, Tocqueville makes an illuminating statement that seems to suggest he maintains some fixed standard of natural right and reason. He recounts how he read a report for the Committee of Indian Affairs where an individual claimed that Native Americans had no right of property. In response, Tocqueville ([1835–40] 2012, 547 n. 29) states: "While reading this report, written moreover by a skillful hand, you are astonished by the facility and ease with which, from the first words, the author gets rid of arguments founded on natural right and reason, that he calls

abstract and theoretical principles." In this example, Tocqueville appears to argue that there is a natural right or justice that theoretical reason can discover. He does not make great use of these concepts, perhaps due to the revolutionary character of modern natural right and the ever-volatile character of French society, but he seems to maintain some standard of right and justice that transcends time or place.

Strauss's tentative indictment of Tocqueville as being a derivative thinker lacking philosophic depth is oversimplified. Surprisingly, Strauss does not examine *why* Tocqueville may have been compelled to "constantly minimize the importance of theory" in his published writings. In the wake of the French Revolution, Tocqueville realized that abstract philosophic theories are dangerous. During the Revolution, intellectuals naïvely incorporated philosophic ideas in their writings and taught citizens how to question the foundations of religion and society. Tocqueville, therefore, may have intentionally minimized the importance of theory to moderate elements of modern political philosophy (Ceaser 2011, 226–27; Mansfield 2014). This minimization of theory may not simply be a product of his historical perspective, as Strauss suggests, but may reflect a certain understanding of the difference between theory and practice (Ceaser 2011, 242; Mansfield 2010, 4).[30]

Strauss's implied critique of Tocqueville as ultimately not being a philosopher is valid to a certain extent;[31] nevertheless, Strauss is too quick to describe Tocqueville as a derivative thinker who minimizes the importance of abstract ideas.[32] In his lecture before the French Academy, Tocqueville reiterates the danger of philosophy, but also acknowledges the utmost importance of "pure theory" for political science. He explicitly cites "Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, [and] Rousseau" as the brilliant thinkers who establish the theoretical foundations of political science. Rather than give a sociological or a historicist account of how their ideas were a product of their times, Tocqueville (2011, 19–20) boldly states that the political sciences of these great thinkers is what shapes society:

> [T]he political sciences give birth to, or at least form, those general ideas from which then emerge the particular facts in whose midst men of politics busy themselves, and the laws they believe they invent; these ideas form around each society something like a sort of intellectual atmosphere breathed by the spirit of both governed and governors, and from which the former as well as the latter draw, often without knowing it, sometimes without wanting it, the principles of their conduct.

In this speech, the importance of theory is not minimized; theory, especially political theory, is elevated and presented as the first cause of social and political change.[33] The great thinkers produce the general ideas, which then produce the facts and laws that political men "believe they invent." Later in the speech, Tocqueville goes so far as to

state that the theoretical books of Aristotle, Montesquieu, and Rousseau "have made us what we are." Contrary to what Strauss suggests, Tocqueville recognizes the transformative effect of ideas and political theory.

Strauss, however, astutely detects a protohistoricist tendency to Tocqueville's early thought that minimizes the power of philosophers to transcend their particular historical horizons. For example, Tocqueville thought that Plato and Aristotle were unable to see that slavery is unjust and against nature because they were part of the "aristocracy of masters." Christ, he famously argues in *Democracy*, had to "come to earth in order to make it understood that all members of the human species were naturally similar and equal" (Tocqueville [1835–40] 2012, 733). The social condition of inequality of conditions prevented philosophers from seeing certain natural truths.[34] In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss (1953, 23) bluntly states: "It is obviously untrue to say, for instance, that Aristotle could not have conceived of the injustice of slavery, for he did conceive of it." These protohistoricist ideas in *Democracy* may simply reflect the thoughts of a youthful Tocqueville or perhaps a lack of familiarity with Aristotle.[35] His 1852 speech before the Academy gives reason to believe that the later Tocqueville shared, to a large extent, Strauss's general view about the power of reason to transcend social horizons and the ability to create new ones.

Tocqueville's approach is more nuanced than what Strauss argues. Rather than call Tocqueville a sociologist, it is perhaps better to think of him as a sociopolitical thinker with a multifaceted approach. Tocqueville (1959) once told his friend Arthur de Gobineau that he examines "the habits of people" rather than "books." As we have just seen, the ideas in books are important, but they do not explain in full the changing social and political habits of a people. Philosophic ideas are one cause among a variety of causes that transform society. There is never simply one causal factor. Even though Tocqueville ([1835–40] 2012, 74, 692) speaks of the democratic social state as being the primary cause of all the changes he sees taking place, he also does not consider it to be the sole cause (see also C. Zuckert 1991, 126). It has been rightly noted that he sees intellectual ideas and social forces as having a "reciprocal influence on each other" (Arellano 2020, 52). His sociopolitical approach attempts to provide a more nuanced analysis of human affairs (M. Zuckert 1993). By examining all aspects of society, not simply the ideas articulated by philosophers, Tocqueville provides a fuller—and perhaps more accurate—portrait.

For Strauss, modern philosophers such as Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Rousseau bear much of the responsibility for the problems we face in contemporary liberal democracy. The loss of human greatness, the precariousness of political and intellectual freedom, the disintegration of social and political unity in Western countries, and growing secularization are somehow the

result of modern intellectual ideas. While it is important and fruitful to take into consideration Strauss's philosophic narrative regarding the decline of the West, it may seem strange and far-fetched to many. Are these thinkers really the primary cause of our current discontent? Is it not perhaps more accurate to say that there are a variety of factors that have produced the current instability and disenchantment found in contemporary liberal democratic regimes? While Strauss may criticize Tocqueville for *minimizing* the importance of theory, one may criticize Strauss for *overemphasizing* the importance of theory.

Strauss's overly intellectualized theory of historical change has inspired many scholars and intellectuals to present oversimplified critiques of liberal democracy. Scholars influenced by Strauss often see the theoretical foundations of liberalism as the primary cause of our current problems. The state-of-nature anthropology of liberalism is somehow the cause of waning orthodox faith, degraded citizens, moral decay, and even high rates of divorce. What is needed, according to some, is a novel return to premodern, Aristotelian or Thomistic political foundations (Deneen 2018; Manent 2020; Milbank and Pabst 2016). Although the writings of these contemporary scholars are illuminating, they often depict modern political thought in monolithic terms and overemphasize its negative qualities.[36] More radical intellectuals are also inspired by Strauss's provocative and memorable critiques of modern philosophy. Scholars have documented how these intellectuals follow Strauss in an immoderate way and attempt to revive Nietzsche's radical critique of liberal democracy.[37] The 1954 "Natural Right" transcript reveals that Strauss (1954, 277) would reject such radical writings as another instance of Nietzsche's ideas paving the way for a new form of "right-wing extremism." It would perhaps go too far to blame Strauss for inspiring Nietzschean radicalism, but it is not difficult to see how his writings provide a certain antiliberal vocabulary that is easily appropriated. For this reason, some critics of Strauss portray him as an enemy of liberal democracy (Drury 1988; McCormick 2021; Xenos 2008), and many of his admirers have been at pains to present him as a friendly critic (Pangle 2006; Schiff 2010; Smith 2006).

## Conclusion

The ambition of this article has been to revive and grapple with a thought-provoking interpretation of Tocqueville. By explicating parts of Strauss's 1954 "Natural Right" course, this article advances a broad scholarly interest in the intellectual sources of Tocqueville's thought and disrupts certain Strauss-influenced interpretations. Strauss unveils a subterranean Rousseauean foundation of Tocqueville's thought that separates him from classical political philosophy and challenges a prevailing interpretation of Tocqueville as a quasi-Aristotelian thinker. In contrast to Strauss, and other interpreters who see Tocqueville as

radicalizing Rousseau's thought, however, I argue that Tocqueville retains a core theoretical framework that prevents his thought from devolving into historicism or a deficient sociological paradigm.

Ultimately, Strauss's engagement with Tocqueville helps us to better understand and diagnose the contemporary crisis of liberal democracy. One of the primary tasks of contemporary political philosophy is to investigate the cause of our modern discontent. Strauss, and many other theorists, see the theoretical foundations of liberalism as *the* problem. Strauss's charge is that Tocqueville was unable to escape the modern horizon and was unaware of the faulty theoretical foundations upon which his political philosophy relied. Although Tocqueville may be a moderate corrective to certain modern excesses, he is still inadequate for addressing the crisis of liberal democracy: his analysis and remedies are ultimately off the mark. The theoretical underpinnings of liberalism, not the sociopolitical phenomenon of democracy, are to blame. This is a provocative and preceptive reading that any admirer of Tocqueville and defender of liberal democracy must take seriously. Tocqueville may be good in practice but wrong in theory.

By thinking through this critique and responding to it, however, an alternative possibility presents itself. Tocqueville may not have minimized the importance of theory as much as Strauss thought, and he may present a more nuanced and accurate picture of social and political life. Tocqueville's writings, to a greater extent than Strauss's, warn against the danger of overtheorizing political life. His moderation and method of analysis prevent one from arriving at overly theoretical diagnoses and prescriptions. Tocqueville, like Strauss, sees how modern political philosophy has had pernicious outcomes, but he does not call for a new theoretical foundation. Rather than a tentative return to classical political philosophy, Tocqueville proposes a modest and prudent application of modern political ideas. Although Strauss also recognizes and admires modern advances in constitutional government, especially as he experienced them in the United States (Pangle 2006, 108), an undisciplined reading of Strauss's works can often produce a kind of "polis envy" and a certain disdain for decent political life; one can easily come to the conclusion that all that is needed is a new theoretical paradigm inspired by ancient philosophy.[38] Tocqueville ([1856] 1998, 197), in contrast, often reminds his readers of the danger of "pure theory," of "philosophizing without restraint." Tocqueville, in other words, can be a cure for pseudo-Straussian radicalism.

Strauss taught his students that political philosophers cannot be understood passively: they must be interrogated and confronted if they are to be taken seriously. We must do the same with Strauss. In this article, I have sought to think with Strauss about Tocqueville and the fate of liberal democracy. By entering into dialogue with him, I have

arrived at a different conclusion. Ultimately, Tocqueville is not a protohistoricist or sociological thinker who avoids any theoretical standard of reason. He may lack a comprehensive understanding of classical rationalism and rely on certain problematic modern foundations, but his philosophical and sociopolitical thought is no less important. Although I agree with Strauss that Tocqueville is a modern thinker, albeit a unique modern thinker, this fact does not diminish him in my eyes. His perspective, which was influenced by modern and Christian thought, allows him to see with greater insight some of the new and enduring problems of human life. There are, to be sure, certain theoretical limits to Tocqueville's political philosophy, but he offers an important alternative approach when investigating the promise and perils of modern liberal democracy.

By responding to Strauss's tentative critique of Tocqueville, I have not sought to argue that Tocqueville is a superior thinker or that we have nothing to learn from Strauss; rather, it is to show the fruitfulness of juxtaposing both thinkers when assessing the merits of liberal democracy. Tocqueville scholars, of all hermeneutic approaches, will benefit from engaging with Strauss's heterodox interpretation; scholars influenced by Strauss will be prompted to reevaluate their interpretations of Tocqueville; and, most importantly, all concerned with the fate of liberal democracy have something to learn from both Strauss and Tocqueville. To be thoughtful and sober citizens of liberal democracy, we must be willing and able to take into consideration the most profound and lasting critiques of our political order. Both Tocqueville and Strauss allow us to revive, to rethink, the fundamental questions at the heart of the liberal democratic tradition.

## Acknowledgments

## Notes

1 Strauss (1959a, 81 n. 2) cites Tocqueville in a footnote to contrast present-day political scientists with classical political philosophers. Eden (1990) argues that Strauss sees Tocqueville as resembling ancient political philosophers in being more of a mediator than a so-called neutral observer of partisan politics. Eden, however, goes too far in aligning Strauss's Tocqueville with classical political philosophy. Strauss's 1954 course transcript emphasizes Tocqueville's departure from classical natural right and clarifies the meaning of this footnote.

2 Strauss's 1954 "Natural Right" course transcript can be found online at The Leo Strauss Center. There are a few important issues with this course transcript: there are no surviving recordings of the course and there are several lacunae that make the transcript not fully reliable. Nevertheless, it still provides valuable insights into Strauss's preliminary interpretation of Tocqueville that are worth careful consideration.

3 I mainly use the term "liberal democracy" in my own voice and that of Strauss's. Although Tocqueville did not use the term "liberal democracy," in the forward to the 12th edition of *Democracy*, he spoke of a "liberal" democratic republic (Tocqueville [1835–40] 2012, 1374).

4 Strauss's 1954 "Natural Right" course was posthumously published and may not reflect Strauss's final position on Tocqueville. The overall purpose of these lectures was not to give a comprehensive account of Tocqueville's thought, but to examine it in the context of an intellectual history of natural right. Moreover, the sections on Tocqueville were meant to serve a pedagogical function: to stimulate reflection and debate on certain fundamental themes that Tocqueville elucidates. Nevertheless, this article attempts to work through the implications of Strauss's provisional thought and to offer a constructive challenge to it.

5 A diverse set of scholars are interested in Rousseau's influence on Tocqueville (Boesche 2006, 27, 44, 66; Jaume 2013, 91–93; Lawler 1993, 73–87; Schleifer 2018, 19–20; Wolin 2001, 171–83; M. Zuckert 1993).

6 There are, to be sure, important affinities between Tocqueville and Aristotle that these scholars have elucidated. Both Tocqueville and Aristotle, for example, represent a practical and commonsensical approach to politics (Tessitore 2011). Strauss, however, emphasizes the extent to which Tocqueville inherited preconceived political and philosophical ideas about freedom and equality from modern thinkers such as Rousseau, making him radically different from Aristotle. Moreover, Strauss sees Tocqueville's and Burke's focus on history as an important departure from Aristotle.

7 For an instance where Strauss himself compares liberal democracy to unattractive alternatives, see Strauss (1975, 98).

8 This article focuses on Strauss's provocative reading of Tocqueville as captive to Rousseau's thought; nevertheless, Strauss's course transcripts make clear that he also thought Montesquieu was a pivotal influence on Tocqueville. Strauss, to my knowledge, was unaware of Tocqueville's famous claim that he read Blaise Pascal, Montesquieu, and Rousseau on a daily basis.

9 In Strauss's (1962, 258) lectures on Rousseau, he states: "[O]ne must never forget the power of this preconception with which Tocqueville approached the phenomenon [of democracy]."

10 In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss (1953, 286) states that Rousseau sees democracy as being closer to natural equality.

11 Lawler (1993, 73–78) also sees Rousseau as underpinning Tocqueville's understanding of history, though he sees it as being modified by Pascal. For Lawler, this intellectual inheritance is an asset, not a flaw.

12 In *What Is Political Philosophy?*, Strauss (1959a, 61) associates this approach with "the 'historical' approach."

13 Strauss is examining a text that is slightly different from Burke's published book, *Reflections on the French Revolution*.

14 Sanford Lakoff (1998, 460), unaware of Strauss's lectures on Tocqueville, rightly saw how Strauss would criticize Tocqueville in the same way he criticized Burke.

15 For a thoughtful comparison of Tocqueville and Burke on the French Revolution and its overall significance, see Lerner (2013, 74–86).

16 For a detailed bibliography on different interpretations of this famous passage on democracy as a providential fact, see (Tocqueville [1835–40] 2012, n. q).

17 Strauss (1953, 317) makes an identical interpretation of Burke in *Natural Right and History*.

18 Catherine Zuckert (1991, 151) arrives at a similar conclusion. Roger Boesche (2006, 3) and Lucien Jaume (2013, 95–105) also see Tocqueville as a sociological thinker influenced by Rousseau and Montesquieu, though they see this as being more of a strength than a weakness.

19 Christopher Bruell (1991, 176) notes how Strauss qualifies this return to classical rationalism. Classical political philosophy neither intended nor believed that it was possible to provide a simply rational foundation. All political societies, according to Strauss, rely on particular fundamental opinions that cannot be replaced by genuine knowledge. Classical rationalism, therefore, can perhaps serve as a philosophic foundation, but not a purely political foundation.

20 In Strauss's 1956 "Historicism and Modern Relativism" course, he boldly states the importance of comparing Tocqueville and Nietzsche: "[I]t seems to me wholly impossible to understand Nietzsche's political thought without thinking constantly of Tocqueville" (1956, 148).

21 Strauss (1999, 360) makes a similar comment in his 1941 "German Nihilism" article.

22 Tocqueville's distinctive understanding of freedom, one that has a certain antidemocratic and moral tone, can be seen in other passages in *Democracy* and *The Old Regime* not quoted by Strauss (Tocqueville [1856] 1998, 216–17; Tocqueville [1835–40] 2012, 68–69).

23 Strauss, it appears, wants to separate the content of Nietzsche's thought—its critique of modern mediocrity and its praise of philosophy—from harsher, even cruel, utterances that can be used to justify acts of violence. Whether such a separation is possible is beyond the limits of this study.

24 Letter to Francisque de Corcelle, Bonn, July 22, 1854, collected in Tocqueville (1861). Zetterbaum (1967, 19) also uses this letter to argue that Tocqueville's "inevitability" thesis was "a salutary myth" and that he was not simply a neutral observer ready to accept democracy on the grounds of history.

25 Similar to what Lenzner (1991, 376) writes of Strauss's interpretation of Burke in *Natural Right and History*, one can say that Strauss had broader purposes when interpreting Tocqueville. He was not solely concerned with understanding Tocqueville as he understood himself.

26 In the manuscript notes to *Democracy*, (Tocqueville [1835–40] 2012, 28 n. n) states: "[G]overnments have relative goodness. … I admire him [Montesquieu]. But when he portrays to me the English constitution as the model of perfection, it seems to me that, for the first time, I see the limit of his genius."

27 One may say that Tocqueville, following Michel de Montaigne, Pascal, and Rousseau, was skeptical of the power of reason, but he did not seem to reject normative standards of justice.

28 Tocqueville's rationalism is different from classical rationalism, which is guided by an understanding of human nature that sees the philosophical life as the best for human beings (Lawler 1993, 108; see also Mansfield 2010, 3).

29 Tocqueville's use of the word "needs" seems to give some credence to Strauss's (1954, 204) claim that Tocqueville grounds natural right in subrational needs. As he mentions in the course transcript, early natural right was "based on a subordination of reason and of the intellect to something nonrational, nonintellectual, sub-intellectual: the fundamental needs of man, and sentiment and so on." My argument is that Tocqueville seems to be closer to the early modern

natural right teaching, which maintains some fixed (albeit weaker) notion of human nature and reason, rather than a purely historical abandonment of natural right.

30  This distinction between theory and practice is less developed than what is found in Aristotle, however, and depends a great deal on historical experience. Moreover, Tocqueville's ultimate thoughts on the status of the superiority of the theoretical life is questionable. For this reason, Strauss's claim about Burke ultimately being radically different from Aristotle may apply to Tocqueville (see Strauss 1953, 303, 312).

31  In Gustave de Beaumont's "Memoir" of Tocqueville, he provides an insightful comment on the philosophic character of Tocqueville's mind: "It has been said with truth, that Tocqueville was a thinker; he was so, and a thinker whose brain, always at work, never allowed itself a moment's rest. The term thinker would be, however, inappropriate, if applied to him in the ordinary sense of an abstract philosopher who takes pleasure in metaphysical speculations; who loves knowledge for its own sake, and is enthusiastically attached to ideas and theories, independently of their application. Such is the real philosopher; such was not Tocqueville, whose speculations had always a practical and definite object" (Tocqueville 1861, 43). For a defense of Tocqueville as a philosopher, see Hancock (2011, 253–82).

32  Beaumont provides some insight on this score as well. He recounts how an Englishman was complimenting Tocqueville for jettisoning abstract theory: "What I especially admire," he said, "is, that while treating so great a subject, you have so thoroughly avoided general ideas." Beaumont tells us that "there could not be a greater mistake; but Tocqueville was delighted. It showed to him that the abstractions with which his book is filled, had been so skillfully presented in a concrete form, that an acute, though certainly not a profound, reader did not perceive that the particular facts were only illustrations of general principles" (Tocqueville 1861, 43).

33  For a similar interpretation, see Arellano (2020, 52 n. 9).

34  In his manuscript notes on this section, (Tocqueville [1835–40] 2012, 733 n. h) explicitly references Plato and Aristotle, and even criticizes Aristotle in a style reminiscent of Rousseau: "When I see Aristotle make the power of Alexander serve the progress of the natural sciences, ransack all of Asia weapons in hand in order to find unknown animals and plants, and when I notice that after studying nature at such great cost he ended up finally by discovering slavery there, I feel myself led to think that man would do better to remain

at home, not to study books and to look for truth only in his own heart."

35  In a letter to Corcelle, Tocqueville (1861, 25) suggests that theoretical ideas are shaped by their particular historical milieu and even become outdated: "I send you the father of philosophy. If you can turn it to a better account than I can, let me know. For my part, I own that, setting aside the respect due to those who have been admired for more than 2,000 years, it is a little too antiquated for my taste. We are not sufficiently Greek to profit much by such books." Strauss does not reference this letter, but it offers some proof for his general interpretation that Tocqueville lacked a classical perspective and that he minimizes the transhistorical character of political philosophy.

36  Samuel Goldman (2018) makes a similar observation regarding contemporary critics of liberalism: they often overemphasize the power of ideas "without acknowledging non-intellectual factors, contingency, and just plain chance."

37  See Burton (2020) and Thompson (2020) for a critique of these intellectuals.

38  Tocqueville ([1835–40] 2012, 817) warns of how the study of Greek and Latin literature can create "very polished and very dangerous citizens" who "would disturb the State, in the name of the Greeks and the Romans."

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