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## **A Symposium on Benjamin Storey and Jenna Silber Storey’s *Why We Are Restless: On the Modern Quest for Contentment***

*Paul T. Wilford, Catherine Zuckert, Dimitrios Halikias, Jean Yarbrough, and Keegan Callanan, with a response by Benjamin Storey and Jenna Silber Storey*

Benjamin Storey and Jenna Silber Storey: *Why We Are Restless: On the Modern Quest for Contentment*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp. 264.)

### **Introduction: The Search for Self-Transcendence in a World of Endless Immanence**

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Almost two centuries ago, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that Americans, despite enjoying peace, security, liberty, and unprecedented prosperity, were peculiarly dissatisfied with their lot. Noting the strange paradox that “the freest and most enlightened men placed in the happiest condition that exists in the world” were so restless as to appear “almost sad even in their pleasures,” Tocqueville sought to uncover the roots of democratic man’s discontent.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, the nation dedicated to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was populated by individuals who never managed to actually enjoy the blessings of liberty. Long before the introduction of the myriad forms of distraction that contemporary technologies make instantly available and insatiably alluring, the American citizen already suffered from a persistent *inquiétude*. As Tocqueville’s penetrating diagnosis demonstrated, this

<sup>1</sup>Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 511.

all-too-familiar paradox reflects a deeper paradox, that the very blessings of modernity—the spiritual, moral, and political goods, not merely the material ones—lie at the root of democratic man’s travails. While vastly expanding the circle of opportunity for human flourishing, the unintended effect of modernity was to stifle the very practices, habits, and virtues necessary for achieving true happiness.

This dilemma lies at the heart of Benjamin and Jenna Storey’s timely, trenchant, and insightful book which illuminates the present by turning to the thinkers of the past. Through an investigation of Montaigne, Pascal, Rousseau, and Tocqueville, the Storeys disclose the contours of our peculiarly restive modern souls—illustrating how we might, by knowing ourselves better, come to pursue happiness more thoughtfully and thereby find a measure of the contentment that so often eludes our grasp. In an age when the superficial crowds out the serious and the urgent perpetually displaces the important, their work is especially pertinent; for there are real political consequences to our feverish pace and frenetic activity—ones that endanger the very goods modernity sought to secure.

Yet their genealogical inquiry into our contemporary malaise is concomitantly a profound theoretical investigation into the enduring tensions of the human soul. The Storeys offer something far richer than another “just-so” story in the tradition of Richard Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences* that traces present ills back to some fateful moment in the past where humanity went astray. Rather, as this symposium attests, their work is a meditation on the enduring dilemma that the rational animal seeks both to transcend himself and to be at-home in the world. Reason points beyond itself and remains perpetually in pursuit of an absolute that lies forever just beyond its grasp. While Montaigne attempts to address this dilemma by subjecting reason’s desire for self-transcendence to rational scrutiny, the Storeys show that the pursuit of immanent satisfaction is no less bedeviled by reason’s penchant for self-criticism. Skepticism about the highest things may temporarily free us to enjoy more tangible goods that lie closer to home, but skepticism seems to turn its critical eye back upon itself whenever such goods fail to satisfy our souls and we begin to wonder about first and last things. If the pre-modern world held that we are restless until we rest in God, modernity is a reaction to the endless disputes about the highest good that achieved nothing but political unrest; yet the search for immanent contentment proves just as elusive—we cannot come to rest within the world because reason, as Plato taught, is not wholly of the world. The problem at the root of immanent contentment is that reason cannot help but ask “why,” and no immanent answer is ever adequate to the depth of reason’s desire.

The only remedy for our restlessness in the democratic age proves to be what it has always been: though self-knowledge does not dissipate the tension between immanence and transcendence and Socratic “human wisdom” does not offer a solution to the human problem, serious reflection on the permanent problems remains the best guide to the good life. In their

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appeal to liberal arts education as the remedy for what ails us, the pedagogic concern animating their inquiry takes center stage: the Storeys are evidently teachers in the fullest and richest sense of the word; they care deeply about their students—about their souls, about their character, about their prospects for actual happiness and not just the pursuit thereof. Though references to Greek philosophy abound, one is tempted to summarize their message in the words of Proverbs: “in all thy getting, get understanding,” for wisdom is indeed the principal thing—the one thing needful.