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Scott Yenor^a

^a Boise State University

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Natural Religion and Human Perfectibility

Tocqueville's Account of Religion in Modern Democracy

SCOTT YENOR

Few issues are as troublesome as the problem of technology. On the level of common opinion, people wonder whether our consumptive culture will destroy the ecosystem necessary to sustain human life, whether the proliferation of biological and nuclear weapons threatens the existence of liberal democracies, and whether human cloning is consistent with the goodness of existence. Thinkers see matters of permanent significance in these occasional issues. Critics from a somewhat leftist perspective worry that the advance of technology turns human beings into anonymous cogs in the hands of a dehumanizing capitalist despotism.¹ Critics from a culturally conservative (whether religious, romantic, or existentialist) perspective think that technology destroys the aesthetic, spiritual, and moral horizon necessary for flourishing human life.² All concerned fear that the spread of technology brings with it an unstated but inescapable predisposition to life or being. Although we risk distortion in the name of simplicity, the technological attitude views the natural world as something to be brought under human control, and it discourages thinking about the ends served by human control. Technological people do not recognize beauty, revere a Creator, or recognize their enslavement to a mere means of production because they are busy trying to find ways to make the future brighter by escaping tradition and controlling nature.

Even though serious thinkers have long seen the West as decadent, unsustainable, and self-destructive, no one can gainsay the continuing power and attractiveness of liberal democracies. Predictions of imminent ecological, economic, moral, and spiritual collapse appear to be greatly exaggerated. Such dire warnings also run against the grain of modern progressive spirit, and, in what might be a self-

fulfilling prophecy, they have not previously had much purchase in American opinion. Technological societies are progressive; they promise an ever-improving “quality of life” for ever more people. One is led to wonder whether technological civilization is not somewhat religious in how it exalts the unlimited promises of future blessings against the imperfect past and present. Christianity and technological civilization share the opinion that human beings are fundamentally not at home in the here and now. Perhaps the shared future-looking orientation explains the continued viability of Christianity in the most technological society seen thus far in human history. However true this may be, the peaceful coexistence between Christianity and technology surprises those who see technological societies as destructive of traditional religious conviction. It is necessary to re-evaluate the arguments of those who view America as an example of a successful synthesis of Christianity and technology; one also should consider the ideas of critics who could not imagine such a success.

There is no better guide for this re-evaluation than Alexis de Tocqueville. Although Tocqueville does not refer to “technology” as such, he believes that modern democracy would be the home of practical (as opposed to theoretical) sciences and that the idea of the “indefinite perfectibility of man,” or progress, was one of democracy’s central commitments.³ At the same time, *Democracy in America* plausibly has been seen as reconciling the aspirations of modern democracy with Christian faith. Compared with secularists who shun faith as inherently inimical to the march of democracy, as well as religionists who shun democracy as inimical to the life of faith, Tocqueville argues that modern democracy and Christian religion seem to march together happily (11–12).⁴ Tocqueville appreciates the political need for and the psychological attractiveness of Christianity as much as any other thinker of the modern era. What has not been adequately appreciated is that Tocqueville, like contemporary critics, thinks that religious and technological commitments are in striking tension with one another.

Scott Yenor is an assistant professor of political science at Boise State University. He currently is working on a book-length manuscript on the political thought of David Hume.

Many have followed the popular view that Tocqueville considers America to be a successful example of democratic vices tempered by a genuine religious commitment to Protestantism.⁵ A growing consensus is emerging around a more radical reading that emphasizes the decline of Christianity in America: the corrosive skepticism and worldly hopefulness typical of the American spirit were undermining Christianity in Tocqueville's America; exhausted Christian culture would be leveled in the direction of pantheism, a religious sensibility more consistent with the democratic thirst for unity and equality.⁶

I begin this article with an attempt to do justice to popular and pantheistic schools of thought, but I ultimately try to radicalize the radical pantheistic interpretation. I argue that the pantheistic reading, although true as far as it goes, should be read in light of Tocqueville's observation that America is committed to the indefinite perfectibility of man. America's future religion is not pantheistic or "green," in Peter Augustine Lawler's tart phrase, because pantheism ultimately is an unnatural attack on human pride.⁷ America's future religion, as I argue in the second section, is likely to be technological because our idea of indefinite perfectibility is the proud, democratic expression of natural faith. In the third section, I show how ideas of indefinite perfectibility shape public debate and culminate in something resembling dynamic libertarianism. As Tocqueville believed, the logic of America's chief public commitments leads either to a braver, newer world or back to genuine religious faith.

More generally, I analyze the nature of religious sensibilities and their relation to technological progress. I begin not with a discussion of the nature of religion and technology per se, but rather with a demonstration of how religious and technological aspirations are grounded in the human soul. Considering these elements first from a human point of view, as Tocqueville does, we can appreciate the influence of a regime's public opinion on human psychology. In the subsequent sections, I follow Tocqueville's analysis of how natural faith is and will be shaped in modern democracy.

CHRISTIANITY'S "SALUTARY CONTROL" IN TOCQUEVILLE'S AMERICA

In contrast to modern thinkers, such as Thomas Hobbes, who believe that religious conviction is founded in a fear of invisible things, Tocqueville locates religious conviction in the noblest regions of the human psyche. Religion relies on the "sentiments, instincts, and passions that one sees reproduced in the same manner in all periods of history" (285). These human "sentiments, instincts, and passions," in Tocqueville's Pascalian idiom, are "a natural disgust for existence and an immense desire to exist"; human beings "scorn life and fear nothingness." The "natural disgust for existence" manifests itself in an unsettling restlessness on earth; people are concerned about the lack of meaning and their inability to enjoy true contentment, happiness, or completion. Human beings experience only "incomplete joys"

(283–84).⁸ This instinct leads people to contemplate a place of complete happiness or tranquility. Human beings naturally fear the meaninglessness or nothingness that arises from consideration of their present lives. Religion lends meaning to seemingly senseless lives. These "constituent principles of human nature" explain the origins of religious belief "from a purely human point of view."⁹ "Religion is . . . only a particular form of hope, and it is as natural to the human heart as hope itself." This hope is akin to "faith," which Tocqueville considers the "permanent state of humanity" (284). People are disappointed with their present situation, and they naturally have enough faith to continue hoping.

Natural faith takes different forms in different cultures. Christianity, for instance, places the object of hope and faith outside of this world, and it leads believers to realize that the fallen condition cannot be remedied on this side of heaven. Religion "prevents [Americans] from conceiving everything and forbids them to dare everything." Considering religion again from a human point of view, Christianity is an obstacle to the "boldest innovators and the most implacable logicians in the world" who might otherwise try to establish heaven on earth (280). Its doctrines restrain minds and mitigate the problems in democracy. It is because of Christianity's conservative influence on the mores of the family that Tocqueville calls Christianity America's leading political institution (278). The force Christianity has in public opinion is "doubtless good," making atheism a ground for social ostracism and enforcing a standard way of life (245). Everyone in Tocqueville's America thinks that Christianity is "necessary to the maintenance of republican institutions" (280). It almost seems as if Tocqueville's treatment of Christianity from a human point of view leads to a uniquely technological understanding of religion—it is an important political tool in the hands of democratic lawmakers.¹⁰

The tension between a Christianity of genuine faith and transcendent longing and Christianity as a tool of public opinion appears in Tocqueville's treatment of materialism. Democratic institutions lead to a pervasive, all-consuming love of material goods; the soul fixes its eye on petty goods to such an extent that those goods come between the soul and God; the spiritual goods that "make the glory and greatness of the human species" are lost (509, 519). Meditation on Holy Scripture calls Americans forth from de-humanizing materialism and toward "an ideal world in which all is great, pure, and eternal." Materialism saps the soul for six days a week, but church, Bible study, and personal reflection foster ideas of infinite goodness, immortality, and spirituality on the Sabbath. The benefits of religious belief in this case are enjoyed only if people are genuinely convinced of the religion's truthfulness. However, in Tocqueville's account, Americans endorse Church attendance and religious reflection because they "feel every necessity of making democracy more moral by means of religion" (517–18). Calculations of political use even intrude on Americans' contemplation of the eternal. Genuine faith—faith unclouded by calculations of utility—provides a remedy to the problem of materialism, but American religion does not appear to be genuine. After discussing how spirituality tempers the

materialism characteristic of democratic ages, Tocqueville makes a more secular argument in the chapter on “how the excessive love of well-being can be harmful to well-being” (521–22). Where religious conviction does not do the trick, it is necessary to argue about what Americans understand and care about: the interests of material well-being. That Tocqueville supports arguments for spiritualism with more strictly materialist, utilitarian calculations illustrates the limited political use of Christianity, even in his day.¹¹

Here we see the pregnant tension in Tocqueville’s account of American religion.¹² On the one hand, the separation of church and state is “in our day, *the natural state of men in the matter of religion*” (286). Alone among civilized countries, America understood that joining religion directly to political authority saps the “energy of youth” from religion (288). Leaving religion unsupported by political power allows it to rely on its natural strength in the permanent “sentiments, instincts, and passions” of human nature and to exert an easy, lasting influence over society. America is “still the place in the world where the Christian religion has most preserved genuine power over souls” (278). On the other hand, Americans adhere to Christianity because they believe that it is useful. Tocqueville does “not know if all Americans have faith in their religion,” and he thinks that “all is well in America except precisely the religious spirit I admire” (280–81).¹³ American civil religion does not rely on natural “sentiments, instincts, and passions” so much as it relies on the strength of public opinion. Christianity “reigns there much less as revealed doctrine than as common opinion” (409). Christianity supports and is supported by the interests of this world, although the interests are not as institutionalized as those in Europe. American Christianity does not lie on a natural basis, in that it is ultimately “unite[d] with authority,” the established and unquestioned authority of democratic public opinion (285).

Religious dogma is not preached from the American pulpits; democratic “Christian” morality is. Americans scrupulously observe religious forms, but “faith is evidently inert.” Underneath the virtually universal adherence to Christian forms, Tocqueville fears, as he writes in an earnest letter to Louis de Kergorlay, “there is a great store of doubt and indifference.”¹⁴ America’s alliance between Christianity and public opinion is deeply unstable, especially insofar as that alliance denies or suppresses the natural foundation for religious conviction in the human heart. When people hold religion for strictly utilitarian reasons or for fear of social ostracism, they miss the answers to primordial questions and the comfort of knowing that their sufferings have particular meaning. People who consider religion to be merely useful are led into an unnatural condition of despair instead of hope (286). It should not come as a surprise that a “cloud habitually covered [Americans’] features” and that they are “grave and almost sad even in their pleasures” (511). This is the result of a religious practice rebelling against natural “sentiments, instincts, and passions.” In what way can America represent “*the natural state of men in the matter of religion*” in light of this problem? Can faith be inert? On what does American hope rest?

MODERN SCIENCE AND NATURAL RELIGIOUS SENTIMENTS

If we “allow the human mind to follow its tendency . . . it will regulate political society and the divine city in a uniform manner; it will seek . . . to *harmonize* the earth with Heaven” (275). America’s civil religion persists without much interest or belief in heaven, so natural “sentiments, instincts, and passions” lead Americans to conceive of heaven in light of earth. Heaven comes to reflect the deepest earthly commitments of democratic citizens. The most profound interpreter of Tocqueville, Pierre Manent, contends that Americans are thereby led to pantheism. Pantheism will have “secret charms for men who live in democracy,” because democratic people are obsessed with eliminating all inequalities, including ultimately the inequality between the Creator and his creation.¹⁵ Tocqueville dreads this possibility, and he calls on “all who remain enamored of the genuine greatness of man” to “unite and do combat against it” (426). Pantheism and deism¹⁶ are defective in light of Tocqueville’s account of natural faith. Deifying the world does not offer the kind of hope that human beings naturally aspire to, nor does it express the natural human disgust for existence and the longing to exist. It is inimical to human pride (which is the basis for human liberty) and a belief in human moral responsibility. Pantheism also runs counter to the modern skeptical spirit of disenchantment and irreligion.¹⁷ Because pantheism does not offer hope, how can natural religious sentiments be satisfied and directed in the modern world?

The answer to this question is found in the structure of Tocqueville’s treatment of religion in the second volume of *Democracy in America*. He begins by discussing how religion makes use of democratic instincts (417–24) in a chapter that ends with an account of how Christianity bows to American public opinion. The subsequent chapters treat the future direction of religious practice, which moves toward a peculiar modern form of Catholicism (424–25) or pantheism (425–26).¹⁸ Because pantheism cannot satisfy natural religious longings, Tocqueville suggests a more viable, secular, and democratic alternative in the next chapter. This chapter concerns “how equality suggests to the Americans the idea of the indefinite perfectibility of man” (426–28).¹⁹ Ages of equality do not give rise to this sublime idea, but they democratize it. Static aristocracies reflect human limits by sewing the idea of imperfection into the fabric of society, while democracies erode that fabric by conjuring up “the image of an ideal and always fugitive perfection” to the mind (427).

Tocqueville illustrates his notion of the indefinite perfectibility of man with an example that reveals its kinship to technology. He asked an American sailor why American vessels were not built to last. The sailor replied that “the art of navigation makes such rapid progress daily that the most beautiful ship would soon become almost useless if its existence were prolonged beyond a few years” (428).²⁰ This uneducated sailor shows how far the spirit of perfectibility grounded in the modern scientific project has spread. Past examples of scientific progress and hopes for even greater advances suggest to every American the promise of a better

world. This sailor sees himself as part of a progressive project, shaking off the dust of the “Dark Ages” and embracing a surprising and better future for all based on the promise of technology. He is committed to novelty and only fears being left behind by an improvident embrace of old “brick and mortar” technology. Scientific progress, like the democratic revolution itself, appears providential in its advance—it is universal and enduring (cf. 6). Failed ventures show that no man “can flatter himself with having discovered the absolute good” yet. Successful ventures “inflare him to pursue [that ideal] without respite.” Faithful believers in indefinite perfectibility are “always seeking, falling, righting [themselves], often disappointed, never discouraged.” They persevere with a mixture of humility and pride. They tend “ceaselessly toward the immense greatness that [they] glimpse confusedly at the end of the long course that humanity must still traverse” (427). This commitment justifies a scorn for our present life and a hopeful contemplation of a better world. It flatters people into thinking that their destiny is in their own hands if they would but seize the opportunity to perfect mankind. Belief in human perfectibility is in sum an expression of natural religious sentiments.²¹

Tocqueville sees a manifestation of this “religious” pride in the French Revolutionaries who believed that “there [were] no longer any limits on [France’s] progress” as soon as the “theory of the continual and indefinite perfectibility of man” captured popular imagination. These revolutionaries were “filled by feelings and ideas, which momentarily took the place of religion, and which at first did not let them be depressed.” Tocqueville continues in a passage important for our purposes:

If, with regard to religion, the French who made the Revolution were more unbelieving than we, at least there was left them one admirable belief which we lack: they believed in themselves. They did not doubt the perfectibility, the power of man; they readily became impassioned for his glory, they had faith in his virtue. . . . They did not doubt in the least that they were called to transform society and regenerate our species. These feelings and these passions had become a kind of new religion for them, which, producing some of the great effects which we have seen religions produce, tore them away from individual egoism, encouraged them to heroism and devotion, and often made them seem insensible to all the pretty goods which we possess.²²

Proud, hope-sustaining belief soon collapsed among the revolutionaries, inaugurating a period of decadence and depression. When such convictions are destroyed,

doubt takes hold of the highest portions of the intellect and half paralyzes all the others. Each becomes accustomed to having only confused and changing notions about matters that most interest those like him and himself; one defends one’s opinions badly or abandons them, and as one despairs of being able to resolve by oneself the greatest problems that human destiny presents, one is reduced, like a coward, to not thinking about them at all. (418)

Belief in human perfectibility relieves this almost post-modern anxiety about human meaning and destiny. It sees the chaos of our experience as a moment in time aiming at a newer, braver future. Tocqueville observes an almost heroic

industriousness in America. Democracy’s spread of “restive activity” and “superabundant force” to even the most common citizen—its democratization of pride or “self-esteem”—is, perhaps, the “greatest advantage of democratic government” (233–34).²³ Paralysis and doubt can be relieved with a religious hope in an undefined and undefinable future, and Tocqueville praises Americans for having avoided anything resembling paralysis and doubt with the aid of a democratic pride founded on a belief in human perfectibility.

We see the psychological importance of human perfectibility in Tocqueville’s chapter on “how in times of equality and doubt it is important to move back the object of human action” (522–24). Belief in human greatness is difficult to sustain in “centuries of disbelief” where “irreligion and democracy meet in an unhappy convergence.” When “lights of faith are obscured” and people lose “the habit of placing their principal hopes in the long term,” human beings “are naturally brought to want to realize their least desires without delay”; “it seems that from the moment they despair of living an eternity, they are disposed to act as if they will exist for only a single day.” Traditional religious conviction used to conjure men from their own place and time; Tocqueville argues that democratic times need new ways of achieving the same end. Democratic “statesmen and moralists” must remind people that every advance is “the fruit of an effort, so that no greatness is too easy,” so that ambition is “forced to fix its eye on the goal for a long time before attaining it” (523–24). These goals do not call people forth from the concerns of this world. Such worldly goals can nevertheless sustain human hope, excite the mind, prompt ambition and greatness, and bring boundless striving to democratic passions. They lend a dignity to human action and infuse human endeavor with pride. Exciting projects in this world (for example, putting a man on the moon or ending poverty) animate the soul in a way consistent with the modern scientific spirit; they replace revealed religion while satisfying natural religious sentiments. Although such projects may not be “spiritual” in the sense that Tocqueville would hope (520), they call forth human creativity, an attribute that may reflect something divine in human nature that transcends mere matter.²⁴

This scientific expression of “religious” sentiment is more consistent with the demands of a skeptical democratic age. Revealed religions are salutary vestiges from ages of aristocracy, in Tocqueville’s characterization (519). Prospects for further revelation are rendered nugatory by the pervasive acceptance of the American philosophic method and modern democratic philosophical method. This philosophical method is self-reliant and focused on the future, traits suggested by the practical advancements seen in scientific ventures. Americans “resolve unaided all the little difficulties that practical life presents,” which induces them to believe that “everything in the world is explicable and that nothing exceeds the bounds of intelligence”; they have “little faith in the extraordinary and an almost invincible distaste for the supernatural” (404).²⁵ The modern philosophical method is supported by democratic poetry (456–63). God, gods, angels, demons, traditional folklore, and epic poetry do not pass the bar of reason and fall into

disuse and disrepute in democratic times. America does not lack poetic themes because the American imagination is inflamed by inventions and progress. Sources of poetic inspiration in democratic times point away from ideas external to human beings. Democratic poetry, Tocqueville believed, would begin by revolving around human ideals, our hopes and dreams for the future, our “idea of progress and the indefinite perfectibility of the human species” (460). Democratic poetry is not scientific strictly speaking, but it supports the hopeful, earthly, anthropocentric view on which modern science is based.

The idea of human perfectibility embodies a profoundly anti-Christian view of man’s history, nature, and destiny. The underlying premise of human perfectibility is that there is nothing permanent in the human condition. The human past is a record of errors and superstition; consistent with this view, Americans accept “tradition only as information” (403). The idea of human perfectibility may be consistent with a belief in human “sin,”²⁶ but the father’s “sins” of ignorance and cowardice are not visited on the son. Sons are spurred to do something about their condition by the pervasive belief in human perfectibility. By placing the attainment of what amounts to human redemption into human hands, the idea of human perfectibility undermines the need for divine grace and redemption. From the standpoint of biblical revelation, the idea of human perfectibility is akin to the temptation to eat from the tree; it sees “the Fall” as a “fall up” instead of a “fall down.” The fact that these ideas were widely held in America speaks again to how profoundly modern ideas had triumphed over traditional religion.²⁷

It would be a mistake to claim that the scientific expression of natural religious sentiments is satisfying for all people at all times; I return to this topic in the conclusion. It also would be an exaggeration to impute to Tocqueville the position that all obstacles to the ultimate triumph of modern science had been removed in his time. Tocqueville thought Christianity’s influence on public opinion contributed to the health of democracy, as I have mentioned. I have argued that the Christianity of Tocqueville’s time was too closely aligned to governing American public opinion for its own good, and I showed that the Christian America that Tocqueville observed was unnatural as such in that it denied the foundation of religion in human hope. Tocqueville’s repeated warnings about the irresistible, dehumanizing power of public opinion in American democracy speak to the threats to humanity (and by extension genuine religion) posed by Protestant public opinion (245, 279). Although Tocqueville dreaded it, the tenor of his thought suggests that Christianity’s gravediggers were on their way to success, or so it seems. How long could Christianity prove useful in the absence of genuine conviction about its truth?

REMOVING OBSTACLES TO THE PROGRESSIVE PROJECT

Tocqueville turns to questions of science in the chapters immediately following the chapter about indefinite human perfectibility. He shows that “the example of the Americans does not prove that a democratic people can have no apti-

tude and taste for the sciences, literature, and the arts” (428–33). The “austere and almost savage” principles of the Puritans did not favor theoretical reasoning. Such is not naturally the state of things in democracies, nor need it be the state of things in America in the long term. In these chapters, Tocqueville prepares democracy for scientific practice after Christianity’s demise (428–43). Democratic scientists will be tempted to ignore theoretical concerns as they sink into a materialistic presentism. Tocqueville aims to show that ignoring “first causes” eventually leads the practical sciences to ossify and atrophy (438). These chapters argue that it is in the practical science’s best interest to consider theoretical or religious matters.

Tocqueville does not provide a blueprint to those who would destroy American Protestantism because he does not think that democratic statesmen should disturb religious belief where it existed (519). I will speculate on how the obstacles would be removed. It is comparatively easy to eliminate the religious practices of a public defending religion solely on grounds of social utility; worries about religion’s truth need no public airing. Those who would undermine Christian opinion would merely have to show that religious-based mores hamper the more fundamental American commitment to indefinite human perfectibility. Christian public opinion, they might argue, is tied to a static conception of human nature and inhibits the ascension of a new morality for human beings embarked on a great historical adventure. Its hostility to free thought, open-ended scientific creativity, human self-determination, and dynamic conceptions of moral order make Christianity an enemy of the scientific attitude. Christianity had often bent to the democratic spirit; eventually it would so accommodate its tenets to democracy as to be no longer distinctively Christian; it would become so relevant to the times that it would no longer be relevant as a distinct religious institution.²⁸

This second, more fundamental “disestablishment” of religion—its loosened hold on public opinion—began during the Progressive Era. John Dewey is the most powerful, most famous American apostle of the idea of indefinite human perfectibility or, as he called it, human “growth.”²⁹ His political agenda included confronting the problem of stasis rooted in the principles of Christian morality. He wrote a theological tract, *Our Common Faith*, in which traditional religious sensibilities are redefined to endorse a morality of experimentation, progress, and growth; this new sensibility requires that public authorities concerned “with the spread of the scientific attitude” deliver a modern education.³⁰ A “purified” or democratic American religion needs to extirpate elements of “the family, the school, industry, [and] religion” that obstruct the progress to be made by the “technological and industrial” Great Community.³¹ Every area of life must be open to direction from public authorities, experimentation, and engineering if the Great Community is to secure personal growth, equality, and progress for all.

Readers often see Dewey’s Progressivism as the soft despotism that Tocqueville thinks democratic nations should fear. However, this progressive soft despotism may conflict with the American commitment to human per-

fectibility. The first problem is practical. Government is not efficient enough to design scientific advances promoting human perfectibility. To do so, government must nimbly predict the direction of public opinion and anticipate the best means of achieving the popular needs, and government is not up to this task. The second problem is theoretical. Will human beings be satisfied renouncing their rights to self-determination as they strive for a great, unknown goal through government? Has Tocqueville perhaps failed to understand the possible tension between the love of equality and the commitment to human perfectibility and freedom? Might the desire for continual progress, spawned by the love of equality, eventually overwhelm the love of equality that characterizes the modern democratic age?

These questions, taken together, raise the issue of whether the idea of human perfectibility can be achieved by means other than government. The sailor's example of faith in indefinite perfectibility finds its best expression in contemporary libertarianism,³² of which Virginia Postrel is one of the more self-conscious advocates. Dynamic free markets produce results faster and better than government. The "enemies" of "the future" for America are technocrats (that is, believers in equality through government) and reactionaries (that is, people demurring from a vision of human perfectibility). Central to Postrel's own dynamic vision is an understanding of nature: "How we think about nature—and about artifice—informs how we think about the growth and evolution of human societies." The "reactionary" conception of nature is connected to an understanding of human limits, either "moral absolute[s]" or natural constraints on how much reform should be undertaken in human affairs. Examining ecological systems and projecting from what we are said to know about evolutionary biology, Postrel rejects the idea that there is a constant "nature" in any sphere of human life. Or, to be precise, she reaches the conclusion that "change and self-determination are among the truest expressions of our enduring human nature." Genetic engineering experiments, such as those in shipbuilding that Tocqueville's sailor predicted would ensue, open up an "infinite series," wherein people may choose from "many different desirable possibilities, depending on our tastes and goals." We may never be "fully satisfied" with the results, but "each improvement" generates "ideas for others." Human beings are "limited, in a very real sense, only by our imagination and the time in which we have to exercise it."³³ Reactionaries cling to an understanding of nature out of a desire for certainty, out of an attempt to find meaning from an order that exists outside humanity. They miss the key dynamic insight as they bury their heads in the sand; Postrel and her fellow dynamists deride American religion for being reactionary.

Free experimenting, whether economic or genetic, cannot be conducted through government machinery because developments are spontaneous, surprising, and unplanned. "Local knowledge," not technocratic plans, drives and responds to "dynamic processes." Government cannot reproduce the complex interaction of insight and accident that leads to improvements in our condition. When given freedom, "creative geniuses" can "master large domains of

knowledge that allow them to come up with such surprising combinations." Postrel seizes the high ground by connecting her vision to our natural disgust with the present and our natural desire for hope. She would have us think about these geniuses as people who are more alive than others and whose creations make them "vital," "jazzed," resilient, playful, and "fun." She claims the mantle, borrowing a phrase from Hayek, of "the party of life," offering "fluidity, variety, competition, adaptation, learning, improvement, evolution, and spontaneously emerging order" to those who accept her vision. Dynamism "allows the human spirit to flourish" and, although everyone may not be better off "in every respect," the life of the average person will have "more variety, more opportunity, more options, more knowledge, more control over time and place, more life."³⁴ It would be difficult to articulate a more perfect statement of the idea of the modern progressive spirit, but it conflicts with attempts to promote equality.

THE LIMITS OF INDEFINITE HUMAN PERFECTIBILITY AND THE REBIRTH OF GENUINE RELIGIOUS FAITH

The foregoing analysis of how libertarianism shares its fundamental commitment with progressive socialism offers a renewed appreciation for Tocqueville's comment that American public opinion differs "only by nuances" (185). American debates center around the secondary question of how to introduce a brighter human future, usually not the fundamental question of whether there is such a bright human future. Pantheism, although more egalitarian than dynamic libertarianism, ultimately is less consistent with the modern spirit than the progressive spirit. There is certainly a hopefulness lending dignity, independence, self-sufficiency, and even a certain commercial heroism to human life in America; this hopefulness is the source for the modern understanding of human greatness and the pride needed to support self-government. Woe to the despairing nation of last men that are devoid of this somewhat uplifting and hopeful vision! They will exist in a postmodern funk without the courage to act, and they will soon stop thinking about the great questions of human destiny.

Are these the modern alternatives—hopeful technological societies or despairing and coddled last men living under soft despotism? Tocqueville offers several hints about the existence of a third way characterized by a rebirth of genuine religious conviction that leads to a more genuine conception of human greatness. I begin to follow these hints by revisiting Tocqueville's account of democratic poetry. Contrary to the impression we left previously, Tocqueville thinks that neither naturalism nor dynamic poetry will flourish in democratic ages. The object of poetic inspiration in democratic times will be man himself, man understood in a Pascalian way. "Human destinies, man, taken apart from his time and his country and placed before nature and God with his passions, his doubts, his unheard-of prosperity, and his incomprehensible miseries, will become the principal and almost unique object of poetry for these peoples" (463). Any reasonably objective view of popular culture shows that American art is not simply smitten with the prospect of

indefinite human perfectibility. People are prone to reflection and hence misery about their fate. "Pity, admiration, scorn, and terror" characterize man, who "comes from nothing, traverses time, and is going to disappear forever into the bosom of God." Man is a creature living in the twilight of knowing and not knowing; nature uncovers "enough to perceive something of himself and veiled enough so that the rest is sunk in impenetrable darkness" (462). This twilight condition provides an almost infinite source of poetic inspiration because it lays bare the soul and is suggestive of our relationship to God.

Tocqueville suggests that the persistence of this twilight perspective leads to a purification of genuine religious conviction in the modern world. Modern technological science reduces all experience to laws of cause and effect, material necessity, and chance, but it tells us nothing (or almost nothing) about the nature of love, beauty, virtue, religious faith, and nobility. On these questions, science is and must be silent. Science may force us to confront the questions of greatest concern anew because it destroys the Christian shell that had diverted Americans from considering them. The pride on which modern science rests becomes modesty when we consider what it does not explain.

The possibility of science leading to a rebirth of religious faith is apparent in Tocqueville's discussion of moving "back the objects of human actions" (522). Men who nourish aspirations about the future find it difficult "to arrest their spirits at the precise boundaries of life, and they are very ready to cross these limits to cast their regard beyond." Tocqueville has faith that "habituating citizens to think of the future in this world" will "bring them little by little and without their knowing it to religious beliefs" (524). People dedicated to the future do not actually live in the present; they live anxiously in and for the future. Planning how to be happy in the future ensures that people will not be happy or at home in the present. The future-oriented perspective endorsed by the progressive project makes people more miserable in the present and more anxious for the future. It is here that the exhausting scientific perspective crosses the threshold to the otherworldly and offers the promise of eternal peace without anxiety. Carrying forth the logic of the progressive project leads people to consider its unavoidable limits: birth and mortality. This reading is supported by further considerations. Whether they know it or not, human beings have souls that aspire to true immortality.³⁵ Science is a secular, this-worldly expression of this desire, but science, although aiming for immortality, cannot ultimately satisfy the desire for immortality. It can only obscure consciousness of death and can delay dying—an attempt that paradoxically can make the prospect of death more horrible. Persistent doubts about the goodness of the technological project suggest that human nature persists, as do sentiments of scorn for this world and hope for the next. Tocqueville ends his discussion of moving back the objects of human desire with a pregnant suggestion: "The means [science] that permit men up to a certain point to do without religion is perhaps . . . the only one remaining to us to lead the human race by a long detour back toward faith" (524, emphasis added). Scientific progress, on which the hopes

for indefinite human perfectibility rest, lends dignity to human life up to a certain point. Thinking through the modern scientific project—its promises, perils, and limits—may spark the beginning of genuine Christian faith. Our political debate takes place within a modern democratic horizon, but human nature, often on the wings of religious experience, can still transcend that horizon.

NOTES

Many thanks to my colleagues Ross Burkhart, Todd Lochner, and Brian Wampler for their thoughtful comments and criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper and to the John M. Olin Foundation for support in preparing it.

1. See, for example, Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968); and Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

2. See, for example, George Parkin Grant, *Technology and Justice* (South Bend, Ind.: University Press of Notre Dame, 1986), and *Lament for a Nation* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965); John Gray, *Beyond the New Right: Markets, Government and the Common Environment* (London: Routledge, 1993), 139; and Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991).

3. When his correspondent asks what Americans believe, Tocqueville emphasizes only two principal and pervasive beliefs—the belief in republican government and "faith in the doctrine of indefinite perfectibility of man." Beliefs traceable to revealed religions are conspicuously absent. Alexis de Tocqueville, Letter to de Kergorlay 29 June 1931, in *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, Roger Boesche, ed. Trans. James Toupin and Roger Boesche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 46–48.

4. All internal citations refer to page numbers in Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

5. Marvin Zetterbaum, *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), 120–23; Catherine Zuckert, "Not by Preaching: Tocqueville on the Role of Religion in American Democracy," *The Review of Politics* 42 (1981): 277–79; William Galston, "Tocqueville on Liberalism and Religion," *Social Research* 54 (1987): 511; and Jack Lively, *The Social and Political Thought of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). Ralph C. Hancock, "The Uses and Hazards of Christianity in Tocqueville's Attempt to Save Democratic Souls," in *Interpreting Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, ed. Ken Masugi (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), 348–93, seems to fall into this category as well, although he is acutely aware of Tocqueville's reservations about Christianity's health.

6. Although all of these works do not necessarily see the secularization process as culminating in pantheism, all see Christianity as fundamentally unhealthy in Tocqueville's account. Consider Sanford Kessler, *Tocqueville's Civil Religion: American Christianity and the Prospects for Freedom* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 149ff.; Peter Augustine Lawler, *The Restless Mind: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Origin and Perpetuation of Human Liberty* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), 33–41; and Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Problem of Democracy*, trans. John Waggoner (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), chapter 8.

7. Lawler, *The Restless Mind*, 49.

8. Consider especially Tocqueville's letter to his brother, Edouard de Tocqueville (12 November 1840), for Tocqueville's account of the soul, in *Selected Letters*, 148–49.

9. We notice in human beings the sources of religious belief, and apparently we cannot, in accordance with proper reasoning, infer that God placed such sensibilities into human beings to point them in the right direction. Tocqueville does not deny this possibility, but he implies that revelation is not the result of reasoning. Nothing in his analysis explicitly denies the possibility of revealed religion (and he professes to be a Catholic). For more on Tocqueville's personal religious beliefs, see Robert P. Kraynak, "Alexis de Tocqueville on Divine Providence and Historical Progress," in *Political Philosophy and the Human Soul*, ed. Michael Palmer and Thomas L. Pangle (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 207–11.

10. See Kessler, *Tocqueville's Civil Religion*, 107–27, for how Christianity proved useful to American democracy. Even the missionaries serving the half-settled American West think of themselves as serving the interests of "civilized" American democracy more than spreading the Gospel (Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 281). Consider the technological understanding of religion in the North West Ordinance: "Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of

mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”

11. Tocqueville repeats this notion several times in book 2. First, he shows how religion can fix problems in democracy, and he then shows that there are reasons grounded in self-interest whereby the problem can be palliated. I return later to another instance.

12. I owe a profound debt to Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, chapter 8, for emphasizing Tocqueville’s distinction between civil and natural religion. This analysis ultimately departs from his understanding of what the religion most natural to democracy is, but his instruction was indispensable.

13. Tocqueville writes to Louis de Kergorlay (18 October 1847): “The march of time, the developments of well-being . . . have, in America, taken away from the religious element three quarters of its original power.” *Selected Letters*, 193.

14. 21 July 1831. *Selected Letters*, 48. As evidence of diffidence about dogma, Tocqueville mentions the prison ministries of his time, wherein preachers of all different sects present the same message of law-obedience and self-sufficiency to the prisoners. Religion alone does not move people deeply enough to account for a new self in America. It is a typically democratic and American belief that all steeples point to heaven.

15. Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, 102–03. See also Lawler, *The Restless Mind*, chapter 2.

16. Tocqueville considers deism the most viable alternative to Roman Catholicism in the American context in his letter to de Kergorlay, 50–53.

17. Naturalistic poetry will be attractive in democracies, but Tocqueville concludes that democracies will not be interested in naturalistic poetry (the poetry of pantheism). Tocqueville writes in *Democracy in America*: “Some thought that this depiction, embellishing the material, inanimate things that cover the earth, was the poetry proper to democratic centuries; but I think that this is an error. I believe it represents only a passing phase” (460).

18. The letter to de Kergorlay, 50–52, is again quite instructive. Tocqueville writes: “Protestantism, a mixture of authority and reason, is battered at the same time by the two absolute principles of *reason* and *authority*.” The objection from authority comes from Roman Catholicism, which Tocqueville thought was growing substantially among poorer Americans in his day. Catholicism is attractive because “naturally religious minds” and “serious and complete minds” tire of Protestantism’s uncertainties and still “deeply feel the need for religion.” These people abandon “the despair of seeking the truth” and throw “themselves anew under the empire of *authority*.” The objection from reason comes from Unitarians or Deists, which Tocqueville saw as growing among the rich as fast as Catholicism was growing among the poor. The “cold” logic of Protestantism cultivates “intellectual and scientific” habits that allow them to profess pure deism.

19. Others see this chapter as representing the logical denouement of Tocqueville’s treatment of religion. See John C. Koritansky, “Civil Religion in Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*,” *Interpretation* 17 (1990): 396–98, and Kessler, *Tocqueville’s Civil Religion*, 152–53. Our treatment differs from the others by connecting the idea of indefinite perfectibility to Tocqueville’s account of natural religious sentiments.

20. Tocqueville’s comments about the objects for democratic poetry: Democratic people “willingly dream of what will be, and in this direction their imagination has no limits. . . . The American people sees itself advance across this wilderness, draining swamps, straightening rivers, peopling the solitude, and subduing nature. This magnificent image of themselves is not offered only now and then to the imagination of the Americans; one can say it follows each of them in the least of his actions as in his principal ones, and that it is always there, dangling before his intellect” (460–61).

21. Tocqueville often uses religious language to discuss the idea of human perfectibility. Americans “all have a lively faith in human perfectibility” (359), and Tocqueville himself wants “very much to put faith in human perfectibility” (363).

22. Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, trans. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), 208 (bk. 3, chap. 3); see also 223 (3.4).

23. Robert P. Kraynak, “Tocqueville’s Constitutionalism,” *American Political Science Review* 81 (1987): 1186, which links America’s activity and pride to a “wholly secular notion” of moral responsibility that is derived from the modern understanding of rights. I take Kraynak’s argument further by tying the modern understanding of rights to the belief in the indefinite perfectibility of man, and this step calls into question the “wholly secular” nature of modern rights. In short, the self-government that Kraynak finds is difficult to distinguish from self-determination in the final analysis.

24. Consider, for example, Michael Novak, *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 59–60, 111, 127–28.

25. People in democratic ages “conceive a sort of instinctive incredulity about the supernatural” and they can “only with difficulty [be] led to place the intellectual authority to which they submit outside of and above humanity.” In fact, democratic people “will not readily believe in divine missions” (408).

26. See Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 49. The idea is consistent not with Christian sin, but rather with Machiavellian sin.

27. Self-interest rightly understood seems to be more important than Christianity in shaping morality in America. The Christian character of public opinion certainly shaped those self-interested calculations, but the calculation was more important than the Christianity. Tocqueville asks his audience if they have not seen “that religions are weakening and that the divine notion of rights is disappearing?” and if they have perceived “on all sides beliefs that give way to reasoning, and sentiments that give way to calculations?” (228).

28. Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 202–47.

29. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957 [1920]), 177: For Dewey, the significant thing is “the process of growth, of improvement and progress. . . . The end is no longer a terminus or limit to be reached. It is the active process of transforming the existent situation. Not perfection as a final goal, but the ever-enduring process of perfecting, maturing, refining, is the aim of living. . . . Growth itself is the only moral ‘end.’”

30. Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1979 [1939]), 148.

31. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press, 1954), 143, 155. Tocqueville provides several famous discussions of this possibility, not the least of which is his account of the Physiocrats, thinkers akin to American Progressives (*The Old Regime*, 209–13; 2.3). The Physiocrats were subject to devastating criticisms by Adam Smith and other free market thinkers in their day. A similar movement is apparent in contemporary thought.

32. Consider Postrel, *The Future and Its Enemies*, 63–75 for a list of examples. The name of Postrel’s book, in paralleling Dewey’s *The Public and Its Problems*, suggests a deep unity of motivation.

33. Postrel, *The Future and Its Enemies*, 148, 157, 164, 160, 64; see also 153–54.

34. *Ibid.*, chapter 7 pass., chapter 2, 28 and 58. “Dynamists believe in the future, in the capacity of human beings, gradually and voluntarily, by trial and error, to improve their lives” (41).

35. “Man did not give himself the taste for the infinite and the love of what is immortal. These sublime instincts are not born of a caprice of his will: they have their immovable foundation in his nature; they exist despite his efforts. He can hinder and deform them, but not destroy them” (510, in the chapter titled “Why Certain Americans Display such an Exalted Spiritualism”).