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EXCELLENCE FOR THE DEMOCRATIC AGE:
LIBERAL EDUCATION AND THE MIXED REGIME

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Dedication:

To my parents, who gave me a love for the liberal arts, and to John Henry Newman, whose inspiration was ever present.

Epigraph:

“The final product of our training must be neither a psychologist nor a brickmason, but a man. And to make men, we must have ideals, broad, pure, and inspiring ends of living—not sordid money-getting, not apples of gold. The worker must work for the glory of his handiwork, not simply for pay; the thinker must think for truth, not for fame.”¹

¹ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (2007, 52).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements... viii

Abstract... ix

Chapter 1: Aristocratic Education & the Democratic Soul: The Pursuit of Excellence in America... 1

Educating the Princes... 1

Elitism and Populism as Twin Dead Ends: Grappling with the Persistence of an Elite... 11

Defining the Elite Today: Can Education Make Power Reasonable?... 16

Towards a Humanistic Vision of the Elite... 26

The Danger of Hubris and the Means of Grace... 31

Method and Outline: Genealogical Self-Diagnosis and Prescription... 36

Conclusion: The American Task... 39

Chapter 2: The Role of the Knowers: Plato on the Political Use of Philosophy... 43

Introduction: The Platonic Point of Departure... 43

Democracy's Flux in the *Republic*... 45

The Quest for Balance in the *Laws*... 53

The Positive Vision of the *Republic*... 59

What the *Laws* Adds... 65

Revisiting the Hierarchy of Goods... 68

The Democratic Age in History and in Truth... 73

Conclusion: Translating the Platonic Prescription... 80

Chapter 3: Teaching the Love of Greatness: Tocqueville on Poetry for Democratic Souls... 87

Introduction: The Contribution of an Aristocratic Historian of Democracy... 87

Tempering Tyranny of the Majority and the Leveling of Leadership... 91

Montesquieuian Echoes: Democracy's Self-Undermining through the Erosion of Honor... 96

Pascal and the Challenge of Solipsism...	105
Rousseau's Contrast: An Education to Content the Soul...	114
Tocqueville's Response: Stirring the Soul's Longing...	120
Educating the Educators...	125
Why Revere the Great Books?...	133
Comparison: From Tocqueville to the Research University...	136
Chapter 4: "Socratic Remnant" vs. "Creative Democracy": Irving Babbitt's anti-Deweyan Vision of Leadership...	140
Introduction: Contemporary Reverberations of a Nineteenth-Century Debate...	140
Babbitt's Characteristic Concerns...	146
Babbitt's Rhetorical and Leisurely Education...	154
Dewey's Platonic Egalitarianism...	157
From Education to Politics in Babbitt...	163
Dewey and Babbitt: Divergence and Convergence...	172
Conclusion: The Value of Babbitt for Democracy Today...	175
Chapter 5: Meritocracy as the Democratic Soul in New Guise...	181
The Dissatisfying Status Quo: From Babbitt's Day to Our Own...	181
Michael Young's Jeremiad...	186
Lasch on Elite Narcissism...	193
Elite Malfeasance as Withdrawal...	198
Laschian Democratic Education...	206
Merit and the Common Good in Sandel...	210
Liberal Education as Antidote to the Democratic Soul...	217
Conclusion: From Merit to Excellence...	220

Chapter 6: Pedagogy Beyond the Cave: Seeking Magnanimity in Meritocracy...	223
Introduction: Arendt on Authority and Knowledge...	223
A Synoptic Approach to Liberal Education...	227
Plato's Education by and for Philosophy...	230
Poetry: Tocqueville's Spiritedness...	236
What Babbitt Adds: Vicarious Experience and Practical Wisdom...	242
Curing Narcissism With Magnanimity...	248
Outlines of a Curriculum...	250
Conclusion: The University as Character-Shaping Community...	253
Works Cited...	257

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Abstract:

This dissertation argues for a renewed consideration of the classical idea of a mixed regime that harmonizes the elite and the people in order to address the vulnerabilities of democracy today. This requires examining the civic role of universities as moral communities that inevitably shape their graduates' character. Since meritocratic and technocratic education does so much to form the contemporary elite, the project proposes a reformed education: a humanistic and liberal pedagogy to cultivate greatness of soul in those who will exercise leadership in democracy. The argument synthesizes the diagnoses and prescriptions of democracy made by Plato, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Irving Babbitt to re-imagine an education for excellence in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER 1: Aristocratic Education and the Democratic Soul: The Pursuit of Excellence in America

“Here we were taught by men and gothic towers democracy and faith and righteousness and love of unseen things that do not die.”¹

Educating the Princes

How can an elite able and willing to serve a democratic polity be formed? In a twenty-first century marked by renewed strategic conflict between states and by rising inequality and populist insurgencies within states, the question of what makes democracy possible, durable, and desirable deserves re-examination. In particular, the proper relationship between the few and the many, finding a stable equilibrium between the twin extremes of pure majoritarianism and oligarchy, demands to be considered anew. Political theory has in recent years insufficiently examined the central theme of **rule** or **leadership**, even though **throughout the tradition of political reflection in the West this was assumed to be the central theme of politics**. Who should rule? On what basis? How should they be identified? Historic phrases to summarize political doctrines, like “divine right” and “popular sovereignty,” are really claims about who should rule, and if we no longer hear them as such it is because their polemical force has faded as the political battle lines have shifted. Any theory attempting to answer the question of rule implies a theory of how to ensure that the rulers are worthy. Other than appealing to revelation to provide a divine appointment, education and nature are the available ways of producing rulers up to their task. The monarchical theories of past ages have given birth to the genre of *speculum principia*, mirrors of princes, envisaging the proper raising of heirs to the throne. These are often, like Erasmus’ *Institutio*, very practical texts crafted with a particular ruler in mind

¹ Inscription on arch of McCosh Hall, Princeton University, attributed to H.E. Mierow, Class of 1914.

(1997).² In oligarchic polities, this principle of pre-eminence through education is extended to a group rather than to one person. For Renaissance humanists, this was a means to align real quality with inherited offices, experience having apparently demonstrated that the sons of rulers did not necessarily become good rulers themselves.³ The more democratic move of the social-contract theorists was to postulate that the potential to participate in rule was to be found in all, even if a general minimal standard of education was required to actualize it. Thus Hobbes wishes his *Leviathan* taught in the universities and its lessons imparted from every pulpit (1996).⁴ Locke aims to reform the education of gentlemen first so that the many will follow (1996).⁵ And Rousseau prescribes an ambitious effort to instill a religious obedience to the laws in every citizen (2018).⁶

Why should we reopen the question of the education of the prince (singular, plural, or collective)? This dissertation pursues a naïve inquiry into the fundamental question of the best practicable form of government, examining the answer offered by the mixed-regime tradition: that the goal is to combine aristocratic leadership with the legitimacy and accountability that popular rule secures. This answer entails a tension between the principles of excellence and equality. These classic questions have enduring relevance for contemporary theorists within liberal-democratic society, and they may even illumine aspects of that society that are at present opaque and occluded. Our habit of focusing on liberty and equality, for example, makes it difficult to find the vocabulary even to describe

² Erasmus dedicates his text to the future Charles V (1997, 1).

³ See for example the vision of Pietro Paolo Vergerio's "The Character and Studies Befitting a Well-Born Youth": "It is only fair that those who wish all the greatest things to be due themselves, be themselves obliged to excel in the greatest things. Nor is there any more firm or solid rationale for ruling than this: that those who rule be judged by all to be the worthiest to rule" (2008, 2).

⁴ In the "Review and Conclusion," Section 16, Hobbes suggests modestly that the book "may be profitably taught in the Universities, in case they also think so, to whom the judgment of the same belongeth."

⁵ "If those of that rank are by their education set right, they will quickly bring all the rest into order," Dedicatory Letter.

⁶ See the discussion of civic religion in Book IV.8 of *The Social Contract*.

the erosion of civic solidarity between elites and people that characterizes the United States and many other democracies today. The reforms necessary to heal this breach certainly have many dimensions, requiring economic measures to address inequality, philanthropic efforts to revitalize civil society, and a profound shift in mores. This dissertation's analysis focuses on only one of these dimensions: the effort to reform the elite itself by rethinking how it is educated. According to the authors considered here, it is particularly difficult to form good elites in democracy because these elites tend not to be conscious of the duties their social position confers. Starting with Plato's analysis of the psychic malformations of elites in classical democracy, who become incapable of ruling themselves, I trace this theme towards the present and American democracy via two readers of Plato, Alexis de Tocqueville and Irving Babbitt. By bringing together these complementary lenses, I generate a synoptic account of why contemporary meritocratic education falls short of producing worthy elites for America today. The structure of the argument telescopes towards the present, seeking to understand ourselves through tracing the history of our concepts.

I assume that the advantages of democracy—understood in its modern sense as a regime in which the majority of the people rule through regular elections of representatives—have been thoroughly theorized in the available literature on democratic theory.⁷ Such a system protects the basic interests of most of its people most of the time through accountability mechanisms that incentivize office-holders to win and maintain the approval of their constituents.⁸ Through elections and other selection processes, it provides regular reminders of the fundamental principle of justice that rulers

⁷ There are of course extensive contemporary literatures focusing on democracy as a deontological requirement of justice in politics or an intrinsic good, traceable to John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas respectively. The public choice literature, by contrast, tends to focus on the instrumental value of democratic institutions, assessing their ability to deliver certain public goods. Brian Caplan's *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies* (2007) is a prime example of this genre.

⁸ Amartya Sen argues in *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (1981) that democracies are particularly resistant to catastrophes such as famines that inflict drastic suffering on almost the entirety of the population.

are the servants and not the masters of those they govern. Unlike the haughtiness of a caste system, it makes possible a real bond of civic friendship: despite the accidents of birth and fortune, all share a common citizenship. And because the entire body of the polity is given a stake in its governance, a democracy may be uniquely highly motivated and unified in a time of crisis.

But democracy's virtues as well as its vices stem from its high degree of overlap between the rulers and the ruled, as has been noted since democracy was first theorized at Athens.⁹ The democratic *polis* may become matter without form, degenerating either into an aggregation of disconnected individuals or into a mob without responsibility.¹⁰ The many may also lack the foresight, the distance from quotidian concerns and bodily needs, to be able to deliberate about the long term. The *demos* may expropriate the *oligoi*, making law to serve their faction rather than the common good. And, just as kings may be flattered, the people are vulnerable to the seductions of demagogues who tell them what they wish to hear or buy their votes.¹¹ The array of manipulative devices available in contemporary mass media may have only exacerbated the danger of demagoguery. There is also the

⁹ Jennifer Tolbert Roberts' *Athens on Trial: The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought* (1994) chronicles the use of Athens' deficiencies (which she believes to be overstated) in later Western political thought. "Parasitic on Athenian democracy, classical political theory kept it alive by its compulsive need to point up its failures again and again" (3).

¹⁰ Edmund Burke gave a classic description of the lack of accountability in a pure democracy: "Where popular authority is absolute and unrestrained, the people have an infinitely greater, because a far better founded confidence in their own power. They are themselves, in a great measure, their own instruments. They are nearer to their objects. Besides, they are less under responsibility to one of the greatest controlling powers on earth, the sense of fame and estimation. The share of infamy that is likely to fall to the lot of each individual in public acts, is small indeed; the operation of opinion being in the inverse ratio to the number of those who abuse power. Their own approbation of their own acts has to them the appearance of a public judgment in their favour. A perfect democracy is therefore the most shameless thing in the world" (1999, 189).

¹¹ Most of these ancient arguments, both for and against democracy in practice, are traceable to Aristotle. See the *Politics* (2013) section III.3-13 for the respective claims of democracy and oligarchy and IV.9 for the argument for mixing them.

theoretical problem about aggregation in the popular will: how are the wills of many individuals to be united into actual decisions about particulars without an executive?¹²

The conventional account in the history of political thought is that the classical thinkers who raised objections to democracy helped develop an alternative system, the mixed regime, which brings certain features of other regimes to remedy democracy's disadvantages. This tradition finds its sources in Aristotle's discussion in the *Politics* of how to balance oligarchic and democratic elements in a city to bring about stability. It is then deepened and developed by Polybius' account of Rome as a constitution consisting of three elements at once, the consuls, Senate, and Assembly, each operating in simultaneous conjunction and in tension, reflecting the orders of Patricians and Plebeians and the balance between them (2013).¹³ Cicero himself defended this view of Rome, speaking of the government of a free people in the service of the common good as the complementary union of the popular many, the excellent few, and the ruling one.¹⁴

¹² See Homer's Odysseus: "Too many kings can ruin an army—mob rule! / Let there be one commander, one master only," in *The Iliad* (1990, II.235-6). Machiavelli titles section I.44 of the *Discourses on Livy* (1996), "A multitude without a head is useless." Rousseau formulates the problem in III.1 of *The Social Contract*: "For the body of the government to have an existence, a real life that distinguishes it from the body of the state, and for all its members to be able to act in concert and to fulfill the purpose for which it is instituted, there must be a particular **self**, a sensibility common to all its members, a force or will of its own that tends towards its preservation" (2011, 195).

¹³ "The constitution is seen to possess within itself the potential to correct abuses. For when any one of the three classes becomes puffed up and manifests an inclination to be contentious and unduly encroaching, the mutual interdependency of all the three and the pretensions of anyone being checked and thwarted by the others, must plainly check this tendency. And so the proper equilibrium is maintained by the impulsiveness of the one being checked by its fear of the other," in Polybius's *Histories* (2013), VI.18.

¹⁴ See the famous description of the statesman's soul in Cicero's *De Re Publica* (2008), in which the unity of different elements in the polity is linked, in very Platonic mode, to the unity of different faculties in the soul:

"[The statesman] should have virtually no duty apart from this, for it embraces all the rest—namely that he should never cease inspecting and examining himself, challenging others to imitate him, and by the splendor of his mind and conduct offering himself as a mirror for his fellow-citizens. Just as with string instruments or pipes or in singer's voices a certain harmony of different sounds must be maintained... so a state, by adjusting the proportions between the highest, lowest, and intermediate classes, achieves harmony [*consensus*]. What, in the case of singing, musicians call harmony [*harmonia*]

Many early-modern republicans saw themselves as vindicating long-maligned popular rule under new conditions. The canonical account in recent decades has become J.A. Pocock's *Machiavellian Moment*, developed for application to contemporary political questions by theorists such as Ryan Balot and John McCormick. Perhaps the most celebrated examples are Montesquieu, who theorized the British constitution as a mixed regime in Book XI of *The Spirit of the Laws*, and the American Federalists, who devised a federal system with indirect and diffused popular rule outside the context of a society of orders. Some of the key innovations in this period are the development of representation, allowing ancient direct democracy, which Hamilton in *Federalist 9* called "a state of perpetual vibration between the extremes of anarchy and tyranny" to be left behind even as all holders of political office depended ultimately on the people, and of a novel understanding of liberty as the protection of the law rather than the ability to participate in governing.¹⁵ Rather than calling the system that emerged in the wake of the American and French revolutions pure democracy, it can be described as a novel form of mixed regime. Bernard Manin notes in *The Principles of Representative Government* that the classical view held that sortition was a democratic means of selection while election was aristocratic (2010). The 18th century republicans "concentrated on the equal right to consent" but also intended "that elected representatives would and should be distinguished citizens, socially different from those who elected them" (Manin 2010, 94). This "principle of distinction," that citizens ought to choose the wisest, most virtuous, or simply most prominent to lead them, seemed a way of combining the advantages of equality with excellence in government.

Since my goal is to revisit the idea of the mixed regime to understand the needs of contemporary democracy, I could follow this tradition, investigating the texts of Aristotle and Polybius

is, in the state, concord [*concordia*]; it constitutes the tightest and most effective bond of security; and such concord cannot exist at all without justice" (II.69).

¹⁵ This is the distinction developed by Benjamin Constant in his 1819 "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns," during the Bourbon Restoration in France (1988, 308-328).

in order to analyze the functioning of contemporary representative institutions. Yet while such work has immense value, what interests me most is the principle of distinction, and how it has come to seem illegitimate for democracy to seek to elevate its best citizens to lead it. How is “best” to be defined, and how are those qualities to be maintained and cultivated? As democracies develop and come to maturity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the principle of popular sovereignty comes to be understood as entailing universal suffrage. The political image of a single, undivided body politic where all are free and equal before the law is assumed to mean a society also without distinctions or hierarchy. This is the mentality that Alexis de Tocqueville perceives as particularly characteristic of the United States, that young country that he describes as inaugurating a “democratic age” in which equality would characterize not just a political form, but also a “social state.”¹⁶ This dissertation takes its primary inspiration from Tocqueville’s analysis of democracy, both in substance and in method: I consider mores, or the deep patterns of cultural and social evolution, at least as important as institutions for political outcomes, and I am particularly interested in the relationship between the psyche and the political regime.

It is therefore Tocqueville, despite his rejection of the idea of a lasting mixed regime in the sense of truly divided and conflicting sovereignties, who best illuminates the need for the kind of excellent leadership that the American Founders hoped would superintend their creation, and also who best explains the difficulty democracies have in elevating the excellence they need.¹⁷ By paying

¹⁶ On the concept of “social state” and its importance to Tocqueville’s anthropology, see Alexander Jech, “Man Simply’: Excavating Tocqueville’s Conception of Human Nature” (2013). Jech argues that Tocqueville does not define human nature in the abstract, but rather identifies a set of impulses that remain present across social states: Although “there is no “natural man” or man “in the state of nature... “human freedom, or the ability to initiate action in pursuit of important objects, lies at the heart of human life” (84).

¹⁷ The *Federalist Papers*’ ambivalence on this point is apparent in #10: while representation should “enlarge and refine the public views,” Madison also warns that “enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm” (1961).

attention to the state of the soul in politics, to the nuanced distinctions between greatness and goodness, and to the potential role of education in cultivating souls worthy to lead, Tocqueville builds on Plato's analysis of the city-soul relationship to suggest that democracy could endure and even flourish if a sufficient number of aristocratic souls played a role in its governance. I therefore return to Plato to trace the root of this concern with democracy's potential to reduce away greatness of soul, rather than to Aristotle or Polybius. After considering Tocqueville's view, it becomes natural to trace these ideas into the American context via two of the most important theorists of the American university who read Plato and Tocqueville, John Dewey and Irving Babbitt, and after them to the contemporary understanding of excellence's role in egalitarianism, which is educational meritocracy. My theses are 1) **that the mixed regime's goal of intermixing aristocratic elements with democracy is desirable, and 2) that in the present American context, this is best achieved not by an institutional overhaul of constitutional liberal democracy but by designing an education to cultivate the qualities—the virtue to love the common good and the wisdom to perceive it rightly—that will enable those who hope to win their fellow citizens' votes to deserve their confidence.** The third essential thesis is 3) **that the prevailing form of elite formation, meritocratic selection and technocratic training in the university system, has in fact been counterproductive, fostering the rule of precisely the kind of democratic soul that worried Plato.** This argument of course has to confront the very serious possibility that the liberally-educated elite I propose as an alternative to the meritocratic one could be at least as bad: their character might be as corrupt, or they might be simply incompetent to fulfill their roles in politics, culture, and business.

If the creation of democratic souls is one of the primary characteristics of democracy both ancient and modern, defining the democratic soul becomes central to this project. For Plato, the egalitarian ethos of democratic politics may translate into all spheres of life, leading eventually to

dismissals of the essential hierarchies of truth or goodness. Even the proper relationship among the parts of the soul, in which the intellect leads the spirit and the appetites, may be lost. But education is the sphere of human activity in which the need for rule is most apparent. If the student recognizes his need for the teacher, education can become essential as a means of instilling the proper hierarchy of values. Despite the widespread skepticism among contemporary political philosophers about the value and validity of the city-soul analogy, I argue that the portrait of democratic psychology in the *Republic* and the *Laws* is a perceptive diagnosis of what can ail democratic societies.¹⁸ Plato's great opponent, an advocate of the democratic soul's undivided, unalienated consciousness, is Rousseau. As Allan Bloom writes of the *Emile*,

Rousseau is at the source of the tradition which replaces virtue and vice as the causes of a man's being good or bad, happy or miserable, with such pairs of opposites as sincere/insincere, authentic/inauthentic, inner directed/other-directed, real self/alienated self. All these have their source in Rousseau's analysis of *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*, a division within man's soul resulting from man's bodily and spiritual dependence on other men which ruptures his original unity or wholeness. This distinction is supposed to give the true explanation of the tension within man which had in the past been understood to be a result of the opposed and irreconcilable demands of the body and the soul (Bloom 1978, 136).

To achieve this, Rousseau rejects both liberal and classical education. Emile's tutor will introduce his pupil only to pieces of knowledge that are directly relevant to the practical experience of the boy, and he forbids him to inflame his imagination with books. When books are introduced, they serve to reveal the relative misery of those who live subject to *amour-propre*. In contrast to Plato, who aims to build aristocratic souls who will be the best citizens of any regime, Rousseau works to display the nobility of the democratic soul that does not seek to rule others, much less itself. Bloom writes, "[Rousseau] attempts... to present an egalitarian politics which can rival Plato's politics in moral appeal rather than one which debases man for the sake of the will-of-the-wisp, security. He takes an ordinary boy and

¹⁸ For a summary of the reception history of the city-soul analogy, see 194-208 of Jonathan Lear's "Inside and Outside the Republic" (1992).

experiments with the possibility of his becoming an autonomous man—morally and intellectually independent” (Bloom 1978, 137-138). In painting the portrait of the natural goodness, the freedom from desires to dominate, to be cruel, even to be admired, of his Emile, “Rousseau picks up the challenge and dares to enter into competition with the greatest of the old poets. He creates a human type whose charms can rival those of the saint or the tragic hero, the natural man, and thereby shows that his thought can comprehend the beautiful in man” (Bloom 1978, 138). What is striking is that Rousseau in the *Social Contract* advocates both popular sovereignty and the government of a preeminent few. It seems that he means those possessed of preeminently democratic souls, like Emile himself (“made for guiding, for governing his equals” (Rousseau 1979, 162)), to do this governing. In many respects we live in Rousseau’s world: when we consider education, we habitually think first of the unique, irreplaceable individuality of each person and assume that authenticity is essentially a virtue.¹⁹ I want to reopen the argument that Rousseau sought to close, by asking if there is not value in forming a soul to imitate heroes, to model itself after great examples, to live vicariously, and to be suspicious of its emotions and its impulses. Rather than the authentic, immanent self, this soul would be capable of self-restraint and self-command and so would be equipped to lead others well in the art of self-government. In this dissertation, Rousseau features in detail only in the context of an analysis of Tocqueville’s sources for his educational theory, but the Rousseauian alternative to the aristocratic model of education I am advocating for is implicitly present throughout. I also consider John Dewey’s Rousseau-inspired vision for the relationship between the American university and democracy. If I am right that Rousseau has misframed the task of education in democracy, Dewey’s legacy also needs reevaluating if the academy is to vindicate its role in civic life today.

¹⁹ In this I follow Charles Taylor’s treatment of Rousseau in “Nature as Source,” emphasizing authenticity (1992).

Describing higher education explicitly as an elite-formation project may help the university acquire a measure of self-consciousness about its goals, because it is simultaneously proud of its selectivity and avowedly egalitarian. Thomas Pangle has written acerbically of elite academic culture that “what is peculiar to our elite corruption... is that it consists in large part of flattery of ‘the people,’ or of democracy and egalitarianism, as well as individualism” (1993, 181-2). The most profound critiques of the current system are those that note that its legitimating logic is meritocracy, which assumes that admission to a selective university is a private good that can truly be earned and that receiving such an education confers no duties to others or to the polity. Brian Caplan has gone so far as to charge that almost all of a degree’s value lies in its function as a signaling device to fellow members of the elite class (2018). Meritocracy appears to have created a technocracy whose legitimacy is in question. Knowledge inescapably confers power, but a vision of consciously elite education that confers a sense of duty to fellow citizens is sorely needed if America is to avert a crisis of authority. At the same time, where Rousseau and Dewey are unmistakably right is that a popular education, a civic education for all, is necessary if the people are to be remotely capable of recognizing the good qualities of their elites.

Elitism and Populism as Twin Dead Ends: Grappling with the Persistence of an Elite

Reconstructing the once-assumed interconnections between a liberal education at an American university and the role of leaders in democracy is not a project of mere antiquarian curiosity. It is vital to understanding contemporary politics in the United States and across democratic societies as they are roiled by political movements that position themselves against “the elite” and “the establishment,” even as counter-movements arise to decry these critics as “populist.” The academic literature on this subject is large and growing, with incisive treatments by Jan-Werner Müller, Nadia

Urbinati, and others.²⁰ More detailed treatments have focused on the contours of populism in America and in specific European and Latin American countries.²¹ In general, the critiques of elites break down into characteristic left- and right-wing patterns. Left-populists tend to identify the corrupt elite with financial interests and economic power so concentrated as to form an oligarchic threat to liberty. Right-populists rather tend to target a cultural elite, accusing those who shape prevailing tastes and perceptions, especially through media, foundations, academia, and government, of treacherously preferring foreigners to their own co-citizens. Critiques from the left of populism tend to identify the elite with enlightened cosmopolitanism and populist insurgents with xenophobia and bigotry. From the right, critiques tend to be in the name of good management, worrying that working-class frustration with globalized economics will trigger reckless spending or inflation. My contention is that this framing of the debate is largely sterile. Not only does it fail to raise the questions of whether an elite is necessary, desirable, or legitimate in a democratic society, it often fails to identify the primary elite/popular cleavage as defined by amount of higher education.²² Economic and cultural elites are both frequently educated in the same institutions, and their substantive political and ethical positions tend to resemble each other even when their policy preferences diverge. Likewise, left- and right-populists are often motivated by similar concerns—about immigration, about national cohesion, about prospects for job and family stability—even if the targets of their frustrations are different.

As we have seen by surveying the mixed-regime tradition, these questions of the just relationship between the powerful few and the numerous many are not at all new in the history of

²⁰ See Müller's *What Is Populism?* (2016), and Urbinati's *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (2019).

²¹ I have in mind especially Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's *How Democracies Die* (2018).

²² Some of the classic studies in modern democratic theory do address these more fundamental questions of why elites endure in egalitarian societies and what their proper function is. E.g., C. Wright Mills' *The Power Elite* (2000) E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People* (1960) and Robert Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (1961).

political thought. Yet the very existence and persistence of an elite in a democratic society, whether that elite be vicious or virtuous, often generates indignation. Tocqueville saw already, in the United States of two centuries ago, that the rise of democratic politics had caused an occlusion that makes it harder to even recognize the existence of an elite, much less to evaluate it.²³ Even earlier, the Abbé de Sieyès' claim at the outset of the French Revolution that the Third Estate was by right the entire nation set the terms of modern political thought: "What is a nation? A body of associates, living under a common law, and represented by the same legislature, etc. It is not evident that the noble order has privileges and expenditures which it dares to call its rights, but which are apart from the rights of the great body of citizens? It departs there from the common order, from the common law."²⁴ Sieyès made hereditary aristocracies seem not only unjust but absurd. The consequence is that the motivating question of this dissertation—How can an elite capable of serving and motivated to serve a democratic polity be formed?—becomes difficult even to articulate. To take stock of our present moment, it will be helpful to establish the nature of the contemporary elite. A number of canonical descriptive and normative accounts of why elites endure and the role they play have been formulated in the democratic age. The accounts cluster into four types—plutocracy, epistocracy, neo-aristocracy, and technocracy—and of course elements of multiple types can be present in the same society. While I will consider each of these four in detail for their relevance to our contemporary situation, a fifth type, educational meritocracy as both a selection criterion and an ethos, better illuminates the unique character of the contemporary elite.

Meritocracy has a number of key features that make its social role significant. In an information-age economy that highly remunerates work in tertiary sectors like finance, medicine, and

²³ Tocqueville (2010) I.II.2, titled "Of the Remnants of the Aristocratic Party in the United States," describes how the wealthy hide from public life.

²⁴ *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History* (1899, 35).

law, academic success is highly correlated to accruing wealth. But meritocracy, as its name implies, comes with a self-legitimizing logic: those who win admission to the most selective colleges and universities are presumed to deserve their place by virtue of their combination of native aptitude and hard work. This legitimation crucially makes reference to one's educational credentials a more socially-acceptable way to assert authority than direct allusion to one's wealth or other forms of status would be. The legitimation has the further effect of convincing meritocrats that they have personally earned their position in society; thus, their endowments confer no obligation to other members of their community or to their fellow-citizens. This subjective phenomenology of meritocracy, how it is experienced, leads to a very salient problem: it encourages ambition but not responsibility. In the extreme case, this can fuel a very real greatness, leading students to develop impressive cognitive abilities, but without an ethical competence worthy of being called goodness. Given that my effort in this dissertation is to develop an account of how American higher education could reform itself to produce an elite that would be in certain key respects preferable to the current meritocratic one, this analysis necessarily has an element of seeking self-knowledge. It is thus, in the spirit of Karl Marx's letter to Arnold Ruge, a kind of "immanent critique," which seeks to bring to consciousness aspects of ourselves and the dynamics within which we live that we might otherwise prefer to keep hidden.²⁵ This quest for consciousness also motivates my genealogical concern with Plato, because his writings have done so much to propel the subsequent Western tradition into assuming a connection must exist between intellectual knowledge and political authority. Understanding this conception, and where meritocracy resembles it but also departs from it, will be crucial for understanding democracy's continuing need for excellent elites.

²⁵ *The Marx-Engels Reader* (1978, 12-15).

The approach I take builds upon a growing interest in the literature, because meritocracy has recently drawn attention from prominent analysts. Thomas Piketty, after studying the concentration of intergenerational wealth in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2017), has in his *Capital and Ideology* (2020) characterized the politics of the United States, as well as the major states of Western Europe, as increasingly defined by access to higher education. He charts a competition and convergence between what he calls the “Brahmin left,” composed of socially-progressive highly-educated professionals, and the “Merchant right,” composed of the beneficiaries of capital who traditionally lean right on economic issues. He sees both as alienated from the interests of ethnic minorities and, more surprisingly, from the native-born working-class who form the traditional constituency of the labor-oriented left. For Piketty, the alienation arises because the mainstream left party in each country has changed its goals as its base became highly educated: “Improving the lot of the disadvantaged ceased to be its main focus. Instead, it turned its attention primarily to serving the interests of the winners in the educational competition.”²⁶ For him, only a renewed commitment to the redistribution of wealth and educational access can break the American Democratic Party out of the habit of defending elite economic interests. Patrick Deneen, in *Why Liberalism Failed* (2018), similarly describes existing political competition between left and right parties as two sides of the same liberal coin, with both aiming to liberate the individual from constraints on his or her will. He believes the establishment of a new elite to have been core to the goals of liberals since liberalism’s inception in the seventeenth century. In this new elite, in contrast to the old one centered on family prestige and landed wealth, “because social status is largely a function of position, income, and geographic location, it is always comparative and insecure” (Deneen 2018, 133). It is thus restless and must add a claim to uniquely self-expressive creativity to justify its access to wealth and power. For Deneen, this results in

²⁶ *Capital and Ideology* (2020, 833).

emancipation of the desires of the few from the communal norms of the many (Deneen 2018, 143). While Deneen is interested in economic reform and in refashioning elites to respect their fellow citizens,²⁷ his recommendations are less material, focused on reviving communitarian life and democratic engagement for ordinary citizens.²⁸

Defining the Elite Today: Can Education Make Power Reasonable?

Both Deneen and Piketty's accounts of popular frustration with meritocratic elites would benefit from a richer diagnosis of the elite's motivations, bases of power, and dispositions toward the polity as a whole. I offer a typology of major accounts of elites—as plutocrats, technocrats, epistocrats, and neo-aristocrats—in modern, democratic polities in order to zero in on the distinctive features of the present.

- 1) Probably the most familiar account of elites in democratic society focuses squarely on the subspecies of oligarchy known as plutocracy. This tradition has an ancient pedigree, rooted in the factional strife of the Greek city states,²⁹ and it has the advantage of analytical clarity (inequalities of wealth are relatively straightforward to measure, in comparison to many other inequalities). It also has conceptual clarity, because it draws attention to the competing logics of democracy's promise of political equality and liberalism's encouragement of economic

²⁷ See his lecture “Aristopopulism, a Political Proposal for America” (2019).

²⁸ While both Deneen and Piketty illustrate efforts to think about the contemporary elite in transatlantic terms, charting the trends of Western politics, there are also more sociological diagnoses based on the dynamics of a particular country. Éric Anceau's 2020 *Les élites françaises* is an example of the latter type. Anceau does discuss the importance of educational meritocracy, but is keen to emphasize the multiplicity of elites in France: there are identifiable economic, political, social, and cultural elites, who are not necessarily overlapping groups.

²⁹ In *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* (2004), Eric Nelson traces the influence of the Greek experience of property and inequality on More, Machiavelli, Harrington, Montesquieu, and Tocqueville. Nelson summarizes: “The Greeks had insisted that men who possessed disproportionate wealth would become corrupted, and that, as a result, the rule of the rich implied the rule of the unvirtuous. If, however, one man or a few men were supereminent in virtue, then the Greeks would insist that those individuals should rule on grounds of justice” (85).

inequality to find a contradiction at the heart of the dominant regime type in the world today.³⁰

A further major advantage is its cultural and historical translatability: almost all societies have been characterized by a distinction between the wealthy and the poor. But, setting aside the large literature developed in response by the defenders of economic liberalism, it is not clear to me that this literature considers deeply enough the links between modern democracy and plutocracy (such as that holding popular elections on the scale of modern states necessarily requires enormous expenditure on campaigns and so wealth and popular enthusiasm can actually form a mutually-reinforcing vicious cycle). It seems that mass electoral democracy creates a certain kind of elite but not others, one defined by access to fungible capital.

- 2) Another account of modern elites is closely connected to the question of the university: the civil service tradition. Developed first in Prussia in response to the humiliations of the Napoleonic invasions, and in turn boosted in France in response to defeat in 1870 at the hands of Prussia, it seeks to consciously design higher education to produce highly-competent administrators to run the state in the national interest. Philosophically, this tradition finds eloquent proponents in Hegel, who theorized a bureaucracy capable of embodying universal reason against the particular interests of other classes, and especially in the ambivalent defense of Max Weber, who lamented the disenchantment of bureaucracy even as he explained its necessity in the scale and complexity of modern states.³¹ Woodrow Wilson was a prominent importer of what he took to be a Franco-German technique developed for absolutist and unitary regimes to the federal republic of the United States.³² This tradition has the advantage

³⁰ The classic formulation of this contradiction as between the nominal equality of public life and the real inequality of private life is found in Karl Marx's "On the Jewish Question" (1978, 26-52).

³¹ See Weber's *Economy and Society* (1978), Chapter XI, "Bureaucracy."

³² See *inter alia* Wilson's early article calling for the American civil service to emulate Prussia's, "The Study of Administration" (1887, 197-222).

of being willing to consider a positive role for the elite, taking seriously democracy's limitations and internal tensions. But it is open to the charge, both historically and conceptually, of providing cover for a technocratic reduction of politics to mechanism.³³

- 3) A third set of analyses of the modern elite locates its defining criterion in some kind of distinctive or superior knowledge. Whether in right- or left-wing forms, these analyses tend to view the elite more benignly and even explicitly advocate for it. In this category falls the Marxist-Leninist case for a vanguard with more knowledge of the meaning of history than the proletarians they must lead,³⁴ as does T.S. Eliot's Tory defense of a 'clerisy' who are meant to be the guardians of inherited wisdom.³⁵ I would not call this simply a subset of the arguments for a civil service elite distinguished by its education because the superior knowledge is taken to be of ends, not merely of means. One merit of such arguments is that they seem more morally palatable; indeed, to "know better" than another is an intuitive justification for why any authority should be obeyed. One great limitation is how difficult it must be to keep such an elite based on superior knowledge accountable. How could a member of the un-knowers judge whether one of the knowers is truly trustworthy?³⁶

³³ One classic case against technocracy is that of Carl Schmitt in his 1929 essay "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations" (2007, 80-96).

³⁴ Despite great controversy about this question within the Marxist tradition, Lenin's argument in Part III of the 1902 pamphlet *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* (1989) that the vanguard must transform the consciousness of the workers from above finds plausible grounding in some of Marx's own texts. See, for example, the description of the role of the Marxian critic as priest in the "Letter to Ruge": "Reform of consciousness not through dogmas, but through analyzing the mystical consciousness, the consciousness which is unclear to itself, whether it appears in religious or political form. Then it will transpire that the world has long been dreaming of something that it can acquire if only it becomes conscious of it." "The work of our time to clarify to itself (critical philosophy) the meaning of its own struggle and its own desires. This is work for the world and for us. It can only be the work of joint forces. It is a matter of *confession*, no more. To have its sins forgiven mankind has only to declare them to be what they really are" (Marx 1978, 15).

³⁵ Eliot sets out the argument for a clerisy, based on Coleridge's definition, in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) and develops it in *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* (1948).

³⁶ See Tocqueville, in Book II, Chapter 13 of *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* (2011).

4) Another perennial justification for distinction, found in ancient and tribal societies, focuses on superior courage.³⁷ This is related to the traditional justification for aristocracies of birth, a class supposedly distinguished by their martial achievements and committed to military training and excellence to serve the realm.³⁸ The 20th-century defenders of a version of this view tended to translate battlefield courage into modern circumstances as decisiveness and assertiveness, praising qualities of will rather than intellect. The fascistic arguments of thinkers like Julius Evola fall into this category,³⁹ as does the objectivist-capitalist thought of Ayn Rand.⁴⁰ The unsavory historical associations and appropriations of such thinkers are clear, and at the philosophical level they fall into Polemarchus' error of elevating courage over prudence and justice and so tend to degenerate into a kind of nihilism. One of the classic examples of this nihilistic endorsement of domination is the early Nietzsche essay "The Greek State" dated to 1871. On its face, it commends ancient practices such as slavery and oligarchy because the few and great must enforce their will on the many weak and mediocre so that society may have the vitality and self-belief to endure.⁴¹ But of course to make this case Nietzsche has to dismiss the fundamental Socratic argument that greatness of soul or body is not self-justifying, but depends on the goodness of the ends towards which it is employed. Rather than copying

³⁷ Polybius, as part of the famous description of the constitutional cycle given in his *Histories*, claims that at the origins of polities, "as with the animals, he who was superior to the rest in strength of body or courage of soul would lead and rule them" (2012, VI.5).

³⁸ Norbert Elias' *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (2000) gives an account of the centuries-long transformation of European warrior chiefs into the court nobility of the ancien régime. Betty Behren's "Nobles, Privileges and Taxes in France at the End of the Ancien Régime" (1963) offers a sketch of the logic of the French system of aristocratic privileges.

³⁹ Central to Evola's corpus is *Revolt Against the Modern World* (1995).

⁴⁰ Expressed primarily in her novels, such as *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) and *The Fountainhead* (1968).

⁴¹ See "The Greek State," (2017, 167-176). Jeffrey Church's article, "Nietzsche's Early Perfectionism: A Cultural Reading of 'The Greek State'" (2015) gives a more sympathetic reading of Nietzsche's aims in the essay. Hugo Drochon's *Nietzsche's Great Politics* (2016) contextualizes Nietzsche's practical agenda within the strategic landscape of the late nineteenth century.

eternal models as do Socrates' philosophers, the great according to Nietzsche are self-creating, ever renewing themselves in time.

None of these four sets of theories satisfactorily captures the dynamic of the contemporary elite in the West, and particularly in the United States. Sheer accumulated wealth, both of individuals and of corporations, certainly plays a powerful role in culture and politics, but its influence is usually concealed because the public does not take it to be legitimate. The United States government is partly staffed by professional civil servants but party patronage through presidential appointments is still tremendously important. Athletes and soldiers are praised in twenty-first century America, but on the whole physical courage occupies little of the public consciousness.

A fifth possibility is simply to dismiss the paradox altogether, and to say that it is in the nature of representation that we should expect to see elites form and wield power. Joseph Schumpeter explained the relative stability and efficiency of Western democracies along these lines, describing democracy as a means of selecting among elites. In Part IV of *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, Schumpeter expresses great skepticism about the people's ability to govern at all in practice, as well as about their capacity to govern well, even if they could have effective control. His objections are threefold: affective confusions, the political passions, must afflict large groups attempting to deliberate (Schumpeter 1950, 256-257); politics is very far from the sphere of experience of ordinary voters, from the things for which they feel a sense of "reality or responsibility or familiarity" (259); and the ease of manufacturing desires purporting to be a "popular will" (262-4). Put this way, popular sovereignty as conventionally imagined seems impossible. In reality, "the role of the people is to produce a government" through repeated intervals of "competitive struggle for the people's vote" (Schumpeter 1950, 269). That government then executes its policies through a professional civil service.

Schumpeter does not always side with elites against the people.⁴² Schumpeter does praise popular judgment in certain circumstances, especially over the *longue durée* (he praises Jefferson and Lincoln’s saying that “fooling all the people all the time” is impossible (Schumpeter 1950, 264). Schumpeter offers at times withering critiques of elite misjudgments.⁴³ Despite his claim that the masses are prone to subject reason to passion, he describes a potentially vicious cycle between the intellectuals who shape public opinion and the masses.⁴⁴ Instead of representing a perspective that could genuinely contrast with or critique that of the masses, they all too often become mutually dependent. Political elites fare little better, in Schumpeter’s account; they are often flatterers of the people and completely short-sighted, incapable of genuine leadership, because they are incentivized to think only as far ahead as the next election.⁴⁵

Schumpeter’s own response to these pronounced failings is not to call for more direct democracy and popular rule.⁴⁶ Schumpeter repeatedly compares at least some forms of popular rule

⁴² In a recent article, Natasha Piano has analyzed Schumpeter as part of the “Elitist” school, with Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, and Robert Michels, and argued that he intended his reductive description of democracy to imply a criticism of elites who control the parliamentary system. “‘Schumpeterianism’ Revised: The Critique of Elites in Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy” (2017) argues that it is “inappropriate to maintain a central emphasis on the role of leadership in in his democratic theory” (2).

⁴³ This applies to the elites of multiple countries (France, Germany, Britain, and the United States receive detailed treatments in Part V of *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, where he recounts the history of socialism) and of multiple sociological types.

⁴⁴ Piano (2017, 6): “The intellectual class is the one most prone to affective behavior. Popular writers and ivory-tower academics alike indulge emotive inclinations” precisely because they must cater to what sells on the market.

⁴⁵ As Piano notes, for Schumpeter, these elites “have failed to become genuine *aristoi* that deserve to lead the polity” (2017, 11) because “electoral competition results in mediocrity” (13).

⁴⁶ For Ian Shapiro and other contemporary Schumpeterians, the advantage of his theory of democracy is precisely that it focuses on electoral politics as a market-style competition mechanism to ensure the circulation of ruling groups and thus minimize the risk of permanent domination. In *The State of Democratic Theory* (2003), Shapiro summarizes Schumpeter’s argument as that “the choices among anarchy, monopoly, and competition are the only meaningful possibilities” and that of these three, “structured competition for power is preferable to both” (55). Adam Przeworski invokes Schumpeter’s authority for his “Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense” (1999).

unfavorably with at least some autocratic regimes on such liberal grounds as minority rights.⁴⁷ For him, therefore, in most everyday praises of democracy what its adulators really value is the whole body politic feeling obliged to obey the laws rather than feeling coerced by an alien imposition: “Many of the propositions we usually aver about democracy will hold true for all governments that command the general allegiance of a large majority of their people or, better still, of a large majority of every class of their people” (Schumpeter 1950, 246). But this “general allegiance” could in theory be secured in regimes without regular popular elections, so we need a more specific account of the value of elections and of the circumstances in which they work well. Schumpeter attempts to do that, illustrating what can make parliamentary democracy workable, by making particular reference to the British case. Rather than treating this constitutional monarchy as simply a success story for democracy, he draws a set of conclusions about what has made the world’s oldest parliamentary regime a stable means of governing.

First, there must be a supply of the “human material of politics” “of sufficiently high quality” (Schumpeter 1950, 290). This is not just a call for a highly-trained group of functionaries, but an elite in the sociological sense, albeit one which is not merely hereditary but capable of incorporating new and meritorious members. Second, “the effective range of political decision [brought before popularly-elected legislators] should not be extended too far” (Schumpeter 1950, 291). This is not simply a case for limited government, but one for deference to experts on complex and specific questions of policy. Third, this kind of system requires, in addition to a capable political class, “the services of a well-trained bureaucracy of good standing and tradition, endowed with a strong sense of duty and a no less strong *esprit de corps*. Such a bureaucracy is the main answer to the argument about government by amateurs” (Schumpeter 1950, 293). Fourth, the system depends upon what Schumpeter dubs

⁴⁷ He notes that medieval European monarchs and popes at times defended Jews against popular anti-Semitism (see Chapter XX, Section III, “A Mental Experiment”).

“democratic Self-Control,” which is an endorsement of Burke’s delegation theory of representation,⁴⁸ requiring the electorate to defer to the judgement of those they put in office: “Successful democratic practice in great and complicated societies has invariably been hostile to political back-seat driving... and that it takes a lot of self-control on the part of the citizen to refrain from it” (Schumpeter 1950, 295). What is striking is that Schumpeter’s minimalism does not yield a theory of democracy that is achievable with fewer enabling conditions in place than the eighteenth-century theories of popular sovereignty that he sets out to critique. On his account, successful parliamentarism turns out to depend integrally on the qualifications of the governing class and on inherited traditions that make possible the endurance of democratic politics in general. “Even the necessary minimum of democratic self-control evidently requires a national character and national habits of a certain type which have not everywhere had the opportunity to evolve and which the democratic method itself cannot be relied on to produce” (Schumpeter 1950, 295). There must be practical consensus on the value of the country and its institutions, which Schumpeter implies are often inherited from pre-democratic centuries, as in a constitutional monarchy like Britain. The mere mechanism of elite competition and circulation through regular elections cannot produce the necessary political culture.

This brief treatment of the importance and particularity of political culture reveals perhaps the most important omission in Schumpeter’s account: by treating parliamentary democracy as simply one means among many to the ends of good governance, he does not analyze the democratic constitution as a type of regime that over time tends to render equality the hegemonic logic of all political and social relations. Thus, the fraught position of democracy’s teachers that Plato and Tocqueville so emphasize is absent. Schumpeter in effect calls for a kind of mixed regime, a limited and elite-led democracy, as the most practical and tolerable solution for modern politics. Perhaps he is right that it

⁴⁸ “Speech to the Electors of Bristol,” 1774, in *Select Works of Edmund Burke, A New Imprint of the Payne Edition* (1999, 8-15).

should not surprise us that democracy in practice requires elites. But if democracy insists on trying to bring its theoretical premise of equality closer to reality in every sphere of social and political life, it may undermine itself over time. Schumpeter does gesture toward the unfolding logic of equality in the economic sphere by discussing democracy's attachment to socialism, but in this discussion of the distribution of wealth he pays less attention to the distribution of honors. Attention to the pedagogical dimension of democratic leadership will be essential to developing an analysis more satisfying than Schumpeter's. The education of leaders will require a deliberate cultivation of a love for greatness and a sense of magnanimity that democratic life cannot produce from within its own resources.

For my purposes of considering education, types 2) technocracy and 3) epistocracy, do raise the possibility that an elite with the proper knowledge might be integral to the success of democracy. Weber's vision of rational bureaucracy and Mill's defense of the enlightened can be read as congruent with Bernard Manin's description of the original premise of modern, representative government: that the consent of all citizens would result in the government of the best. As democratic societies develop to produce a world where the "best" are no longer distinguishable by birth or social status, it becomes impossible to attain the mixed regime's desiderata by isolating the upper class in a Senate (as was, for instance, the proposal of John Adams). And this has much potential for good: with the right educational program, we might get an elite more capable and less complacent than the old hereditary one. Mill's late-career Inaugural Address for the University of St. Andrews in 1867, offers an example of a modern vision of an education for a rational elite. It appears to envision a liberal education with a clear mission for political leadership, but it contains a deep ambivalence: the natural world is the realm of real (i.e., predictive) knowledge, whereas the human world is implicitly subjective. The address falls into four sections by discipline: the first devoted to the humanities and classics, the second to the natural sciences, the third to ethics and religion, and the fourth to art. Broad learning will form minds "capable of guiding and improving public opinion on the greater concerns of practical life," and a St.

Andrews graduate should “deal competently with [those concerns] as a thinker, and not as a blind follower of party” (Mill 1867, 7) and be one of those “those who are destined to stand forth as thinkers from the multitude” (Mill 1867, 21). The effort of learning ancient and modern languages is valuable, for knowing the language “of any other cultivated and civilized people” (Mill 1867, 9) serves as an antidote to narrow and parochial perspectives. Yet Mill does not grant Greek and Latin any special status. Though the classical authors are unequalled for style and form, the moderns are more introspective. The economy of classical literature teaches “the arts of expression,” but all of the humanities are of secondary value. It is the sciences that represent “the arts of thinking,” because only the “observation and reasoning” of Baconian experimentation is a sure path to truth (Mill 1867, 15). Psychology is “as positive and certain a science as chemistry” (Mill 1867, 21), because human behavior would be predictable, given enough knowledge of mental states.

But Mill goes on to paint a quite different picture for politics and ethics. On his utilitarian framework, they are not in essence different from the sciences, because net utility and therefore the utility-maximizing decision in every circumstance are in principle calculable. However, given our present lack of information, such decision-making is radically subjective. “We have no masters to follow; each must explore for himself, and exercise an independent judgment” (Mill 1867, 22). “Scientific politics” are a desirable goal, but for the time being, they “do not consist in having a set of conclusions ready made, to be applied everywhere indiscriminately, but in setting the mind to work in a scientific spirit” (Mill 1867, 22).⁴⁹ In some areas, such as economics, the necessary information is beginning to be accumulated and “there exists a collection of facts and thoughts sufficiently sifted and

⁴⁹ In his review of Volume II of *Democracy in America* in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Vol. XVIII (1977, 153-204), Mill credits Tocqueville with having demonstrated “the true Baconian and Newtonian method applied to society and government” (156).

methodized to form the beginnings of a science” (Mill 1867, 23).⁵⁰ In the realm of the spirit one must be even more circumspect about the prospects for knowledge: religious and ethical dogmas, which claim to have knowledge via revelation of human nature and purposes, should give way to art, which serves an essential function of inspiration to motivate progress and innovation. Art “trains us never to be satisfied with imperfection in what we ourselves do and are: to idealize, as much as possible, every work we do, and most of all, our own characters and lives” (Mill 1867, 31).

In the tensions of Mill’s text, I believe we find our own confused intuitions about the value of higher education, even if we do not share his utilitarian framework. His ambition for a scientific politics managed by true experts is familiar; at some level we know that politics demands exceptional competence and that education is one promising means to acquire that competence. When suffering from a painful abscess, we all seek the best-qualified dentist to cure it. Yet for competence in this sense to apply directly to politics would imply that there are no disagreements about political ends, but only about means, and experience tells us this is unrealistic. Given the difficulty of achieving this scientific consensus, Mill reserves a certain sphere for the humanities, deeming them to still have value for acquiring a deeper knowledge of oneself, of others, of the human condition. We, like Mill, often hesitate to claim for the humanities the status of instilling a knowledge of truths about the world or about realities beyond our own experience. We are most comfortable making claims about their value for introspection and empathy.⁵¹ Yet Mill’s theoretical ambivalence did not prevent him from a having

⁵⁰ Mill develops this ambition for a comprehensive, scientific account of political phenomena in his “On the Logic of the Social Sciences,” in *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive*, Vol. 2 (2012), 473-624.

⁵¹ William Deresiewicz’ 2014 book *Excellent Sheep* is a recent critique of American elite education that reproduces Mill’s ambivalences. As an antidote to technocracy— “We’re suffering today from just such a cadre of technocrats, just such a specialized elite. The problem with our leaders now is not just bureaucratic cowardice; it is also a lack of ability to think outside of specialized boundaries” (169)—Deresiewicz wants to claim that liberal education both produces leaders and should be encouraged on egalitarian grounds.

a practical effect on education: he is remembered for his advocacy for a professional civil service in Britain, standing at the origin of the movement for formal training of bureaucratic functionaries.

Towards a Humanistic Vision of the Elite

Today many within and without the university have lost faith in its mission. To vindicate the university requires an account of its civic role, as university administrators are increasingly realizing.⁵² In these accounts of the humanities' value for forming citizens, contemporary polemicists are building on Weber's admission that mere technical expertise could not govern. For Weber, the rise of the bureaucrat was a world-historical phenomenon, and one that was not obviously an improvement vis-à-vis the humanist gentleman: "Behind all the present discussions about the basic questions of the educational system there lurks decisively the struggle of the 'specialist' type of man against the older type of the 'civilized' man, a struggle conditioned by the irresistibly expanding bureaucratization of all public and private relations of authority and by the ever-increasing importance of experts and specialized knowledge" (Weber 1978, 1002). This expresses in microcosm Weber's ambivalent attitude toward the "Iron Cage" of rationalization.

The "older type" to whom Weber refers is a product of a tradition growing out of humanist ideals of *liberal* education: necessarily concerned with the ends of individual and collective human life, this education calls those assumed ends into question and seeks, through reason, to discern which ones are worth pursuing. For the mixed regime tradition is also a civic humanist tradition of reflection on how to form a truly meritorious elite.⁵³ Those who fear the power of educated elites today are

⁵² Former Dean of the Core Curriculum at Columbia, Roosevelt Montás' *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation* (2021) makes a personal, autobiographical appeal for the value of classic texts, whereas President of Johns Hopkins Ronald Daniels' *What Universities Owe Democracy* (2021) takes a more institutional approach.

⁵³ James Hankins chronicles this educational tradition in his article "The Virtue Politics of the Italian Humanists," in *Beyond Reception: Renaissance Humanism and the Transformation of Classical Antiquity* (2019a, 95-114).

typically afraid of technocracy's effect on civic life.⁵⁴ Would not leaders with specialized knowledge become unaccountable to their fellow citizens, who will not be able to comprehend their ideas enough to evaluate them? At the same time, wouldn't these non-elite citizens become less engaged politically, losing the habit of deliberating about policy? But in Aristotelian terms, what liberal education aims to cultivate in the student is *phronesis*, not *techné*. Rather than leading towards replacing what Saint-Simon and Marx called "the government of men" by "the administration of things," liberal education fosters a vision of government that requires leaders to exhibit wisdom and virtue to show themselves worthy of imitation.⁵⁵ This preserves a crucially personal dimension to governing, maintaining it as an art rather than a science.⁵⁶ For example, few would dispute that public health is a kind of common good and that securing it requires a least some technical knowledge of epidemiology and physiology. But as the immense and ongoing controversies over the management of the Covid-19 pandemic have revealed, it is not obvious that technical knowledge alone is sufficient. Good public health decisions require a weighing of costs and benefits to assess tradeoffs; they require a sense of justice; and they require a rhetoric that can convey them well to the public and make them convincing.

Unlike the kind of ability wielded in technocratic fields, the value of having such a liberal education can in principle be apparent even to those who have not experienced it. Without extensive training in monetary policy, it is difficult to begin to appreciate what central bankers do, much less to

⁵⁴ A well-known contemporary proposition in favor of epistocracy or noocracy is Jason Brennan's *Against Democracy* (2016). Daniel Bell has pursued a similar theme in the context of East Asia in *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (2016). H el ene Landemore's radical alternative *Open Democracy: Reinventing Popular Rule for the Twenty-First Century* (2020) argues for selection by lot as a way of invigorating government close to the people.

⁵⁵ "The Administration of Things: A Genealogy" by Ben Kafka, in *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* (2012), traces the phrase to Saint-Simon.

⁵⁶ In form, this argument parallels the economic philosopher F.A. Hayek's claim that economics is not about the allocation of limited resources to defined ends; it is in fact the process of discovery of which ends are to be served. Hayek's case is most thoroughly developed in *Lam, Legislation and Liberty, Volume II: The Mirage of Social Justice* (1962, 107-132). The inference Hayek draws from this, however, is that politics must remain agnostic about which ends are preferable to others.

evaluate whether the decisions they are taking are warranted or not given the economic data they have at hand. But historically the great examples of liberally-educated statesmen have been eminently capable of drawing on their literary and historical knowledge to evoke a deep sense of shared belonging in their fellow citizens and to explain the value of their policies to them. Lincoln spoke of the “mystic chords of memory” that united Americans from all bloodlines and he plucked those chords himself in evoking the Prophet Jeremiah in his Second Inaugural. Churchill drew upon Macaulay’s “Horatius at the Bridge” in the dark days of the Blitz to imagine London as the citadel of Rome threatened by the Tarquinian tyrant.⁵⁷

I have chosen heroic examples that are bound to strike us as positive, but these could be cynically read as one-way traffic. Yes, elites can communicate to the people using rhetoric that brings out the best in a country, but surely rhetoric can also be simply a means for the powerful to deceive and manipulate. How can the people convey their priorities and concerns back to elites? I believe the answer is twofold. First, in a healthy society elite and popular culture are interdependent. For the Hebrew Scriptures, Shakespeare, Tocqueville, and Macaulay to have meaning, these authors must be widely known and appreciated, meaning that education at the primary and secondary levels must instill a version of what elite higher education provides in more depth. Secondly, the people talk back to elites through accountability mechanisms, of which elections are the primary but by no means the sole example. The deeper principle is the one articulated by Aristotle in Book III, Chapter XI, of the *Politics*, that the people deliberating together are capable of judging the actions of leaders even if they could not act in the leaders’ place (2013, 1281b1-1282a25).⁵⁸ This will certainly entail a popular version of

⁵⁷ From Lewis Lehrman, *Lincoln & Churchill: Statesmen at War* (2018). The implication of these discursive examples is that rhetoric ought to play a much larger role in humanities education than it currently does, in line with Bruce Kimball’s defense of Isocrates over Plato in *Orators & Philosophers* (1986).

⁵⁸ Jeremy Waldron helpfully expounds this passage in “The Wisdom of the Multitude: Some Reflections on Book 3, Chapter 11 of Aristotle’s *Politics*” (1995, 563-584).

the elite's civic education, to ensure that elite and people share a common culture, and so that the people can tell the difference between a worthy leader and a charlatan. It may be that such individual greatness is not something that any institutional form of education can be relied upon to produce. Lincoln famously taught himself from a handful of books; Churchill reportedly hated schooling and only began to read seriously when a junior officer on garrison duty on the North-west Frontier of the British Raj; De Gaulle broke every tactical precept he learned at Saint-Cyr. It seems difficult to imagine that any curriculum could predictably produce such heroes. At the very least, however, that curriculum can ensure that the circle of subordinates able to enact these leaders' vision is wider.

Since the moral virtues cannot be entirely separated from the intellectual ones, an education that aims to develop the latter necessarily encourages certain views of the good life and discourages others.⁵⁹ Many of the intellectual virtues that a humanistic education is capable of cultivating—the dispassionate entertaining of the other side of an argument, the ability to take the long view, the zeal to set aside expediency in favor of the truth of the matter—ought to permit better deliberation about the common good, meeting a need sorely felt in contemporary legislatures. Training in the liberal arts should inculcate a reverence for tradition and toward the successes and failures of past ages, compensating for the presentism towards which democracy inclines. It ought to instill a taste for greatness, for unique achievements and displays of human excellence, that runs counter to the levelling love of equality. It thus appears as a potentially aristocratic element that could benefit democracy. John Henry Newman described how liberal learning should benefit public life in *The Idea of a University*: “It aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration,

⁵⁹ I take Pierre Hadot to have shown in *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995), comparing the practices of the ancient schools to those of the Jesuits (Part II, “Spiritual Exercises”) that philosophical educations are always at least implicitly moral educations.

at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life” (Newman 2009, 177-178). Newman’s list suggests many elements of a theory of intellectual authority in culture and politics. The university-educated are not to reject popular cultural predilections (of “tone,” “mind,” or “taste”) wholesale, but to make of them a better version of themselves. In the language of finding “true principles” and “fixed aims” for “popular enthusiasm” and “aspiration,” Newman gives a vision of intellectual leadership, which should discern the truths implicit in the popular demands of the day. Without simply taking the preferences of the masses as given, the university-educated should channel them in a direction that will bear fruit in the long term.

The Danger of Hubris and the Means of Grace

Because many assume that to focus education on an elite few would violate a basic principle of democratic justice (sometimes taken to be a basic principle of all justice), the equal treatment of human beings and therefore the equal weight that should be given to their life plans, many theorists of civic education today have focused on the education that can be designed for all citizens.⁶⁰ The norm is to take the elementary school as the context and to assume that an education that instills egalitarian norms best serves democracy, following John Dewey.^{61 62} At this level of schooling, children are socialized for the first time outside of their families, and here they need to learn to respect one

⁶⁰ In *An Aristocracy of Everyone: The Politics of Education and the Future of America* (1994), Benjamin Barber attempts to split the difference by calling for a universal but elevating education.

⁶¹ For a representative range of liberal-democratic theories that reflect this description, see Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (1993); Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (1997); and Meira Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education* (1999).

⁶² See, *inter alia*, Levinson (1999), Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (1997), and Callan (1997). A partial exception is Stephen Macedo’s *Liberal Virtue: Citizenship, Virtue, and Community in Liberal Community* (1990), which goes so far as to make a Platonic move and draw a parallel between the structure of liberal regimes and that of the liberal’s soul (274-6). Personal and civic virtues mirror each other, and the cardinal virtues within the person map onto the three branches of constitutional government: judicial impartiality, legislative breadth of sympathy, and executive initiative and innovation.

another as equals in a way that should translate to a sense of common citizenship and civic friendship later in life. The virtues emphasized in this education tend to be the ones that are primarily expressed in reciprocal relations among equals, such as compassion, pity, fairness, honesty. These virtues are certainly greatly needed in a democratic society, but I do not think this orientation to the primary school adequately addresses all of the political role of education. Some part of education must seek to produce **leaders** as well as citizens. Good leaders should possess the egalitarian virtues, but they are distinguished by another set of traits that are more hierarchical than reciprocal. The Aristotelian virtues in this category include magnanimity and courage, and parts of justice (distributive as opposed to commutative) and prudence (the kind of prudence that is about foreseeing and directing, rather than about calculating). But there are prominent democratic theorists who have recognized that effective governance requires capable, far-sighted leaders more numerous than the one head but fewer in number than the entire citizen body. Elizabeth Anderson has identified four qualities that are highly desirable, if not essential, in a democratic elite.⁶³ They must be responsive to the interests of all—which requires both awareness of those interests and being disposed to serve them. And they must also be able to serve those interests effectively—which according to Anderson requires knowledge of the means and the capacity to relate to and communicate respectfully with all groups in society.⁶⁴ This framing leads Anderson to focus attention on the adequacy of the minimum standard of access to education and on the breadth of different groups represented in the elite, rather than on absolutely equalizing educational outcomes.⁶⁵

⁶³ This discussion can be found in “Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Perspective” (2007, 595-622).

⁶⁴ Though Anderson frames these as specifically qualities of a **democratic** elite, they might be features of any legitimate elite in a just society.

⁶⁵ “Working backward from the good we demand elites to do for everyone in society to their necessary qualifications, we arrive at a standard for the educational opportunities a democratic society must provide to its youth. A just K–12 educational system must prepare students from all sectors of society, and especially those disadvantaged along any dimensions, with sufficient skills to

It also seems that a conscious effort to cultivate an excellent elite might violate a commitment to liberal neutrality. In Rawlsian terms, a liberal state cannot put forth any “comprehensive doctrine” about the human good without undermining itself.⁶⁶ Even though I intend this vision to be diffused through the culture of many institutions of higher learning without being made official government policy, instilling virtue and wisdom in the future governing class seems to suggest a comprehensive doctrine. Some contemporary theorists have claimed that liberalism in its canonical form, such as in the thought of John Locke and Mill, has always been about creating a certain kind of subject capable of behaving as a rational, productive individual. The implication therefore is that the liberal credo was always an attempt to replace the propertied, hereditary elite with a new, innovative, mercantile one. But other liberals have insisted that liberalism need not mean giving up on personal decency or public-spiritedness. Stephen Macedo argues that a form of political meritocracy can be entirely compatible with the liberal and democratic American constitutional tradition (2014, 232-258).

But the best reply is to be found among the historians, and part of the contribution that I hope to make is to put a richer sense of historical arguments for liberal education into conversation with contemporary political theory. James Hankins’ voluminous study of the political ambitions of Renaissance humanism, *Virtue Politics* (2019b) draws an extended parallel between the classical Confucian idea of promoting government officials according to examinations on humane letters and that of the Renaissance humanists, who did not merely seek to imitate ancient models or to give a veneer of refinement to an underlying *libido dominandi*; instead, they sought to educate young noblemen’s habits and dispositions so that they might really be worthy to rule. The humanists did not

be able to succeed in higher education and thereby join the elite. This yields a sufficientarian or adequacy standard for just provision of opportunities for education: every student with the potential and interest should receive a K–12 education sufficient to enable him or her to succeed at a college that prepares its students for postgraduate education” (Anderson 2007, 597).

⁶⁶ This is the central argument of Rawls’ *Political Liberalism* (2005). However, Rawls does have an extensive account of the education in virtue that is compatible with state neutrality.

necessarily seek to produce Christian saints (even those who considered this a worthy ideal did not think that their pedagogy was capable of realizing it; grace was required for supernatural virtue). They were also largely agnostic about the type of regime to be pursued, whether it was principality, or aristocratic or democratic republic. They did however agree that certain virtues would be needed by all who were in positions of authority and went a step further to claim that the virtuous ought to wield political authority. And they assumed that *mimesis*, learning to imitate the examples of great figures from the history of statecraft, could help instill these qualities. Hankins explicitly recommends this humanistic vision as a model for the reform of education and of the elite in our own time. He counsels attention to the state of the soul of rulers, because tyranny results not simply from decayed institutions but also from corrupted characters: “Political authority cannot in the long run be maintained without moral authority, and moral authority cannot be acquired without nurturing society’s rulers in the best traditions of the peoples and civilizations they aspire to serve” (Hankins 2019b, 514). And the effort to maintain a common standard of excellence is important in pluralistic polities: “Some agreement about what constitutes decent and moral behavior is surely necessary to build the trust required for personal freedom and moderate rule in large-scale, multi-ethnic societies” (Hankins 2019b, 512). Above all, despite their great variety of philosophical and religious positions, the humanists unanimously rejected Machiavelli’s severing of politics from ethics, which leads to the celebration of leaders for their greatness rather than for goodness, corrupting virtue into *virtú*.⁶⁷

This anti-Machiavellian thrust recalls the opening claim of this dissertation about the importance of educating the prince: that the health of any regime depends upon the education of the rulers, and that the endurance of democracy in particular depends on preventing society from being composed only of democratic or tyrannical souls. A few aristocratic souls can do much to preserve

⁶⁷ Patrice Gueniffey’s *Napoleon and de Gaulle: Heroes and History* (2020) addresses the tension between greatness and goodness by contrasting the two most influential statesmen of modern French history.

healthy institutions and protect the common good. To revive this humanistic vision of education for political excellence is indeed in tension with liberalism's focus on institutional mechanisms, but it is a fruitful tension. The Renaissance humanists were republicans in the Ciceronian sense; they believed that virtuous politics depended on the harmonious relationship of the few and the many oriented towards the common good. Considering how to ensure that those in positions of authority wield it with solidarity may not be central concerns of liberalism, but if by considering them we can put a politics of individual liberty and dignity on a sounder basis, it is worth doing. It seems clear that America liberal democracy is not healthy, either at the level of institutions or at that of souls. How does this humanist tradition define virtue and wisdom? Virtue is the characteristic disposition to serve the common good, and wisdom is the capacity to discern the common good and what it entails. Virtue is thus more other-regarding than Rousseauian authenticity, and wisdom takes more factors into account than Mill's technocratic calculus of aligning means to preset ends. Plato, Tocqueville, and Babbitt each refine the definitions of virtue and wisdom, but they all share the fundamental assumptions that to be able to recognize and pursue the common good are a leader's most important qualities and that the human psyche is not naturally oriented well but must be rightly ordered through education. All three of them seek to recover a specific virtue that connects goodness and greatness, that of magnanimity, the disposition to undertake difficult and risky action for the sake of others in order to achieve glory.⁶⁸

Therefore this dissertation aims to provide resources for thinking about the role of universities in American national life today. As William Theodore de Bary wrote during the Vietnam War, drawing

⁶⁸ Robert Faulkner's *The Case for Greatness: Honorable Ambition and Its Critics* (2008) focuses on ancient figures such as Alcibiades and modern ones such as Lincoln. Lorraine Pangle has studied this theme in the *Cyropaedia* in "Xenophon on the Psychology of Supreme Political Ambition," (2017) attempting to disentangle the good and the bad aspects of a desire to be great.

on his knowledge of the Confucian tradition to warn of the abuse of power by Washington mandarins with great intelligence and commensurate hubris,

“The essential thing is to have educated people. They must be educated, to be truly themselves, in a world community. They must undergo the kind of intellectual chastening that is prerequisite to the exercise of any power or influence in the world. They must know themselves better than they know world affairs so that the responsibilities they assume are commensurate with their capacities and not swollen with self-conceit—personal, national, racial, religious, social, political, and so on. Confucius and his teaching were strongly oriented towards public service, to world affairs, yet he had to reconcile himself to serving *out* of office. Finding it impossible to engage in the politics of his time and yet remain true to himself, he chose the latter. We must know how to be like that” (2013, 10).

If De Bary’s warning is to be heeded, we must look for an education that truly effects that “intellectual chastening” that can decouple, as much as possible, pride from power. The greatest objection to my claim that meritocracy has fostered elite narcissism is that an aristocratic education for greatness will only foster a worse form of ambition, inflaming potential tyrants. The answer which I can only begin to sketch here depends upon the experience of liberal education as being the antithesis of meritocracy’s grasping attitude, in which a degree is experienced as the deserved reward to a certain amount of intellectual labor. As Newman writes, “There is a Knowledge, which is desirable, though nothing come of it, as being of itself a treasure, and a sufficient remuneration of years of labour” (2009, 114). The analogy is to physical health, which certainly does give greater capacity for action but is desirable in its own right. George Steiner has similarly described the experience of communing with the great philosophical and literary minds as an experience of grace, a gift disclosed but never deserved.⁶⁹

Method and Outline: Genealogical Self-Diagnosis and Prescription

In method, this dissertation does not attempt to sketch a complete theory of the role of elites and their relationship to education in America, much less in modern democratic regimes. Neither is it an attempt to trace the institutional history of the modern university and its political ambitions.

⁶⁹ *Lessons of the Masters* (2005).

Though informed by the literature in democratic theory and rooted in a historical understanding of the complex relationship between ideas and their highly contingent application in practice, I primarily seek to mine resources for thinking about the education of democratic elites for contemporary America via a series of close readings. In doing so, I hope to illustrate the rich potential of approaching canonical texts with attention and reverence, a kind of “hermeneutic of deference” that assumes as a default posture that these texts contain a wisdom greater than my own. I do not mean to deny the value of the hermeneutic of suspicion or the necessity of critique; I do however hold that critique alone is inadequate for the moral formation in character and virtue that elite education should foster, because critique is incapable of establishing a positive standard of excellence that should be imitated. My authors are selected to be genealogical, helping us recover a sense of the importance of the question of elite education for understanding our present cultural and political moment as well as a sense of how the present confusion has arisen and how it might be navigated.⁷⁰ I do not claim to be reporting what Plato, Tocqueville, or even Babbitt would have said ought to be done in our present context, since they wrote in very different times and places. But I believe their theories can help us gain perspective on the dynamics of our regime and of the soul and thereby better conceive of constructive reforms.

The following chapter returns to Plato’s argument for the authority of knowledge to better understand both the weaknesses of democracy and the inadequacy of our present conceptions of epistocracy or technocracy. Based around a complementary reading of Book VIII of the *Republic* and Book III of the *Laws*, I argue that Plato’s concern with democracy is that he fears the egalitarian ethos

⁷⁰ Part of my methodological inspiration comes from Ahmet Kuru’s article, “Bringing Ideas and Religions Back in Political Science: Contributions of Daniel Philpott” (2021), which encourages political scientists to seek naïvely to answer central and perennial questions of political life.

of politics may translate into all spheres of life, leading to dismissals even of the essential hierarchies of truth or goodness. For him, education is essentially about the quest for this truth and goodness.

The third chapter leaps more than two thousand years into modernity to put Tocqueville's understanding of democracy alongside Plato's. Though evidently the political context, and even the prevailing understanding of the human psyche, have been profoundly transformed by, *inter alia*, the intervening experience of the Roman Empire, the advent of Christianity, and the French Revolution, the Plato-Tocqueville comparison allows us to identify what may be essential to democracy, both ancient and modern. I interpret Tocqueville's picture of the inertial tendency of the mores of modern democracy in *Democracy in America* as fundamentally congruent with Plato's picture of the unchecked democratic soul. I follow Joshua Mitchell in focusing on Tocqueville's portrait of the psyche, and in emphasizing the possible counterweights Tocqueville suggests for this regime's manifestation in the soul.⁷¹ In particular, I contend that Tocqueville has more of a theory of the role of formal education, and especially of the role of an educated elite in preserving the goods of democracy, than is normally understood.

The fourth chapter again moves closer to the contemporary context to the rise of the Humboldtian research university in the post-Civil War United States, which aimed to produce the leaders that burgeoning American democracy needed. With John Dewey and Irving Babbitt, I will question whether prioritizing specialized, technical education over humanistic formation represented an error. Both Dewey at Columbia and Babbitt at Harvard were writing in the second generation after the establishment of the American research university, and both warned that academic specialization had the potential to lead to technocratic rule. Dewey and Babbitt diverged sharply in their prescribed

⁷¹ In *The Fragility of Freedom: Tocqueville on Religion, Democracy, and the American Future* (1995) Joshua Mitchell reads Tocqueville as a theorist of the Augustinian and democratic soul. Brian Danoff, in *Educating Democracy: Alexis de Tocqueville and Leadership in America* (2010), notes important affinities between Tocqueville's view of authority and Plato's.

remedies, however. For Dewey, the university should be the most perfect realization of the democratic ethos, embodying the free debate and endless capacity for revision that characterizes the public square. But Babbitt follows Tocqueville in describing the university as embodying an aristocratic ethos that guarantees excellence by prescribing an authoritative curriculum. His concern is explicitly Platonic and anti-Rousseauian, arguing that leaders in particular must be taught to be suspicious of their own instincts and emotions, and that this critical distance is obtained by the study of great humanistic classics. This hierarchy within the soul that bridles the desires of the moment he explicitly parallels to American constitutionalism's suspicion of majority tyranny. I argue that the victory of Dewey's argument against authority has led to universities undermining their essential role in democracy, which is to serve as counterweights to its negative tendencies.⁷²

The fifth chapter examines meritocracy conceptually and phenomenologically as the default compromise between democratic equality and aristocratic excellence that has in fact come to guide American university policy, rather than either Dewey or Babbitt's vision. I argue that among the possible defining principles of an elite, the one with most legitimacy and perhaps most influence today is that of meritocracy on the basis of academic aptitude. I trace this concept from Michael Young's coining of the term "meritocracy" to more contemporary critics of it in theory and practice, especially Christopher Lasch and Michael Sandel. While Christopher Lasch gives a very thorough diagnosis of what he sees as an elite narcissism stemming from meritocratic selection and education, Sandel begins to point a way forward by retrieving the classical-republican conception of the common good. Although Rousseau dismissed humanistic, liberal education for inflaming the pride and drawing students into psychological unreality, if Lasch and Sandel are right, education for authenticity has

⁷² Philip Rieff in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (1966) and Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979) offer complementary critiques of an immanent culture that educates for self-acceptance.

created its own new form of proud mediocrity. The concluding chapter highlights the relevance of the combined philosophical, poetic, and ethical cases for liberal education that emerge from reading Plato, Tocqueville, and Babbitt in combination.

Conclusion: The American Task

During much of American history, the conventional understanding of education for those who had the means was to gain a familiarity with the classics that would instill civic and moral virtue.⁷³ John Adams's May 18, 1781 letter to his son John Quincy, then thirteen years old, is a particularly eloquent expression of this vision. After a brief allusion to the political and journalistic scene of Holland where John Quincy is residing, Adams gives him instructions on what he ought to be learning:

You go on, I presume, with your latin Exercises: and I wish to hear of your beginning upon Sallust who is one of the most polished and perfect of the Roman Historians, every Period of whom, and I had almost said every Syllable and every Letter is worth Studying.

In Company with Sallust, Cicero, Tacitus and Livy, you will learn Wisdom and Virtue. You will see them represented, with all the Charms which Language and Imagination can exhibit, and Vice and Folly painted in all their Deformity and Horror.

You will ever remember that all the End of study is to make you a good Man and a useful Citizen.—This will ever be the Sum total of the Advice of your affectionate Father,

John Adams⁷⁴

In these few sentences, Adams expresses a number of densely interwoven themes: Sallust is valuable for the style and the beauty of his language; John Quincy can enter into the “company” of the Roman historians, learning “Wisdom and Virtue” from them as a friend; their texts present virtue so that it may be admired and imitated and vice so that it may be despised and avoided. And, most significantly, Adams describes the “End of study” as twofold: both to become “a good Man” and “a useful Citizen.” These two are assumed not only not to be at odds but perhaps to be complementary. The curriculum

⁷³ For an overview of the prevailing assumptions of the period, see Carl J. Richard's *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (1995).

⁷⁴ This quote was drawn to my attention by Pavlos Papadopoulos' article, “Education and the Man According to John Adams” (2021).

of this education is obviously classical, but it is particularly based on history and rhetoric, two genres characterized by anecdote and exemplarity. And from this letter sent by one future American president to another, we may safely infer that to be “a useful citizen” is more than to vote judiciously every few years in an election; it is to lead, to take part in the most important deliberations of public life. What is remarkable about this letter is how unremarkable it is in its time,⁷⁵ and yet how far away it is from contemporary sensibilities. We might very naturally ask how the knowledge of old texts, even the friendship with their authors that Adams invokes, could possibly make someone better in soul or wiser in judgment.

The challenge this dissertation considers is thus distinctly American, although it pertains to the question of democracy in general. As Tocqueville saw, democracy in America, unlike its French equivalent, was not born in the shadow of an aristocratic past. The American regime therefore is uncomfortable with the notions of hierarchy and authority, but it was also not built in fear of the return of a new hereditary upper class, as the French Republic was. France since 1789 has thus been conscious of the importance of elites in politics, often aiming deliberately to cultivate through education a loyal and capable republican elite to replace its hereditary antecedent. The roles and the trainings of French elites are therefore perennial subjects of contention in French politics.⁷⁶ This is less prominent a theme in American political thought, although an ambition to educate the most capable Americans for public service has been present since the time of the American Founding. Though Benjamin Rush’s proposal for a national university was ultimately rejected,⁷⁷ Thomas

⁷⁵ It is perhaps still remarkable for the active and imaginative role it ascribes to the student; while the texts mentioned are fairly standard for the Founding generation, students’ actual engagement with the Latin authors would often have been rote and regurgitative. See James Walsh, *Scholasticism in the Colonial Colleges: A Neglected Chapter in the History of American Education* (1935).

⁷⁶ The plural is intentional, because different public institutions of higher learning exist in France to produce intellectual, technical, administrative, political, and artistic elites.

⁷⁷ For this history of this debate, see George Thomas, *The Founders and the Idea of a National University: Constituting the American Mind* (2014).

Jefferson's writings offer an exceptionally sanguine and systematic scheme to instill republican virtue through both popular and elite education.⁷⁸ Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* offer a plan for statewide public education in three tiers: elementary schools for all, grammar schools for "the best geniuses... raked from the rubbish annually," and a state capstone university to provide technical instruction for those "youths of genius" who can excel in "the useful sciences" (Jefferson 2002, 182-184).⁷⁹ He assumes a very uneven distribution of ability but believes that his system, "adapted to the years, the capacity, and the condition of every one" (Jefferson 2002, 183) can overcome mere accidents of birth and will guarantee that merit may rise.⁸⁰ In hindsight, Jefferson's vision may seem a rather naïve meritocracy with many lacunae; he does not realize his "best geniuses" may become a class that tends to reproduce itself and protect its own interests, and he assumes that intellectual ability and technical skill are the sole relevant criteria of excellence. But it serves as a reminder that the effort to educate an elite capable of sustaining republican government is not alien to America. In the twenty-first century, as reckless populism threatens political authority and demagogic ideologies dismiss constitutionalism, Adams' charge to remember that "the End of study is to make you a good Man and a useful Citizen" may even be essential.

⁷⁸ John Adams's views of elite and popular tensions in *A Defence of the Constitutions of the Government of the United States of America* (1851) provide a contemporary contrast to Jefferson's optimism. Adams argues that the human ambition for distinction is such that the two groups, the great and the many, will recur in every society, and that, since it will be impossible to suppress an aristocracy permanently, it ought to be quarantined in an upper house in the legislature (848).

⁷⁹ Jefferson eventually built the University of Virginia to be the centerpiece of this state system.

⁸⁰ For further treatment of Jefferson's theory, see Lorraine and Thomas Pangle, *The Learning of Liberty: The Educational Ideas of the American Founders* (1993).

CHAPTER 2:

The Role of the Knowers:

Plato on the Political Use of Philosophy

“A nation of philosophers is as little to be expected as the philosophical race of kings wished for by Plato. And in every other nation, the most rational government will not find it a superfluous advantage to have the prejudices of the community on its side.”¹

Introduction: The Platonic Point of Departure

If despite the deficiencies of contemporary meritocracy we do not wish to abandon the idea of excellence in education and in leadership, we should give fresh consideration to Plato. In the Western tradition, any account of education’s connection to political rule necessarily must evoke Socrates.² Because Plato lived in a world in which democracy was not the norm and required justification, he was perhaps able to see its vices and virtues more clearly than we who live in a world in which it is often considered the only legitimate form of government.³ The Platonic dialogues are one of the fountainheads of the tradition of liberal education, bequeathing to us a legacy in which the title to rule is bound up with the possession of knowledge. One of Plato’s most consistent metaphors for the relationship between ruler and ruled is that of teacher and student.⁴ At the risk of

¹ Madison, *The Federalist Papers* (1961, #49).

² See Melissa Lane’s investigation of the relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge for Plato in “Plato on the Value of Knowledge in Ruling” (2018).

³ When dictatorial regimes challenge democracy, democrats would do well to have an articulate account of the justice of their system.

⁴ At 632b, the lawgiver teaches “what is noble and what is ignoble,” and at 700a-701a, those knowledgeable in music rule those who are not until the corrupt theocracy is set up (1980). As we shall see, Book VIII of the *Republic* (2016) develops this idea at most length. Another metaphor is the relationship of doctor and patient, such as at 342d and 389d. These metaphors provoke the necessary question: how is the pupil or patient in such a relationship to recognize the superior authority of the one offering to teach or to heal him? Does it all depend on the rightness or wrongness of the orientation of the first teacher, or is the gap between the teacher and student’s knowledge one only of

oversimplifying, to get education right, for Plato, simply is to get politics right. I will examine the related diagnoses of democracy and its relationship to knowledge in the *Republic* and the *Laws*. Each dialogue describes democracy as a potentially relatively healthy regime but one whose egalitarian norms render it vulnerable to a descent into disorder. In particular, both share a concern with the phenomena of democratic psychology—the way that the psyche itself may be diverted from its proper internal ordering by the experience of living under democracy. For Plato, the human soul that is harmonious and rightly ordered is necessarily a hierarchical one in which the appetites and the spirit heed the direction of the intellect: a psychic aristocracy. What I seek in this fresh consideration of Plato’s texts is to understand whether he can help us envision aristocratic souls arising within a democratic regime and acting as good leaders within it. If we hope to prolong the cycle of regimes and prevent democracy’s degeneration, we should desire an affirmative answer. Both dialogues offer prescriptions for education, although we will have to examine carefully what lessons the education of the Guardians of Kallipolis or of the citizens of Magnesia might have for our very different liberal-democratic context.

First, I examine the city-soul analogy that structures the quest for the definition of justice in the *Republic* (2016) in order to understand the implications of the critique of democratic psychology in Book VIII. I then turn to the parallel discussion in Book III of the *Laws* (2016a), which gives an analysis of Athenian history as a descent from a well-ordered democracy at the beginning of the fifth century to a corrupt one by its end. The corruption of civic virtue there is described as stemming from a corruption in the practice of attending and judging plays at the Dionysian theatre. I then examine the *Republic* and the *Laws* for their positive teaching on civic education. I conclude my close readings of these two dialogues by a meta-textual consideration; even if Plato did not mean that the regimes of

degree rather than of kind? The logic of technocracy tends to reduce all knowledge gaps to differences of degree.

Kallipolis or of Magnesia could ever really be implemented, he certainly presents his master Socrates as seeking to teach, and to form for the better, the young men attracted to his ideas. Thus the very form of the dialogues themselves can offer us a vision of what is necessary for the education of intelligent, ambitious young people away from the most perverse paths to greatness and towards ones that can serve the common good, a necessary re-orientation in any healthy regime but especially in a mass electoral democracy. At the end of the chapter, I reflect on two of the most striking differences between Plato, my chosen diagnostician of the psyche in ancient democracy, and Tocqueville, the one selected to portray modern democracy. First, Plato assumes that the good society can be defined without reference to history, whereas Tocqueville suggests that the just society of democracy is necessarily the result of a long historical process. Second, Plato assumes that the human soul is full of desires and that the task of education is to redirect those desires to good ends. Tocqueville, however, seems much more contemporary in claiming that our more pressing problem is actually apathy. Both of these divergent assessments of the present have enormous consequences for education. If *eros* is exhausted, education must endeavor to stir it up before trying to give it a better object. But if aristocracy is not just a relic of pre-democratic history but a necessary part of good government, educating an elite will require instilling both greatness and goodness. Thus Plato and Tocqueville's analyses are each necessary and mutually complementary.

Democracy's Flux in the *Republic*

What is unique, and uniquely pertinent for our purposes, about Plato's treatment of the forms of government in the *Republic*—clearly already an established *topos* of debate by the fifth century in Greece, as Herodotus' account of the coup against Cambyses in the Persian court reflects⁵—is that he relates each regime to a particular structure of the psyche to establish a principle of just rule. This is

⁵ See *The Histories* (1998) III.80-82.

the famous city-soul analogy: Seeking to understand whether justice is choice-worthy in itself for one man, Socrates points to justice writ large in the city (2016, 368d); “It looks to me as though the investigation we are undertaking is no ordinary thing, but one for a man who sees sharply. Since we’re not clever men,’ I said, ‘in my opinion we should make this kind of investigation of it: if someone had, for example, ordered men who don’t see very sharply to read little letters from afar and then someone had the thought that the same letters are somewhere else also, but bigger and in a bigger place, I suppose it would look like a godsend to be able to consider the littler ones after having read these first.” It is not immediately apparent why something so complicated as moral psychology should make more sense when examined at the much more complicated level of an entire city. At one level, it may be that a single person in total isolation from others is inconceivable and unintelligible, since “a city, as I believe, comes into being because each of us isn’t self-sufficient but is in need of much” (2016, 369b). But Socrates’ method in fact turns out to be a constant toggling back between the individual and the city in order for each to make sense in light of the other. Socrates says that this will produce heat and light for the question: “If something different should turn up in the single man, we’ll go back again to the city and test it; perhaps, considering them side by side and rubbing them together like sticks, we would make justice burst into flame” (2016, 435a). It becomes established that the soul’s faculties of reason, spirit, and appetite correlate to the philosophers, the Guardians, and the producers. When there is justice between the classes in the city, relating harmoniously and each fulfilling its role, “the whole city will naturally grow to be one and not many” (2016, 423d). The equivalent in the individual is when “he arranges himself, becomes his own friend, and harmonizes the three parts, exactly like three notes in a harmonic scale” (2016, 443a). Once the healthy soul and city are described as aristocracies in which the truly best, the intellect and the philosophers, rule the other parts, Socrates gives a detailed account in Book VIII of the four other corrupt regimes and their psychic equivalents: timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny.

This city-soul analogy has not always fared well in modern political thought—James Madison refused to analogize the three branches of government to the powers of the soul and emphasized the difficulty of understanding either⁶—and twentieth-century scholarly treatments of it have often been skeptical. Bernard Williams accused Plato of using the analogy “to have it both ways,” allowing his political priority of rule by reason to obscure the subjugation of the unphilosophical many by the few philosophers.⁷ Williams reads the analogy as meaning simply that each type of regime and soul is determined by its dominant part. For the city to have peace, the producing class must have just enough *logistikon* to recognize the authority of their superiors, but not enough to deserve to rule themselves.⁸ It is particularly difficult to establish the causal mechanism operating between the individual level and the city as a whole. At some level, it is simply that a large number of individuals of a certain psychic type will affect the character of the city. Socrates asks Glaucon sarcastically, “Do you suppose that the regimes arise ‘from an oak or rocks’ and not from the dispositions of the men in the cities, which, tipping the scale as it were, draw the rest along with them?” (2016, 544e).

A number of recent analyses have worked on this causal element to give the city-soul analogy a more positive reception: Jonathan Lear has defended an account of the processes of externalization and internalization that can lead to a psyche mirroring a constitution and vice versa.⁹ In this he helpfully draws attention to Plato’s emphasis on the plasticity of the human psyche, given our capacity for imitating patterns and exemplars: “Plato seems to be saying that, through proper imitations from youth, one actually constitutes oneself as a certain type of person” (Lear 1992, 187). Lear thus focuses

⁶ See *The Federalist Papers* (1961) #37.

⁷ See Bernard Williams, “On the Analogy of City and Soul in Plato’s *Republic*” (1973), 199.

⁸ Williams’ exasperated conclusion is: “There have been those who thought that the working classes were naturally of powerful and disorderly desires, and had to be kept in their place. There have been those who thought that they were good-hearted and loyal fellows of no great gifts who could recognize their natural superiors and, unless stirred up, keep themselves in their place. There can have been few who have thought both; Plato in the *Republic* came close to being such a one” (1973, 204).

⁹ See “Inside and Outside the Republic” (1992).

his attention on Plato's insistence that poetry be subordinated to political ends, because it has the power to shape what citizens find attractive and thus to form their psyches. The city/soul parallel is no "mere analogy," but a "an isomorphism which must hold due to the way we function psychologically. Psyche and polis, inner world and outer world, are jointly constituted by reciprocal internalizations and externalizations; and the analogy is the byproduct of this psychological dynamic" (Lear 1992, 193). Those below the philosophers in Kallipolis do not have true reason of their own, but they participate in reason by virtue of their education, which has taught them to desire only what is good for them.

G.R.F. Ferrari has defended the analogy but denied Lear's causal interpretation of it.¹⁰ Going through the account of the descent of the regimes in Book VIII, he argues that in all of them except the extremes of philosophical and tyrannical rule, there is no suggestion that the ruler remakes the city in the image of his soul. The analogy is instead meant to work structurally; the oligarchy's repression of the demos' consumption, for instance, is like the oligarchic man's cruel bridling of his desires in order to accrue profits, but that does not mean that we should assume that the leading men of the oligarchy are at all temperate. Kevin Crotty has emphasized the relationship between justice and being: Justice alone is capable of forging a whole human being from the mere aggregation that is the ordinary soul's jumble of desires, and a city with a constitution from a mere multitude.¹¹ My own view is that Lear is right to identify a causal process of imitation at work in the *Republic's* psychological politics, and that Crotty is right to focus attention on the underlying metaphysical argument. Following Ferrari, I will show how the causal process behind the descent of the regimes may unfold in order to understand why Plato thinks democracy contains the potential for its own destruction.

¹⁰ See *City and Soul in Plato's Republic* (2003).

¹¹ See *The City-State of the Soul: Constituting the Self in Plato's Republic* (2016).

It bears repeating that each type of soul, and each type of city, is driven by a desire for a particular kind of good: The true aristocracy of Kallipolis, then, is motivated by the love of truth.¹² Its rulers possess a genuine wisdom and are in contact with Being. Timocracy is driven by the spirited love of honor, oligarchy by the necessary appetites, and democracy by the unnecessary appetites. These are not, however, identifiable with the motivations of the individuals who resemble the regimes, except in the lowest case of the tyrant. Tyranny is in flight from Being—for what could be lower than the unnecessary appetites? The tyrant likewise lacks courage, justice, wisdom, and moderation. He is a kind of inhuman monster. When introducing this figure at 566a, Socrates describes the demagogue's descent into tyranny as to “turn from a human being into a wolf.” What is it about democracy that lends itself to descent into this bestial state? After all, Plato's description of the democratic city is nuanced enough that it has led some readers to interpret Plato as a defender of democracy. The entire conversation that gives Socrates' arguments a hearing is possible in the democratic city of Athens; possibly only there, despite the demos' later decision to kill Socrates, could such a man have played such a role with such relative freedom, and only there would leisure and learning have been abundant enough to give him an audience.¹³

Socrates lends some credence to this reading by associating both the city and the soul of democracy with the philosophical quest for the best *politeia*. Democracy has a certain multiplicity and variety which is beautiful and bedazzling, “like a many-colored cloak.”¹⁴ Thus, “it's a convenient place

¹² One of the peculiarities of Plato's account of *kallipolis* is the apparent indifference between the rule of philosopher-kings and of a philosopher-king. Does it not matter to him whether the best regime is one of the one or the few, as long as the ruling souls are of sufficient quality? Unlike the truth or virtue of the philosophers' aristocracy, the honor of the timocracy is a relative term, implying it could only be the principle of a **plural** regime.

¹³ In *Plato's Democratic Entanglements: Athenian Politics and the Practice of Philosophy* (2000), Sarah Monson notes a number of parallels between Socrates' political rhetoric and the conventions of debate at Athens.

¹⁴ This description reminds me of Saruman, who in his hour of treachery reveals to Gandalf that he no longer wears a cloak of pure white, but a shifting one of every hue. See J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of*

to look for a regime” because “it contains all species of regimes, and it is probably necessary for the man who wishes to organize a city, as we were just doing, to go to a city under democracy. He would choose the sort that pleases him, like a man going into a general store of regimes, and, having once chosen, he would thus establish his regime” (2016, 557d). Democracy, it seems, is capacious enough to acknowledge and give some room for the authoritative principles, and ruling values, of each of the other regime-types. It allows for multiple ways of life to be pursued. In the description of the democratic man, the son of the oligarch, Socrates notes that he can sometimes discipline himself and aspire to higher things. In fits and starts, he admires athletic discipline, philosophical wisdom, military honor, statesmanship, and mercantile productivity, and samples the life characteristic of each:

“He also lives along day by day, gratifying the desire that occurs to him, at one time drinking and listening to the flute, at another downing water and reducing; now practicing gymnastic, and again idling and neglecting everything; and sometimes spending his time as though he were occupied with philosophy. Often he engages in politics and, jumping up, says and does whatever chances to come to him; and if he ever admires any soldiers, he turns in that direction; and if it’s money-makers, in that one. And there is neither order nor necessity in his life, but calling this life sweet, free, and blessed, he follows it throughout” (2016, 561c-d).

What is characteristic of democracy is not that anarchy, or even self-indulgence, completely take over, but that no single principle rules. As Mark Johnstone has shown, the democratic soul, unlike democracy, is not dominated by the appetites: “Plato intended us to understand the democratic man as having an ‘anarchic’ soul – that is, one that is not ruled in a stable and enduring way by **any** of its elements or parts. Rather, I claim, his soul is temporarily ruled by a succession of desires, which are of a full range of different kinds.”¹⁵ For Juliane Rebenitsch as well, democracy according to Plato is characterized by a simultaneous expansion of the range of options for choice and a diminishing of the

the Rings (2004, 259): “I looked then and saw that his robes, which had seemed white, were not so, but were woven of all colours, and if he moved they shimmered and changed hue so that the eye was bewildered.”

¹⁵ Johnstone’s “Anarchic Souls: Plato’s Depiction of the ‘Democratic Man,’” (2013, 140-1), emphasis original.

intellect's ability to consider the consequences of action.¹⁶ But this soul need not manifest, to an external observer, as particularly disorderly.

Plato suggests a causal link here between the structure of the regime and the structure of the soul: The political principle of equality, understood as sharing equally in collective decision-making, each possessing equal authority to deliberate, risks teaching over time the psychological principle that all desires are equally valid if the majority wills them. This can grow into indifference between impulses. In each of the previous regimes, the authority of the fathers exercises some restraint—there is residual deference to the previous generation, and the longer time-horizon provides a check. The timocrats “will harvest pleasures stealthily, running away from the law like boys from a father. This is because they weren’t educated by persuasion but by force” (2016, 548b). The timocratic man comes into being by listening to his mother’s complaints about his wise and decent but apolitical father and becoming ashamed of him (2016, 549c-d). The oligarchic man becomes fearful after seeing his honor-loving father humiliated by the city, and retreats into a private life of money-making. But the generational link then breaks: the man vulnerable to becoming like a democracy has been “reared without education and stingily” (2016, 559d). Not properly instructed by his father who sought short-sighted economies, democratic man becomes unreceptive to any real teaching, though he welcomes flatterers. He “lives his life in accord with a certain equality of pleasures he has established. To whichever one happens along, as though it were chosen by the lot, he hands over the rule within himself until it is satisfied; and then again to another, dishonoring none but fostering them all on the basis of equality” (2016, 561b). The only falsehood, in his eyes, is to claim that some desires are false

¹⁶ Juliane Rebintisch, *The Art of Freedom: On the Dialectics of Democratic Existence* (2016); Part I treats Plato. I am indebted to René de Nicolay for drawing my attention to her work and to Johnstone’s.

and others true. Those who purport to establish an authoritative hierarchy among his desires he eschews.¹⁷

The step from being this sort of egalitarian dilettante to becoming a tyrant is small. This creates an unusually direct parallel between the state of the city and the state of the soul: as Socrates reverts from describing the democratic man to his portrait of the democratic city and how it falls under the sway of a tyrant, he returns again to this pedagogical theme. At democracy's end, even the natural authority of fathers over sons and the intellectual authority of teachers over pupils becomes unbearable.¹⁸

As the teacher in such a situation is frightened of the pupils and fawns on them, so the students make light of their teachers, as well as of their attendants. And, generally, the young copy their elders and compete with them in speeches and deeds while the old come down to the level of the young; imitating the young, they are overflowing with facility and charm, and that's so that they won't seem to be unpleasant or despotic (2016, 563a).

In fact, to be unpleasant and to be despotic have become identified, for such students. Any check on their immediate will is experienced as arbitrary coercion; any claim to know better what is good is heard as tyranny. To side with Lear against Ferrari, this parallel between the problems of the democratic man and the democratic city is strong enough to justify a causal inference—the mimetic process of living in a democratic regime tends to produce democratic souls. Democracy's lack of social hierarchy eventually erodes the plausibility of any moral or metaphysical hierarchy. Democratic man chafes at the very education required to make him into a self-governing citizen. And he resents those who put themselves forward as more excellent or worthy than himself, creating a dearth of precisely

¹⁷ “He doesn't admit true speech or let it pass into the guardhouse, if someone says that there are some pleasures belonging to fine and good desires and some belonging to bad desires, and that the ones must be practiced and honored and the others checked and enslaved. Rather, he shakes his head at all this and says that all are alike and must be honored on an equal basis” (Plato 2016, 561c).

¹⁸ For Plato, pedagogical and paternal authority cannot be set apart from political authority. Their fates are intertwined.

those leaders who could secure far-sightedness and stability in government. This leaves the city vulnerable to flatterers, tyrants in the making who promise to fulfill any and all desires.

The Quest for Balance in the *Laws*

Given this causal connection between the form of the regime and the structure of the soul, we might wonder whether the soul's regime can be kept different from the city's. If a democratic city teaches its citizens to be democratic people, the descent into tyranny that Book VIII narrates may be inevitable. But if a democratic city can teach its citizens to have noble souls, souls capable of restraining and elevating their desires, souls that are in Plato's sense aristocratic, the degeneration into tyranny may be prevented. While ancient mixed constitutions are familiar as institutionalized at Sparta and Rome and as theorized by Polybius and Cicero, this Platonic idea may be called a mixed regime in the soul. While the *Republic* leaves this crucial possibility largely unexplored, except in the description of democracy's diversity and the suggestion that the philosopher may be resident in a city "in heaven" despite being physically present in an unworthy city,¹⁹ it is left to the *Laws* to sketch a political and educational apparatus around the hope of fostering counterbalancing impulses in the soul.²⁰

¹⁹ "He will [mind the political things] in the city whose foundation we have now gone through, the one that has its place in speeches, since I don't suppose it exists anywhere on earth."

'But in heaven,' I said, 'perhaps, a pattern is laid up for the man who wants to see and found a city within himself on the basis of what he sees. It doesn't make any difference whether it is or will be somewhere. For he would mind the things of this city alone, and of no other' (2016, 592a-b).

²⁰ For accounts of the relationship between the *Laws* and the *Republic*, see Malcolm Schofield, "The Disappearing Philosopher-King" (1990), and Andre Laks, "Legislation and Demiurgy: On the Relationship between Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*" (1990). Laks regards the city of the *Laws* as the best regime practicable; Schofield focuses on the discussion in Book IV of the ideal founder of the city to conclude the direct knowledge of philosophy is not essential in the *Laws*, though much of the institutional design is intended to instill philosophical knowledge in rulers and people indirectly. Julia Annas, in "Virtue and Law in Plato" (2010), proposes that the laws together with their preambles take on the educational role that philosophy plays in the *Republic*.

In *Laws* Book III, the Athenian Stranger lists three desiderata for a good city: freedom, friendship, and wisdom.²¹ Clearly these exist in a certain tension—if the wise rule by dominating the unwise, the city may have wisdom, but it will have no freedom, and there will be no friendship between rulers and ruled. There is a city-soul analogy operative in the *Laws* as well, supporting the idea of a hierarchy of wisdom both in the city and in the individual. The Stranger explains, “In the soul... the part that feels pain and pleasure is like the populace and the majority in the city. So when the soul opposes knowledge, or opinions, or reason—the natural rulers—this I call lack of intelligence: in a city, when the majority refuses to obey the rulers and the laws, and in one man, when the noble arguments in the soul achieve nothing, but indeed go contrary to these things” (1980, 698b).²² Friendship, in the context of the musical metaphors for rule used throughout the *Laws*, recalls the internal *homonoia* that is the great desideratum of the *Republic*. The Stranger then lists the two regimes that, like primary colors, can form all others by their combinations:

“There are, as it were, two mothers of regimes. It would be correct for someone to say that the others spring from these, and correct to call one monarchy and the other democracy... Almost all other regimes... are woven from these. Both of them should and must necessarily be present if there is to be freedom and friendship, together with prudence” (1980, 693d-e).

Having already by this point praised Sparta as a well-mixed and balanced regime, with its *gerousia*, ephors, and dual kingship, he lists Persia and Athens as the exemplars of each extreme type and proceeds to give a history of their corruption over time.

The defects of both regimes stem from a lack of proper education in the rulers.²³ This is because politics itself is a matter of holding up certain things as worthy of praise and blame, teaching

²¹ For an overview of definitions on political freedom in ancient Greece, see Kurt Raaflaub, *The Discovery of Freedom in Ancient Greece* (2004).

²² This section refers to Thomas Pangle’s translation of the *Laws* (1980).

²³ Earlier, Kleinias the Spartan and the Athenian Stranger defined education as proper habituation of the desires: “Education, I say, is the virtue that first comes into being in children. Pleasure and liking, pain and hatred, become arranged in the souls of those who are not yet able to reason, and then, when the souls do become capable of reasoning, these passions can in consonance with reason

the citizens what to pursue. The Stranger lists three kinds of desires—for the goods of the soul, those of the body, and those of the external world—which resemble but do not perfectly parallel the goods of the intellect, spirit, and appetite that define the regimes in the *Republic*.²⁴

“If a city is to be preserved and is to become happy within the limits of human power, **it must necessarily apportion honors and dishonors correctly**. The correct apportionment is one which honors most the good things pertaining to the soul (provided it has moderation), second, the beautiful and good things pertaining to the body, and third, the things said to accrue from property and money. If some lawgiver or city steps outside this ranking either by promoting money to a position of honor or by raising one of the lesser things to a more honorable status, he will do a deed that is neither pious nor statesmanlike” (1980, 697b-c, emphasis mine).

The Stranger launches the critique by describing Persia at its best, two centuries before Plato’s time, when Cyrus the Great established the empire. “The rulers shared their freedom with the ruled” (1980, 694a), enabling commoners to identify their good with that of the regime. The soldiers fought bravely. Anyone with something wise to say could offer counsel to the king (an instance of *parrhesia*, frank speech, under monarchy),²⁵ and “everything prospered for them in those days because of freedom and friendship and a common sharing in intelligence” (1980, 694b). But problems arose from the succession because Cyrus was “a good general and a friend to his city,” but “failed completely to grasp what is a correct education, and didn’t direct his mind at all to household management” (1980, 694), so that he neglected his own family.

affirm that they have been correctly habituated in the appropriate habits. This consonance in its entirety is virtue; that part of virtue which consists in being correctly trained as regards pleasures and pains so as to hate what one should hate from the very beginning until the end, and also to love what one should love—if you separate this off in speech and assert that this is education, you will, in my view, be making a correct assertion” (1980, 653b-c).

²⁴ In general, the moral psychology of the *Laws* closely resembles that of the *Republic*, but *thumos* plays a smaller role, and the metaphor of the soul as a puppet pulled by many strings places more emphasis on balance than on unity. See M.M. Sasi, “The Self, the Soul, and the Individual in the City of the *Laws*,” (2008), and S. Sauvé Meyer, “Pleasure, Pain, and ‘Anticipation’ in Plato’s *Laws*” (2012).

²⁵ For a discussion of the history and significance of *parrhesia*, see Matthew Landauer, “*Parrhesia* and the *Demos Tyrannos*: Frank Speech, Flattery and Accountability in Democratic Athens” (2012).

The Stranger goes on to say that Cyrus' sons received an indulgent "education which had been corrupted by the so-called happiness of the Medes... [They] turned out as one would expect, after having been brought up without any restraint" (1980, 695a), lacking the hard virtues that martial experience and the traditional Persian training might have inculcated. On Cyrus' death, one son committed fratricide, became a drunkard, and promptly lost his throne (1980, 695b). While the *Laws* does seem to assign some blame to the good kings for allowing their heirs to become corrupt, the passage concludes with a general condemnation of "the evil life led for the most part by children of exceptionally rich and tyrannical men" (1980, 696a) and a praise of Spartan asceticism. The concluding verdict on the Persians is that the badly-educated rulers have destroyed the unity of the polity: "By bringing in more despotism than is appropriate, they destroyed the friendship and community within the city. Once this is corrupted, the policy of the rulers is no longer made for the sake of the ruled and the populace, but instead for the sake of their own rule" (1980, 697d). Means and ends are hopelessly confused in such a constitution. The result is that Persian subjects will not risk their lives for the empire by serving in its armies; the Great King has to hire mercenaries to replenish his ranks.

The failure of the succession in Athenian democracy requires a more complicated story, because the succession of the entire citizen body is an inherently more complicated matter than that of a single king. Whereas the bad upbringing of Cyrus' sons can be understood within the ordinary meaning of education, the malformation of the *demos* can only be seen by a broader definition that includes the habits learned through the practices of civic life. Initially, as the Stranger tells it, Athens had a relatively moderate constitution. Not only was there a property qualification for voting, but the citizens were ashamed to be immoderate and they held the laws in reverence: "Total freedom from all rule is to small extent inferior to a measured degree of rule by others... there was an ancient regime with certain rulers based on a division into four classes. In it was a certain despotic mistress—Awe—on account of whom we were willing to live as slaves of the laws" (1980, 698b). Lest this seem mere

nostalgia, the Athenian goes on to describe the salutary effects of the threat of Persian invasion. Those who did not fear the laws were induced to cooperate by their fear of enslavement to Persia; this crisis forged a resolute unity from the whole. Interestingly, the Stranger describes this part of Athenian history entirely in terms of the actions of collective nouns: “the Athenians,” “we,” “they.” Individual leaders, such as Themistocles, who features so prominently in Herodotus’ account of Salamis, are not mentioned.

“All of these things instilled in them a friendship for one another: fear, both that which came at the time and that which sprang from the laws they already had—the fear which they possessed as a result of their enslavement to those previous laws, which we have often in the arguments before called ‘awe,’ and which we claimed those who are going to be good must be enslaved to. The coward is free from this and is fearless in respect to it” (1980, 699c).

Yet the victory achieved at Salamis soon allowed Athens to become complacent.

With nothing external to fear (the Stranger diplomatically occludes the Peloponnesian War in the following generation from the history he gives to a Spartan), the fear of the laws itself begins to fade. Order became lost to arbitrary power, and something like Persia took over at Athens after all. “**My people have in a way suffered the same thing the Persians suffered**—they by leading their populace into complete slavery, and we by leading the majority in the opposite direction, into complete freedom” (1980, 699e, emphasis mine). What is so striking about this account is that the first step does not occur in an apparently political realm; in another echo of the concerns of the *Republic*, the first failure comes in aesthetic education, which we might be inclined to regard as a private matter. In the laws about “music” was “the origin” of “the excessive development of the free way of life” (1980, 700a). The unleashing of the masses’ appetites began in the context of watching drama. The Stranger sketches the scene at great competitions like the Dionysian Festival. Once, many imitated the judgment of those few who had good taste in music, and the vulgar who could not restrain themselves were restrained by force:

“It was accepted practice for the educated to listen in silence until the end, while the children and their attendants and the general mob were kept in order by the threat of beating” (1980, 700c).

Only the judges voted, and applause and shouts from the audience were rare and had no weight. Then certain talented poets, “ignorant about what is just and lawful for the Muse” fell into a “Bacchic frenzy, more overwhelmed by pleasure than they should have been” (1980, 700d). The audience responded enthusiastically, letting the visceral experience of musical pleasure overwhelm any theoretical knowledge of the principles of music or deference to the judges. Then the many began to assume themselves to be qualified to judge the merits of works of art, and to vote on the prizes, making noise rather than listening attentively. What might seem only a shift in aesthetic taste actually heralds an irreversible political revolution:

“In place of an aristocracy in music, a wretched theocracy has emerged. If only there had emerged a democracy of free men, in music, what has happened wouldn’t be so terrible. But as it was, the opinion that everyone is wise in everything, together with lawlessness, originated in our music, and freedom followed. People became fearless, as if they were knowers, and the absence of fear engendered shamelessness” (1980, 701a).

Political democracy can be sustained as long as an aesthetic aristocracy—which corresponds to an aristocracy within the soul—endures.

Lest this Platonic story seem merely the contrived fable of a crank who prefers archaic music, we must stress again the familiar concern with order in the soul and with education that is as prominent in the *Laws* as in the *Republic*. The root problem is that the poets emancipate passion, subjecting what is higher in the soul to what is lower. Shame is not as adequate a restraint as true *sophrosune*,²⁶ but it can be an effective proxy for those whose souls are not well ordered. But with shame delegitimated, the soul’s immediate desires, unrestrained by external commands or its own word given in the past, can run riot:

²⁶ In Aristotelian terms, this is the distinction between the continent person and the temperate one.

“After this freedom would come the sort that involves the loss of the willingness to be enslaved to the rulers; following upon this is the rejection of the enslavement to and guidance by one’s father and mother and elders; the next to the last stage involves seeking not to have to obey laws; after this comes the ultimate freedom when they cease to give any more thought to oaths and pledges and everything pertaining to the gods, but instead display and imitate what is called the ancient Titanic nature” (1980, 701b-c).

At this concluding point, the stranger takes the discussion to a theological level. Like the Titans, the passionate desires unleashed in a disordered democracy are the primordial rulers of the soul. But also like the Titans, they are not the most fitting or authoritative rulers, and their attempts to rebel against the wiser Olympians are futile, destined only to harm themselves.²⁷ The Stranger concludes Book III’s argument with a restatement of the case for the mixed regime. For the three desiderata for a good city—freedom, friendship, and reason—neither absolute monarchy nor unbridled democracy will do: “When either—the despotic or the free—was limited within measure, affairs went outstandingly well; but when either marched on to its extreme—the one to slavery and the other to the opposite—there was no advantage in either case” (1980, 701e). Both extreme, pure constitutions have been shown to be the rule of passion, of the lowest part of the soul over the rest. Thus, the quest for a mixed constitution is also an effort to establish a mixed and balanced regime in the soul. Such a regime is characterized by a hierarchy of desires and a suspicion of one’s immediate impulses: “Excessive friendship for oneself is the cause of all of each man’s wrongdoings on every occasion... So every human being should flee excessive self-love, and should instead always pursue someone who is better than himself, without putting any feeling of shame in the way” (1980, 731e, 732b).²⁸

The Positive Vision of the *Republic*

Having examined the complementary diagnosis of democracy’s vices in the *Laws*, I want to return to the *Republic* to see what its positive vision of an education to prevent the dominance of the

²⁷ The expulsion of the Titans from Olympus is told at lines 624-721 of Hesiod’s *Theogony* (1987).

²⁸ For this discussion of how freedom undermines itself in Book III of the *Laws*, I have found helpful René de Nicolay’s “The Birth of Unlawful Freedom in Plato’s *Laws* 3” (2021).

democratic soul is. But Plato does not at first seem particularly encouraging about the prospects for sowing a democracy with aristocratic souls who may be able to serve it. The portrait of the aristocratic man in a democracy is designed to make us sympathize with his son, who reacts to him with contempt and quickly becomes a glory-seeking timocrat. The *Republic* considers how to raise aristocratic souls in the education of the guardians. When first introduced in Book 2, the guardians are needed for war, because a city with luxury will want more and thus will come into conflict with its neighbors. Even though this education is a preparation for the specific profession of soldiering, it more liberal than training for craftsmanship because it “would require more leisure time than the other tasks as well as greater art and diligence” (2016, 374e). Like dogs, “they must be gentle to their own and cruel to enemies” (2016, 375c), picking up on Polemarchus’ initial definition of justice. While this devotion to one’s own might seem to be simple bigotry or prejudice, Socrates describes this as a philosophic quality that accompanies the physical strength and speed of the guardians, since the doglike guardian discriminates on the basis of what is known and unknown. “How it can be anything other than a lover of learning since it defines what’s its own and what’s alien by knowledge and ignorance” (2016, 376b). The implicit problem seems to be that if the guardians become curious about the world beyond their city, they will become unable to serve it with this single-minded devotion. This issue of curiosity arises again in the context of the education in “gymnastic for bodies and music for the soul” (2016, 376e), because musical education includes an initiation into the poetry about the gods.

If the first round of the education of the guardians in Book II made them seem merely like timocrats, disciplined and devoted to the honor of the city to be protected and advanced in war, the more developed discussion in Book VII of the guardians who are also to be philosopher-kings, as distinct from mere “auxiliaries,” adds a theoretical element and elevates their motivations. Socrates stresses the liberal character of this curriculum, mocking Glaucon for being “afraid of the many in your not wanting to seem to command useless studies” (2016, 527d). The goal of these theoretical

studies is that “those who are going to rule” be “least eager to rule” so that the city may be “governed in the way that is best and freest from faction” (2016, 520d), and they are to achieve this by drawing “the soul [of future rulers] from becoming to being” (2016, 521b). The first of these studies is arithmetic, initially because of its value in military strategy, but then the student discovers that it leads him to comprehend quantity itself. Three more mathematical disciplines are then introduced: plane and solid geometry, which is “for the sake of knowing what is always, and not at all for what is at any time coming into being and passing away” (2016, 526b), and astronomy, described as the discipline closest to philosophy. The stars, “these decorations in the heavens, since they are embroidered on a visible ceiling, may be believed to be the fairest and most precise of such things; but they fall far short of the true ones, those movements in which the really fast and the really slow—in true number and in all the true figures—are moved with respect to one another and in their turn move what is contained in them” (2016, 529c-d). In an ironic twist, Socrates says that this is all intended to convert the prudence in the soul from uselessness to usefulness” (52016, 30c). Once the philosopher-kings have ascended through dialectic as far as the climactic vision of the good which gives all of these lesser studies purpose and coherence, “They must be compelled, each in his turn, to use it as a pattern for ordering city, private men, and themselves for the rest of their lives. For the most part, each one spends his time in philosophy, but when his turn comes, he drudges in politics and rules for the city’s sake, not as though he were doing a thing that is fine, but one that is necessary” (2016, 540a-b). Thus is born the moderate, even apolitical aristocratic soul that so frustrates the young timocrat.

What lessons might be drawn from Socrates’ curriculum for the philosopher-kings of Kallipolis for our own situation, in a very different regime? There are many mysteries about the way in which dialectic is supposed to effect this almost-miraculous turning of the soul, the prelude to the liberation of the chained prisoner in the cave (2016, 515c). Presumably such a transformation would require a teacher who is already philosophic, familiar with the sunlight of the Good. But I think we

can identify a number of themes or modes in Plato's education that are alien to or at least neglected in contemporary liberal learning. First is the element of discipline and courage that is apparent in the elementary gymnastics. With the exception of some token physical education requirements, subjecting the body to a regime of rigors is not usually included in liberal arts curricula today. The aesthetic element, the cultivation of a taste for a certain kind of beauty through music and poetry, is also described as foundational. There is a great stress placed on abstraction, on the ability to entertain a concept theoretically and to trace all of its implications in order to come to understand an aspect of Being itself. This is in contrast to educational theories that value the immanent and the experiential, as we will see in John Dewey's account in Chapter 4. Education is intended to draw the pupil out of himself, away from egoism. And a fourth key theme is the stress on dialectic; on constant argument, putting ideas under pressure through discussing them with others. Though Socrates famously denigrates book-learning for the reason that the book cannot argue back,²⁹ making it inferior to conversation with a teacher like himself, a modern great books seminar does in principle embody three of these four elements: the abstract, bringing a student out of his or her limited experience and potentially narcissistic concerns, the aesthetic, giving the student a vision of great beauty, and the argumentative, encouraging students to wrestle together with themselves and with their teachers about the implications of the arguments laid before them. Elements of this Platonic approach that are too often neglected in great books curricula, though, are scientific and physical education. I would argue that we as educators should take seriously Plato's ambition to form students' souls to have a sense of their place in the ordered whole of the cosmos; great books education's weakness lies in its apparent withdrawal into the world of human things divorced from the physical realm. Socrates notes this vice

²⁹ In the *Phaedrus* (1925) 275d-e, Socrates warns, "Every word, once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself."

of the education of the young in dialectic: that they are prone to misuse arguments “as though it were play, always using them to contradict” (2016, 539b), “like puppies enjoying pulling and tearing with argument at those who happen to be near” (2016, 539b).

Assuming this education were to succeed in its ambitions to shape the character of future leaders, what could we infer would be their positive and negative traits? The potential benefits are clearly described in the education of the guardians, who are to be courageous to the point of facing death unflinchingly, in love with the truth so as to judge with consistent wisdom, and restrained in their personal desires so as to put the good of the city above their own. In contrast to today’s meritocrats, while they are born and selected to rule, they do not seem to view their positions as private possessions earned by their own labor, and in contrast to today’s technocrats they have a much wider vision of the knowledge desirable in governing well (knowledge of astronomy and physics do not typically feature in modern civil service curricula). But these desirable qualities are most fully manifest in Kallipolis, where the guardians share all their goods and even family life in common, including women and children. Outside of that political setting, would an education modeled on that of the guardians really produce any desirable qualities? Our clearest clues as to that are given at the end of Book VII and in the description of the man with an aristocratic soul. Among the philosopher-kings who have seen the Good, there is no impulse to seek to rule. “For the most part, each one spends his time in philosophy, but when his turn comes, he drudges in politics and rules for the city’s sake, not as though he were doing a thing that is fine, but one that is necessary” (2016, 540b). Though they are honored after death as gods or heroes, this memorialization does not seem to motivate them at all.

Book 8 allows us to isolate the variable of the philosopher-king’s education somewhat; the man who is like Kallipolis in soul but “lives in a city that is not under a good regime” (2016, 549c) is visible in glimpses through the eyes of others in the city. He notably fails to reproduce his virtues; he raises a timocratic son who wants to make a name for himself in politics, reacting against his father

who “flees the honors, the ruling offices, the lawsuits, and everything of the sort that’s to the busybody’s taste, and who is willing to be gotten the better of so as not to be bothered” (2016, 549c). He is so unassertive in the face of wrongs that he takes no revenge. The timocrat’s mother also finds the aristocratic man disappointing. She finds him not enough concerned with the family name nor with her, complaining to the son that his father “always turns his mind to himself and neither honors nor dishonors her very much,” because he is “lacking in courage and too slack” (2016, 549e). He is lacking in *thumos* because his *eros* is entirely oriented towards philosophy. Yet the father is not completely aloof from his family; he does play a certain role in the son’s education. “His father waters the calculating part of his soul” (2016, 550a), whereas the mother’s influence, the household servants’, and the talk of the town align to nourish “the desiring and spirited parts” (2016, 550b). The father succeeds in preventing the son from being completely dominated by his appetites, but fails to convince him of the unworthiness of the goods of honor. It is this pursuit of a shadow-good that begins the unraveling of the regimes towards tyranny in the rest of Book VIII.

If this is the good influence in a democratic city wielded by alumni of the guardians’ curriculum—which is limited to mitigating corruption in one’s own household—it would seem that philosophical education does little good outside of Kallipolis. Plato underlines this ambivalence towards the actual city at the end of Book IX, where Socrates and Glaucon discuss the philosopher’s restrained attitude towards wealth and honors, which leads him to pursue only what is good for his soul, because he “looks fixedly at the regime within him” (2016, 591e). Glaucon responds, “If that’s what he cares about, he won’t be willing to mind the political things” (2016, 592a). Socrates responds emphatically that he will care about the affairs of “his own city,” where he maintains citizenship even when dwelling in his earthly “fatherland”: “In heaven... a pattern is laid up for the man who wants to see and found a city within himself on the basis of what he sees. It doesn’t make any difference whether it is or will be somewhere. For he would mind the things of this city alone, and of no other” (2016

592b). It seems then that the truly philosophically educated person would be so universal as to be a cosmopolitan without loyalty to an earthly city. Here Plato presents the gulf between civic education and liberal education as apparently unbridgeable.

What the *Laws* Adds

Like the *Republic*, the *Laws* offers a positive account of an education to bridge the civic and liberal gap, in addition to its negative account of the miseducation of the heirs to the Persian monarchy and that of the Athenian demos. These are among the systems of rule that the Stranger calls “nonregimes”; “democracy and oligarchy and tyranny” “all would most correctly be termed ‘factions,’” “for none of them constitutes a voluntary rule over voluntary subjects” (1980, 832c). Essential to securing for Magnesia the freedom, friendship, and wisdom that are intended to prevent the descent into these mere factions by way of establishing the proper allocation of honor and shame will be the laws on education. This body of legislation takes up Book VII, even though the Stranger begins by acknowledging that much of education occurs “in private and in the home” (1980, 788a); as long as the domestic sphere exists apart from the public one, the legislators can only “utter a kind of instruction and admonition” about what education should be (1980, 788a). Much of this education closely resembles that of the Guardians in the *Republic*: gymnastics and music are its foundations, to shape the body and the soul. The concern with the shaping of bodies begins even in infancy with admonitions to mothers about how much to move their babies (1980, 789d-790a). All inhabitants of the city, men and women, slave and free, are to get some education in these two disciplines, but “the free men” (1980, 817e) are expected to go further to learn arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. Only “a certain few” are to “labor at all these things to the point of precise accuracy” (1980, 818a); these few turn out to be the prospective rulers, those who are to become “a god or a demon or a hero capable of exercising serious supervision over humans” (1980, 818c). These three mathematical subjects are also curiously marked as foreign, because “the whole mob of children in Egypt” learns

them (1980, 819b). They are nonetheless valuable for Greeks because they concern parts and wholes, comparison and commensurability, enabling the Magnesians to compete with each other in solving math puzzles, “and thus indulge their love of victory in leisure pursuits that are worthy of them” (1980, 820c). Unlike in the *Republic*, an element of the pursuit of glory remains a factor motivating (at least the initial stages of) philosophical education.

Music, and its corollary poetry, appear to receive a more sympathetic treatment than they do in the *Republic*, where the poets are banished from Kallipolis. The musicians called upon to educate the young explicitly do so by virtue of their craft’s alluring rhythms which provoke the desire to emulate what they contain, “singing to and enchanting the souls of the young and calling upon each of them to join in pursuing the acquisition of virtue, by means of the imitations” (1980, 812c). The pupil learns different genres of poetry; one of the major ones is *encomia* toward the city’s past heroes (1980, 801e-802a). Then dance comes on the scene as central to the poetic formation, since three types of dance can unite the individual and collective : warlike, peaceful, and pious. By means of these dances, “the same city, with citizens that are as similar to one another as possible, should experience the same pleasures, and live well and happily” (1980, 816d). At this point the Stranger introduces a new complication: how are the stories of the poets to be kept in accord with the city’s definitions of virtue and truth? Book III described the Athenian democracy as beginning to degenerate when taste in theatrical performances became democratized and the dramatists began to appeal directly to the passions of the crowd, ignoring the canons of good judgment established by the expert critics. In Magnesia, the poetic experts and the rulers will be one and the same, and they will prohibit any foreign literary work from being presented to the crowd “before its rulers had passed a judgment on whether or not the words and practices you had created were to be spoken in its midst or not” (1980, 817d).

Magnesia’s rulers claim the knowledge to judge poetry because politics is a kind of poetry. Their argument to the foreign poets who would introduce new stories to Magnesia is:

“We ourselves are poets, who have to the best of our ability created a tragedy that is the most beautiful and the best; at any rate, our whole political regime is constructed as the imitation of the most beautiful and the best way of life, which we at least assert to be really the truest tragedy.... We are your rivals as artists and performers of the most beautiful drama, which true law alone can by nature bring to perfection—as we hope” (1980, 817b-c).

What can it mean to call politics “the most beautiful drama,” and the regime an “imitation of the most beautiful and the best way of life”? Part of the answer seems to be that civic education and philosophical education are entirely aligned at Magnesia. Assuming that the city’s laws perfectly embody philosophical knowledge, the introduction of foreign ideas can only bring confusion for the citizens. The stories and songs of Magnesia are designed to foster a love of the principles that the laws aim at. The Stranger explains that, just as the criterion of the good lawgiver “is that he write not only laws, but, in addition to laws, things interwoven with the laws, writings that reveal what seems noble and ignoble to him,” that of the good citizen is having “passed his life in unbroken obedience to those writings in which the lawgiver legislates, praises, and blames” (1980, 823a). Viewed in this way, the city and the sum total of its institutions are a poem portraying the best human being as the best citizen. But why call it a “tragedy” (1980, 817b)?

Thomas Pangle’s commentary draws our attention to the fact that the dialogue of the *Laws* is part of the legislation that the Magnesians will have to read.³⁰ Thus they will see the drama of the reasoning that went into their city’s creation, “the perplexities the founders confronted, the aspirations they had to abandon or qualify, and the alternatives they rejected. [The citizens] will understand the achievements and disappointments to be the result not of unfathomable divine will, but of human reason struggling with natural necessities” (1980, 490). For Pangle, this tragic sense of the fragility and contingency of the achievement of founding the city is designed to mediate between the unreflective “passionate commitment to the love and defense of one’s own” and the critical questioning that

³⁰ Pangle’s “Interpretive Essay” is found on pp. 375-510 of the *Laws* (1980).

philosophy inculcates (1980, 486). The citizens are certainly not all philosophers, but their education does catch them up into contemplation of the fragile, contingent process by which universal ideas have been translated into the particularity of their experience. This is of a piece with the critique of courage in Book I. One of the reasons why courage in the pursuit of victory cannot be the chief virtue is that victory is not ever entirely subject to human control. Wisdom is a higher virtue because it acknowledges the contingency of human events and the fragility of hopes. “The philosopher’s reflection on his inability to achieve political success, and his refusal to take political success or failure very seriously, should be the source of the best city’s new attitude toward god and human destiny” (1980, 485). This civic education is of a peculiar kind; it emphasizes not the naturalness or the inevitability of the city, but its contingency, that it could have been otherwise, and it instills a love not for the city’s strength but for its vulnerability. For the purposes of designing civic education in a country like the United States, founded on the “reflection and choice” of *Federalist* #1 but also the historical inheritance of *Federalist* #2, the *Laws* offers a way to think about forming citizens to have loyalty to their country but simultaneously to have a reasoned appreciation of its goodness. The goal is not to imitate Crito or Polemarchus’ blind loyalty to one’s in-group; the goal is a Socratic citizenship.

Revisiting the Hierarchy of Goods

Having read key portions of the *Republic* and the *Laws* with close attention to their accounts of democracy’s psychic fragility and their educational prescriptions to instill a healthier psychology, I intend to consider what aspects of the Platonic diagnoses and prescriptions are pertinent to modern democratic experience. Central to the Platonic political art is the “correct way to apportion honors” to the pursuit of different kinds of goods (1980, 697a). If he is correct in this, all polities and politics are educational. Joshua Mitchell’s reading in *Plato’s Fable* helpfully relates the goods to the metaphysical problem of *mimesis*, imitation. Platonic man is always searching for *paradigma* to model himself on: “The mortal alternatives are not **whether** to imitate patterns, but rather **which** patterns to imitate:

mortal or divine, defective or perfect.”³¹ As honor and shame are given out in public life, different kinds of souls are formed. This helps to explain the process of internalization and externalization. Kallipolis is unique among cities for giving highest public honor to wisdom, true knowledge of the true good.³² Thus even those who are not philosophers in Kallipolis might be expected to value wisdom and ascribe prestige to those capable of pursuing it. Presumably, in a Kallipolitan school, a studious truth-seeking youngster would be praised as a potentially golden soul rather than mocked as a nerd. Timocracy as described in Book VIII seems to have much less *homonoia* (roughly, an agreement on values that secures social peace) than the aristocratic Kallipolis; the timocrats rise to power by sheer force of arms, “enslaving” the laborers and farmers (2016, 547c). Yet, here too we can imagine how non-timocrats could come to internalize the values of timocracy; young men or elderly men might hold themselves to be lesser because they are less capable of risking their lives in physical confrontations. Sometimes a member of the subjugated classes might be able to rise by displaying exceptional bravery in combat—Thucydides records an ill-fated case where the helots were promised liberty for fighting on behalf of Sparta but were betrayed.³³

How this process of imitation and internalization might work in oligarchies (which Plato presents as plutocracies defined by wealth), and in democracies is more familiar to us from modern societies. Delayed gratification in the pursuit of wealth is praised in oligarchies; Gilded Age children are raised on hagiographies of Andrew Carnegie and other paragons of “rags to riches,” while the children of the Dot Com boom grow up to admire Silicon Valley entrepreneurs. For wealth to rule

³¹ Joshua Mitchell, *Plato's Fable: On the Mortal Condition in Shadowy Times* (2006), 17.

³² This makes the city a kind of heavenly model, unlikely to ever be realized, as Socrates himself acknowledges (2016, 592a-b). Magnesia aims to set forth the same highest good for honor as Kallipolis, although the institutional form it takes is more earthly.

³³ See the Spartans' offer of freedom to two thousand particularly courageous helots at IV.80.3, in *The Landmark Thucydides* (1996). The Spartans then executed these helots, illustrating the cruelty endemic to timocracy.

with some measure of stability and not be immediately swept away by popular envy, it must be broadly admired. In democracies it is more difficult to identify the currency of distinction, in part because democracies pride themselves on not setting any particular individuals apart from the collective. Thus, democracies value civic friendship, and praise those who are civically friendly, who treat others as equals. The darker side of this is that democracies praise popularity itself, tracking opinion polls and trends to discover what is liked by many. As James Fenimore Cooper wrote in *The American Democrat* (1931, 175): “‘They say’ is the monarch of this country, in a social sense. No one asks ‘**who** says it,’ so long as it is believed that ‘**they** say it.’” In a democratic school, those who play nicely, who include others, who engage collaboratively, and who speak accessibly are praised. This is a process explicitly theorized in Rousseau’s *Emile*, a re-writing of the *Republic* intended to demonstrate the superiority of the democratic and truly philosophic soul over the aristocratic. Certainly, democracies are many-colored cloaks, allowing for other types of souls—the contemplative monk who lives for the Beatific Vision or the dedicated warrior who lives by an honor code may be suffered to exist at the margins, but they are not held up as central to the culture’s moral imagination. They are rather viewed as idiosyncratic individuals expressing their own preferences. The exception may be athletes and movie stars, since celebrity culture certainly continues to thrive in democracy. But even as people avidly consume these exemplars, they also delight in the tabloid press’s exposure of every sordid detail of celebrities’ personal lives. They are not truly held up as types of nobler ways to live.

The goods and corresponding desires held up as praiseworthy in each regime also fit into a clear pattern, descending from the most universal and intellectual to the most particular and bodily. Kallipolis is defined by the pursuit of the always-and-everywhere true, making it a good that is entirely independent of circumstances and social approval. After this, timocracy is an infinite step down—honor depends upon approbation from others, and achieving victory is subject to all manner of contingencies. Yet in timocracy the quality that is promoted is the willingness to risk bodily life in

courageous acts. This still reflects an aspiration towards the deathless, eternal realm. Oligarchies are focused on the real but minor goods of the transient world that secure the body's well-being, towards which the necessary appetites incline. In this delayed gratification, there is at least an attention to the future, even if it is only thought of as a site of potential profit. Democracy, by refusing to discriminate among the appetites, tends to presentism and self-indulgence. It has the lowest time-horizon short of tyranny. And the tyrant is in the most helpless position of all; pursuing each passing shadow on the wall of the cave as his fancy takes him, he is least able to make contact with the real. So external objects of desire act through him, because he does not truly grasp the grounds for acting. Despite all his apparent power, the tyrant is revealed as fundamentally passive and pitiable. Unjust acts are a turning away from being, and therefore ultimately unreal. There is a real sense in which only the philosopher, though superficially the most passive type of soul, truly acts; the divided and defective souls let life happen to them. The just soul described at the end of Book IV "binds [the parts of his soul] together and becomes entirely one from many, moderate and harmonized (2016, 443e)." "Then, and only then, he acts, if he does act in some way" (2016, 443e).

Democratic man believes himself to be free, but his is the freedom of spontaneous motion. "The democratic soul is, recall, proud of its 'spontaneity'—by which is really meant: confident that the rate at which the appetites 'come at him' is manageable. The democratic soul, the kaleidoscopic, responds as needs are felt and calls this a life of action" (Mitchell 2006, 158). The oligarchic man's situation is little better: "The oligarch accumulates because he is haunted by the spectre of depletion that his repressed appetites portend. He does not 'watch' because he has not time; he has no time because he is busy repressing the appetites he does not want to see" (Mitchell 2006, 159). He dwells in fear of the liberated appetites that democratic freedom would unleash, yet he cannot allow himself to love the whole range of human goods that drive the timocrat. He thus must fear himself, and especially fear death. The timocrat appears as both greater and crueler, since he is less overshadowed

by death. Continuing with Mitchell's account, "the oligarch measures success according to the temporal horizon of his own life and death; the timocrat measures victory according to the historical horizon of the city that honors him" (Mitchell 2006, 160-161). Yet, like the shade of Achilles in Hades, the timocrat is entirely dependent on those that come after him in the city preserving his life in speech. Even his noblest and best actions are not free of concern for their results, and thus they remain in a certain respect enslaved and unreal. "Philosophically speaking, the 'doing' that the timocratic man does is akin to a sports event. His deeds are remembered, **but for those who can truly see**, they have an unreal character about them because they occur within the confines of a game" (Mitchell 2006, 162, emphasis original). He excels above his fellow prisoners in the idle guessing games about the shadows on the wall of the cave, but he has never been able to peer beyond the cave's confines.

In this context, the distinctive qualities of the philosopher become apparent. He is the one who truly acts; since justice dwells within his soul, unifying its faculties and ordering its desires, his actions can be said to derive from him wholly, making him a true author, not a spectator or reactor. This principle of wholeness also translates into an ability to truly act politically, on behalf of the whole city, without merely serving the interests of a faction. After all, Socrates does make in the *Gorgias* the apparently baffling claim to be Athens' only statesman because of his philosophical ability to see the whole.³⁴ The philosopher's superiority to the timocrat lies in his relationship to temporality: "Action, as the timocrat will proudly point out, involves doing with a view to immortality... [but] the task is not to leave a mark **in time**, but rather to enter into communion with what is **beyond time**" (Mitchell 2006, 165). Knowing this, the philosopher can also give due honor to what is true in each of the other human types and regimes. He can appreciate the timocrat's scorn for death and the need for warriors

³⁴ "In company with a few Athenians—I don't want to say I'm the only one—I am attempting the true science of politics, and I think I'm the only one practicing politics among people today," 521d, *Gorgias*, in *Gorgias, Menexenus, and Protagoras* (2010).

to defend the weak. He can see in the oligarch's delayed gratification a simulacrum of *sophrosune*, and in the democrat's love of equality a commitment to an aspect of justice. Each of the other ruling types tends to suppress the philosopher; at best, they shunt him into obscurity but allow him to live. But the philosopher can give them each their due in the light of the whole. This will be precisely the attitude of magnanimity that Christopher Lasch calls for in any potential member of an elite.

The Democratic Age in History and in Truth

If we must copy a pattern, which one should we choose? There is path dependency in human life; the choice is often made for us. Unlike Plato, who attempted to step outside of the assumptions of his own polity and inquire into the nature of politics itself, other great political philosophers who offer a vision of social order often rely too much on the preservation of certain fortuitous starting conditions, which can then be imitated and reproduced as habits. The characteristic progressive objection to this move is to ask, what if the starting conditions are indelibly corrupted? In the American case, what if the history of slavery has inscribed the national psyche with such a penchant for domination and degradation that American freedom only perpetuates oppression?³⁵ The characteristic conservative worry is, What resources for renewal are there if the starting capital has been spent down across the course of the centuries?³⁶ To glance at three examples of thinkers who focus on inherited historical capital but do not reach Plato's metaphysical depths: Burke opposes to the ideological fanaticism of the Terror the inheritance of the unwritten British constitution, with its myriad tensions and nuances, contingent on a millennium of political developments that occurred nowhere else quite as they did in Britain.³⁷ Tocqueville's praise of American democracy is not the

³⁵ Nikole Hannah-Jones' argumentation in "The 1619 Project" is in this tradition. See her essay, "Our democracy's founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true," *New York Times*, August 14th, 2019.

³⁶ Yuval Levin's 2017 book, *The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism*, represents this strand of contemporary conservatism.

³⁷ This is the argument of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1999).

praise of popular sovereignty or the rule of the many in the abstract; it is praise of what has unfolded from the very particular “point of departure” that was New England.³⁸ Even Aristotle relies largely on convention, on habit, on the example of those usually acknowledged to be good men, to define excellence of character in the *Ethics*, and he assumes that character is usually fixed in childhood.³⁹ The most characteristic difference between his political teaching and Plato’s lies not in Aristotle’s qualified praise of democracy, but in his definition of election as an **oligarchic** mode of selecting leaders.⁴⁰ For election to be a means of selecting and promoting the *aristoi*, the body of voters would have to be willing to seek out and elevate good and wise people above themselves. Aristotle does not seem to consider Plato’s objection that the trend in democratic politics is for the citizenry to become impatient and contemptuous of anything purporting to be above them, turning elections into popularity contests won by flattery.⁴¹

The Thomist philosopher Yves Simon connects this Platonic thought about the potentially corrosive effects of democracy to the problem of finding political authority that is reconcilable with democratic government. Simon defends a high view of authority in his *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (1993), siding with Aquinas in arguing that even a perfectly wise and virtuous people would need a common authority.⁴² Because the good is plural, an authority is always needed to select which

³⁸ *Democracy in America* (2010), describes Puritan institutions as the birth of American republicanism in I.I.2, “Of the Point of Departure and Its Importance for the Future of the Anglo-Americans.”

³⁹ *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics* (2011), II.1.1103b24-25: “It makes no small difference, then, whether one is habituated in this or that way straight from childhood but a very great difference—or rather the whole difference.”

⁴⁰ In IV.9.4-5 of the *Politics* (2013), Aristotle writes, “It is held to be democratic for offices to be chosen by lot, oligarchic to have them elected, and democratic not to do it on the basis of an assessment, oligarchic to do it on the basis of an assessment. It is characteristic of oligarchy and polity, therefore, to take an element from each—from oligarchy making offices elected, from democracy not doing it on the basis of an assessment” (1249b7-13).

⁴¹ The Ship of State metaphor at 488a-489a, and the image of the *demos* as a great beast at 493a-493c suggest a bleak vision of leadership in democratic politics (Plato 2016).

⁴² Simon cites I.96.4 of the *Summa Theologiae* in his note to p. 59, *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (1993).

of the many goods available the polity will pursue to secure its common good. Lawful authority, as distinguished from mere coercion, has a peculiar power: To compel the conscience and make us feel a **duty** to obey. “On the one hand, it seems to be impossible to account for social life without assuming that man can bind the conscience of his neighbor; on the other hand, it is not easy to see how a man can ever enjoy such a power” (Simon 1993, 145). This power to bind the conscience is what the Scholastic political philosophers on whom Simon draws designated as *principatus*.⁴³ Simon blames a series of liberal thinkers, beginning with Rousseau, for defining popular sovereignty in such a way as to lead to the “Coachman theory” of authority, in which magistrates are merely contracted servants to fulfill the will of citizens, and the only binding obligations are those I have explicitly consented to. Rousseau’s theory attempts to save the phenomena by adding that when I obey the law, I merely obey my own will, or at least, what I would will if only I were truly rational.⁴⁴

Simon warns that the normal experience of trying to live under this consent-based “Coachman theory” subverts political and moral order; most learn to obey the law only out of fear of the consequences of disobedience. “The inner dispositions of minds and hearts toward the law are subjected to such fortuitousness; this weakens dangerously the unity of society and corrupts the character of political life by substituting a law of utility and force for the law of voluntary co-operation whenever I happen not to be in the majority” (Simon 1993, 154). Simon does contend that democracy is normative and natural, but he also warns that magistrates must be entrusted with authority from the people to make binding decisions for the common good. But the mechanisms of democratic political life, intended to hold magistrates accountable, can make the coachman theory seem dangerously plausible over time:

⁴³ I owe this point to Russell Hittinger in his seminar “Yves Simon’s *Philosophy of Democratic Government*,” given for the Lumen Christi Institute, December 7th, 2019.

⁴⁴ *The Social Contract* (2018), IV.2.

“In addition to the basic procedure of control over the governing personnel through periodical election, democratic practice always retains some aspects of direct democratic government. One of these practices is the obligation of submitting some particularly important laws (e.g., constitutional dispositions) to referendum. Another one, so common that without it democracy, at least in modern societies, is inconceivable, and so broad in its scope as to affect all aspects of political life, is the power of public opinion. This is one aspect by which normal democratic practice bears resemblance to the coach-driver system. On account of this resemblance, this aspect of democratic practice can favor the inconspicuous corruption of democracy into masked anarchy” (Simon 1993,184-5).

Where appeal to “the people” as a whole is possible, “because of the informal character of this assembly and of the unwritten character of its powers, great uncertainties inevitably ensue, and it is in the shadow of these uncertainties that democratic government ceaselessly undergoes the temptation of being corrupted into a coach-driver system” (Simon 1993, 186).⁴⁵ The coach-driver is unable to command the passenger, but he also unable to lead or take responsibility. Therefore the metaphor of the social contract should not be interpreted as literally like a commercial contract, to deny the government’s ability to command.⁴⁶ Simon raises a Platonic question: How can life in an egalitarian political system be prevented from teaching us to obey only our own immediate will?

Even asking this question has been complicated by a family of narratives that Mitchell dubs “The Fable of Liberalism,” which makes it seem implausible to locate authority anywhere other than in the rights of the individual or in the will of the majority. In its basic outlines, first laid down in the eighteenth century, this story describes the history of the human race as one of coming of age and lowering the horizons. Once upon a time, the common folk were credulous and dwelt close to the soil, while the privileged few vied for glory. The many dwelt unreflectively in dogmatic slumbers while

⁴⁵ One might think of the fact that two general elections were needed in Great Britain to determine just what it is “the people” willed for the British exit from the European Union; and yet, the people did not will the particular terms of the final deal.

⁴⁶ Burke’s fear, in his “Speech to the Electors of Bristol,” (1775) 156-8, is precisely that the experience of elections will teach his constituents that he is merely their coachman, turning Parliament into a mechanism for the aggregation of interests, not for deliberation about the good of the whole country.

the learned told them what to believe. All shared an enchanted world that prescribed to each a clear social role while preventing the emergence of self-doubt and angst. Then nonage came to end through the discovery of critical reason and individual conscience; commerce and its gentling mores made possible another mode of competition that rendered the warriors' quest for honor ridiculous. Humanity can no longer take any authority for granted, but neither can we acquiesce in suffering and subjugation. Versions of this story, framed as either a triumph or a lament, have been told by Kant, Constant, and Hegel. More recent scholarly iterations of it include Arendt's *The Human Condition*, Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, Albert Hirschman's *The Passions and the Interests*, Leo Strauss's *What Is Political Philosophy?* and Pierre Manent's *City and Man*.⁴⁷ The key similarity in each of these very different ways of describing what is distinctive about modernity is their sequences of events' parallel to Plato's sequence of regimes.

This homology should at least cause us to wonder whether Book VIII of the *Republic* is not merely a neat schema to make an abstract point; perhaps it contains real explanatory power for the dynamics that unfold in human psyches and politics. But the fables do not assume the cyclicity that undergirds Plato's account. Each of them takes timocracy or warrior aristocracy to be self-evidently a relic of a foregone and inaccessible path, inaccessible and perhaps even unrecognizable in the modern world. "The account of the movement from the first to the second epoch offered in the fable of liberalism presumes that the principle of honor is not so much inscribed into the soul as it is a **historical artifact**, capable of being subdued or superceded as humanity progresses" (Mitchell 2006b, 175). Read more subtly, this does not leave ancient categories behind at all. Modern politics, after 1789, retains elements of the classical conflict between oligarchy and democracy in Greek city-states

⁴⁷ Pierre Manent, *City and Man* (1998), Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958), Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (1959), Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989), and Albert Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph* (1997).

that was theorized by Aristotle and Thucydides. The wealth that commerce accumulates is not a convincing principle of authority for the whole polity, but it is the primary distinguishing principle that is permitted to conflict with the love of equality.

Tocqueville is one of the most acute and psychologically attuned of those who write in the vein of the fable of liberalism, partly because he grounded himself in the history of two specific cases, France and the United States. But even he seems to have side-stepped the Platonic question. For Mitchell, Tocqueville treated “honor in sociological rather than psychological terms” (Mitchell 2006b, 161fn) and so neglected to ask whether honor might have a real basis.⁴⁸ France had an aristocracy, but in America there is no history of an aristocratic class. All social distinctions like honor are, therefore, bound to appear contrived in the United States. “Honor arose in the aristocratic age because of the comparisons that social class made possible. As the democratic age dawns, social distance collapses, and with it the viability of the idea of honor and the possibility of being remembered. The timocratic soul... will disappear—and be forgotten—with the final victory of the democratic age” (Mitchell 2006b, 161fn). Though he treats the pursuit of honor as only having to do with seeking distinction, not with proving oneself in the face of death, Tocqueville does discuss the costs of the dissolution of the aristocracy, because “**in both ages** society is a three-tiered affair involving the one, the few, and the many” (Mitchell 2006b, 176, emphasis original). Tocqueville worries that the doctrine of popular sovereignty pictures only an undifferentiated mass and a unitary government: the few helpless and supine before the one. At its best, the old European feudal order allowed for contestation and decentralization; the auspices of their lords could give local people clear rallying points against

⁴⁸ In *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy* (1996), Pierre Manent argues that Tocqueville does indeed see aristocracy and democracy as two permanent possibilities inhering in the nature of man.

overreach by the sovereign.⁴⁹ ⁵⁰ For democratic man, such implicit deference and loyalty is no longer possible.

The result is that Americans, in Tocqueville's description that opens Volume II of *Democracy in America*, are both Cartesian individualists and reflexively deferential to public opinion, assuming that "authority and truth are personal matters... **and** that public opinion... is the final authority and truth" (Mitchell 2006b, 183, emphasis original). Neither of these sources of authority "dignifies humankind nor renews civilization" (Mitchell 2006b, 183). In Tocqueville's telling, as in Plato's, having a democratic soul that cannot heed discriminating counsel leaves the individual vulnerable to manipulation.⁵¹ In this modern version of the parable, the sources of the threat are both familiar—demagogues—and novel—"democratic despotism" through administrative centralization. To avert this, the mediating role of the few must be performed in a new guise, and Tocqueville's familiar paean to voluntary associations and civil society arises in this context. Once citizens are habituated to associating and have their hearts enlarged, they will maintain the habit by a recurring, mimetic process. But this prompts the classic progressive and conservative worries about mimesis anew in the specific context of Tocqueville: What is to become of the peoples, like those considered at the end of Volume 1 of *Democracy in America*, whose mimetic inheritance and circumstances have not been amenable to

⁴⁹ On "democratic despotism" and the prospects to resist it, see *Democracy in America* (2010) II.IV.6.

⁵⁰ In *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution* (2011, 114), Tocqueville describes the one region where there was sustained resistance to the tyrannical measures of the Revolutionary government: "The nobles [of the Vendee] who are said to have refused to do their duty toward the king [by refusing to move to Versailles at Louis XIV's command] were the only ones in France who would later take up arms in defense of the monarchy, some of whom would die in combat on its behalf. Moreover, they owed this glorious distinction to one thing only: the fact that they were able to retain the loyalty of those peasants among whom they were criticized for preferring to live."

⁵¹ In addition to Mitchell's work drawing attention to Plato and Tocqueville's parallel psychology, Diego y Vernazza's "El Concepto de 'Hombre Democrático' en Platón, Tocqueville y Nietzsche" (2012), and Yves Couture's "La notion de l'homme démocratique chez Platon et Tocqueville" (2014) have done so.

developing free institutions?⁵² What is to become of France, whose prospects for freedom Tocqueville evaluates pessimistically in *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution* in light of centuries of centralization? And what will happen across the West when the accumulated cultural capital of the aristocratic past is spent down, when what Mitchell calls the “vestigial mediational fora from the aristocratic age” (Mitchell 2006b, 189) of family, religion, and community have been rendered extinct? Plato invites us to ask whether Tocqueville is insufficiently profound on this matter. Perhaps the love of honor and of truth are simply part of the human condition, and must recur in some form. Perhaps, in fact, philosophical education to teach democracy’s leaders to love the Good remains necessary.

America’s colleges and universities are part of the aristocratic vestiges that confer a measure of distinction and authority upon their graduates. If Tocqueville is right about the need for mediating elements between individual solipsism and stifling majoritarianism, and Plato is right that the soul needs to be taught to love the good, can higher education play a role in counterbalancing the democratic soul’s instability? As the *Laws* demonstrates, Plato did not insist that nothing could be done except in the all-encompassing political-ethical-institutional apparatus of Kallipolis. The peculiar nobility and challenge of the task facing American educators, to follow Socrates in forming ambitious young people into excellent elites, is that the United States has no hereditary aristocratic tradition to draw upon. In a democratic society, each generation must learn what it can in its own lifetime.

Conclusion: Translating the Platonic Prescription

Invoking Platonic education as part of the remedy for the contemporary challenge of hubristic elites invites a skeptical reaction. Both the *Republic* and the *Laws* envision a utopian situation of a city being founded under the influence of philosophers; this is not only far-fetched, but it is far from clear

⁵² *Democracy in America* (2010) I.II.10 considers the situation of Native Americans and African-Americans; the Conclusion compares Russian settlement in Siberia to the Anglo-American westward expansion.

that the dialogues are sincere in proposing Kallipolis and Magnesia as desirable models. Perhaps it is precisely their inachievability and insufficiency that is the point. And even if they are in some measure desirable, are they remotely relevant for us? By the standards of contemporary liberal democracy, Kallipolis and Magnesia are both extremely hierarchical and collectivist regimes. When we think about forming elites to lead well and fulfill their roles justly in a polity like the United States, we are not imagining warrior-philosophers who hold all their possessions in common like the Guardians. If we do not live in a Platonic regime and are not willing to abandon liberal democracy in hopes that one might arise, are we obliged to learn nothing from Plato's critique of democracy? I do not believe so. There are multiple reasons to hold that at least some of the curricular principles Plato sketches are pertinent to our own situation. First, Magnesia, with a geographic location given in the dialogue, is much more a realistic exercise in constitutional design than Kallipolis, which is repeatedly called "a city in speech" and whose coming to be is repeatedly described by the interlocutors as unlikely. It is also a mixed regime with some important elements that modern, democratic constitutions also aim to secure, like civic friendship. Further, Plato explicitly considers the case of aristocratic souls who have been educated philosophically and their role in ordinary cities. While they are unlikely to be politically successful, they will certainly be decent citizens who will participate to the degree they can in the inevitably imperfect institutions of their own cities. Plato also argues that he is addressing **human** problems, not fourth-century BC Athenian problems. The task of rightly orienting human desires through the allocation of honor and shame is one for all regimes, and through participating in a lawful regime, many citizens may internalize principles of divine reason that they cannot articulate. I submit that we do recognize the problems of democratic psychology that he describes: a disposition to turn inward, to reject excellence, and to impatiently seek one's immediate desires without any consideration of the long term or of the true good. And concomitantly, we recognize a threat to democracy that

Plato also saw: the ambitious and talented may react against an egalitarianism they see as contemptible, leading them to pursue tyrannical power.

But there is a third reason to think that Plato can teach us something about rightly educating democracy's leaders: on a meta-level, each Platonic dialogue is Socrates working with his less-than-philosophical interlocutors, striving to ennoble and redirect their desires through dialectic. Rather than abandon those who love things unworthy of them, Socrates elects to argue with them and seek to elevate their souls. Socrates recognizes a real potential for greatness in these men, which is paradoxically the reason for his trenchant criticism. They are certainly concerned about the place of greatness in democratic politics, chafing at the restraints imposed upon them by the masses' fear. As Kevin Crotty notes, "Plato's purpose in the *Republic* is precisely to provide bright, energetic and ambitious young people with an ethically adequate object for their ambitions" (Crotty 2016, ix). In particular, setting the dialogue in motion through confrontation with Thrasymachus highlights that philosophical justice must be an object of the affections worthy enough to satisfy the ambition of young timocrats who felt that their talents cannot be duly recognized within a democracy. Thus, "Plato's task of 'justifying justice' was more precisely an effort to frame a conception of justice capable of inspiring and guiding the most capable and talented—the kind of person Thrasymachus and Callicles had in mind" (Crotty 2016, xiii).⁵³ In the Platonic dialogues he is most often portrayed in

⁵³ This Socratic project echoes Lincoln's worry, articulated in his "Address to the Springfield Young Men's Lyceum: The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions": "Many great and good men, sufficiently qualified for any task they should undertake, may ever be found whose ambition would aspire to nothing beyond a seat in Congress, a gubernatorial or a presidential chair; **but such belong not to the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle.** What! think you these places would satisfy an Alexander, a Caesar, or a Napoleon? Never! Towering genius disdains a beaten path. It seeks regions hitherto unexplored. It sees no distinction in adding story to story upon the monuments of fame erected to the memory of others. It **denies that** it is glory enough to serve under any chief. It **scorns** to tread in the footsteps of **any** predecessor, however illustrious. It thirsts and burns for distinction; and if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves or enslaving freemen. Is it unreasonable, then, to expect that some man possessed of the loftiest genius, coupled

close conversation with the scions of elite families, working to arouse their ambitions and to channel them away from tyranny or even mere timocracy and towards truly worthy objects.

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates engages the eponymous rhetorician not to show off his reasoning skills but for the sake of the young men around him who are captivated by his words and, like Callicles, are fascinated by power. The *Laws* is on one level the Athenian's effort to convert Megillus from his attachment to his city's fanatical militarism and love of domination. But it is the *Republic* that makes this dynamic a central theme. After Thrasymachus' initial confrontation with Socrates in Book I, Glaucon insists on being shown not just "that justice is stronger than injustice, but show what each in itself does to the man who has it—whether it is noticed by gods and human beings or not—that makes the one good and the other bad" (2016, 367e).⁵⁴ Socrates is said to perceive that he is sincere, that he truly desires to be a just man but therefore wants to know why justice is choice-worthy quite apart from the instrumental or reputational benefits it usually confers. He exclaims to them in praise, "something quite divine must certainly have happened to you, if you are remaining unpersuaded that injustice is better than justice when you are able to speak that way on its behalf" (2016, 368a). The entire movement of the subsequent eight and a half books stems from what Socrates says next. "I can't not help out. For I'm afraid it might be impious to be here when justice is being spoken badly of and give up and not bring help while I am still breathing and able to make a sound. So the best thing is to succor here as I am able" (2016, 368b). If philosophy can do this, it can change the trajectory of a soul and perhaps even of a city.

with ambition sufficient to push it to its utmost stretch, will at some time spring up among us?" (2013, 17).

⁵⁴ Melissa Lane has argued that Socrates' refutation of Thrasymachus depends on his showing that rule requires a kind of knowledge greater than the mastery of a craft, *techné*: "Techné and arche in Plato's Republic Book I," (2020).

This is how high the ambitions of Platonic philosophical education are: to make worthy rulers (because they are knowers) out of those who might otherwise become domineering masters (because they are doers). For Josiah Ober, this goal of restraining potentially-domineering elites was one that Plato shared with the ruling ideology of democratic Athens and its civic education, but Plato sought not to instill egalitarianism but a more just hierarchy.⁵⁵ For such high ambitions, at least two more things are necessary than what we have already seen in the education of the Guardians and Magnesians. It matters that one's teacher for this transformation be someone like a Socrates; the prisoner in the Allegory of the Cave has his "bonds and folly" removed in the past tense; "he is released and suddenly compelled to stand up," presumably by a teacher who knows the way to the light (2016, 515d). Without someone to free him, there is no suggestion that he could free himself. And such a teacher must seek to make a just life attractive. Socrates himself, after a dialogue frequently impugning the poets for spreading falsehoods, concludes his teaching of Glaucon with a poetic story, the Myth of Er. This vision of the afterlife, with the purifying torments of wicked souls and the choice of reincarnation given to each, is said to reveal "the whole risk for a human being" (2016, 618c). So here Socrates explains the purpose of his curriculum: "Each of us must, to the neglect of other studies, above all see to it that he is a seeker and student of that study by which he might be able to learn and find out who will give him the capacity and the knowledge to distinguish the good and the bad life, and so everywhere and always to choose the better from among those that are possible" (2016, 618c). Socrates brings the myth and the dialogue to a close with the injunction, "If we are persuaded by me, holding that soul is immortal and capable of bearing all evils and all goods, we shall always keep to the upper

⁵⁵ Josiah Ober, "The Debate Over Civic Education in Classical Athens" (2001) 189: "Socrates' criticism of Meletus in Plato's *Apology* sets the stage. In Socrates' argument, because Athens **lacked** a formal system of public education to inculcate excellent values, that is to say a system designed and implemented by competent experts, it followed that no Athenian (except Socrates himself) took any care at all for the improvement of the youth."

road and practice justice with prudence in every way so that we shall be friends to ourselves and the gods” (2016, 618c).

Does any of his high ambition for education apply to the contemporary, more modest task of forming leaders capable of counterbalancing some of democracy’s defects while recognizing and affirming its virtues? A liberal education based on the discussion of difficult and excellent texts—under the guidance of a teacher who embodies the philosophical life and can challenge the student’s assumptions, question her initial answers, and move her to mold herself into a greater and deeper seeker of truth—can indeed inflame young people to desire nobler goods than wealth or pleasure. Surely the question of what is worth seeking in life is one of the most appropriate ones possible in a classroom of young people studying the classics of humane letters. Only liberal learning, which treats the student as an end and not as a means, can do this. Pre-professional education cannot pose the question of what ends are worthy of a human life, because pre-professional classes presuppose the worth of the ends for which they cultivate the skills. One goes to an accounting class because one assumes that accounting will be useful for some further goal, but one can take a philosophy class without any further end in mind. It is there that (hopefully) the question of the ends worth living for will be posed explicitly. But a robust curriculum of difficult, cumulative study of things alien to our own immediate experience is necessary for us to understand and interpret our experience well. It is here that the rigorous curricula of the Kallipolitan Guardians and the Magnesians gives an essential set of criteria for the foundations of liberal education: it must take the good of the body into account, it must draw the student out of her own personal experience towards a contemplation of the highest physical and metaphysical truths, and in so doing it must foster a healthy impatience with petty partisanship. The treatment of civic education in Magnesia and the deployment of poetry in the *Republic* suggests that liberal education for future leaders must include noble examples that help foster a certain reverence (even if a qualified one) for a shared national story. As much as philosophical

education should take one out of the city's contingencies, if this is to be an education for leadership, it should aim to instill in future leaders a due measure of loyalty to a particular city and to their fellow citizens. Thus, liberal education requires both a hermeneutic of deference and a hermeneutic of suspicion. This is a paradox that will need to be explored further in the context of modern democracy in our subsequent thinkers; it is of special concern to Tocqueville and Dewey.⁵⁶ Irving Babbitt will consider what kind of soul reflects the republican character of the United States constitution.⁵⁷ As we turn to examine Tocqueville, we must consider the difference it makes that Plato assumes the human soul (or at least some human souls) is always overflowing with spirited desire that must be rightly channeled, whereas Tocqueville worries that democracy will sap, for better and for worse, the very human capacity to desire: "I see an innumerable crowd of similar and equal men who spin around restlessly, in order to gain small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls" (Tocqueville 2010, II.4.6). This causes Tocqueville to judge the threat of tyranny as less pressing than Plato did. "When no citizen has a great power or great wealth, tyranny lacks, in a way, opportunity and theater. Since all fortunes are mediocre, passions are naturally contained, imagination limited, pleasures simple" (Tocqueville 2010, II.4.6). The result is that Tocqueville in his educational prescriptions will welcome the very poets Socrates had banished and encourage them to educate future elites.

⁵⁶ What Jeff Jackson has called Dewey's "back to Plato movement" is most evident in his treatment of the psychic flexibility he views as essential to democracy. See "The Democratic Individual: Dewey's Back to Plato Movement" (2014).

⁵⁷ See Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (1971).

CHAPTER 3:

Teaching the Love of Greatness:

Tocqueville on Poetry for Democratic Souls

“There are three men with whom I spend every day, Pascal, Montesquieu, and Rousseau.”¹

Introduction: The Contribution of an Aristocratic Historian of Democracy²

To turn from Plato to Tocqueville to continue an examination of the education proper for elites in democracy is to take a great stride towards the familiar. Tocqueville writes from within our world in ways that Plato does not. From this side of 1776 and 1789, placing ourselves into the mental universe of the *Republic*, where the justice of democracy is not taken for granted, is an alienating exercise. Compared to this, *Democracy in America* seems like a self-portrait. Tocqueville himself said that he was writing from the hither side of a chasm in mores that had made the ancients nearly unintelligible. Yet it is because he is not entirely of the democratic age he so vividly depicts that he can help us see the strangeness of it with due awe and “religious terror” [*terreur religieuse*] (2010, I. “Introduction.”)³ And it is because he is not entirely a democratic historian that he retains the ability to make us feel wonder at and occasionally pity for the particular souls in democracy whose motivations have been transformed by forces beyond their control and who yet retain the conceit that they are subject to nothing to which they have not consented. Despite his famously empiricist approach to the study of politics, I read Tocqueville as in certain essential respects a Platonist.⁴ For

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville to Kergolay, Nov. 1836, cited in Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (2001), 171.

² Elements of this chapter have appeared as the articles “Tocqueville on the Mixed Blessing of Liberal Learning: Higher Education as Subversive Antidote,” in *Exploring the Social and Political Economy of Alexis de Tocqueville* (2020) and “Can the Great Books Serve the Common Good? Tocqueville on Aristocratic Education in a Democratic Age,” *Revue Tocqueville* (2022).

³ Reference made to the French edition, Alexis de Tocqueville, *Oeuvres II: De la démocratie en Amérique*, (1992).

⁴ Sarah Gustafson comments that despite his method, with its affinities to Aristotle’s, “Tocqueville believes [with Plato and Rousseau] that what democratic man contemplates will shape his mind, his

Tocqueville, the central fact of democracy's dawn is that we have become recognizable to each other as individuals, not as social roles. To define a regime by the way self and other are perceived within it has much in common with Plato's mode of understanding the soul by writing it large in the form of the city.⁵ Again like Plato, and unlike Hegel, whose sense that 1789 marked a radically new epoch of humanity he sometimes seems to share, Tocqueville makes frequent references to a human nature that transcends the shape that desire takes in any given society.

Without assuming a state-of-nature anthropology, Tocqueville nonetheless specifies the characteristic ways that self-interest takes better and worse shape as human freedom plays out in different circumstances.⁶ Most importantly, Tocqueville sees the political task as fundamentally a task of education, which may be especially urgent in a democracy where all opinions are assumed to be equal. Tocqueville's primary fear for the future of democracy is not tyranny. Rather, he follows Montesquieu in identifying a despotism justified on the basis of security as a particularly salient danger in a commercial republic.⁷ The consequence is that, under modern democratic conditions, Tocqueville does not design an education to curb the soul's ambition away from tyranny and towards the truth, as Plato. He seems in fact rather agnostic about the possibility of knowing truth and emphasizes literature

soul, and his politics; he asks those in authority to keep minds within salutary boundaries such that man and the political community live in spiritual and political liberty, and not material despotism," in "A Tocquevillian Marketplace of Ideas? Spiritualism and Materialism in Tocqueville's Liberalism" (2020, 127).

⁵ See Plato (2016), 368d and 435a.

⁶ Here I follow Jech in "Man Simply?: Excavating Tocqueville's Conception of Human Nature": "Man's true interests are in the development and use of his most human powers, those which depend upon a taste for what is elevated, great, or sublime... Freedom is the independent capacity to initiate action in pursuit of one's objects, especially one's freedom, and the greater the objects, the greater the freedom" (2013, 92). For an alternative view, arguing that Tocqueville assumes much of Rousseau's portrait of the state of nature, see Raúl Rodríguez, "Tocqueville's State of Nature Foundation" (2022).

⁷ This famous description of "tutelary despotism" appears in (2010) II.IV.6. See Françoise Mélonio's study of the concept in "Tocqueville et le Despotisme Moderne" (1997) 339–54. She identifies four forms of democratic despotism according to Tocqueville: legislative despotism, the despotism of public opinion, Caesarism, and administrative despotism (340).

rather than philosophy. Tocqueville also does not fear elites will dominate in their own interests. Therefore, what he thinks matters is an education that cultivates ambition in the first place, in order to instill a sense of proud self-reliance, willing to struggle against democratic conformism.⁸ One interesting consequence of this divergence, as I have already mentioned, is that Tocqueville speaks very highly of the poets and their role in forming the soul. But another implication is that democracy seems to stifle *eros* in the soul. It will be increasingly difficult to feel anything at all. His vision of the problems of the future is more *Brave New World* than *1984*.

Tocqueville makes a continuous comparison between the structure of the soul and the structure of the polity (though, unlike in Plato, it is the social state rather than the constitution of the regime that shapes the soul).⁹ *Democracy in America* is permeated by descriptions of humanity in two epochs and according to two modes: democratic man and aristocratic man. Compared to the *Republic's* rich tableau of five human types, each arranged according to its motivating desire and linked in a chronological sequence, Tocqueville seems at first reductively sociological. Yet Tocqueville does give a clearer account of the causal process by which human beings come to mirror their social state, because what matters is whether man, looking around, perceives a hierarchy of those above and below him, or whether he sees all others as on the same plane. These two social states thus yield three possible human types: the aristocrat, the peasant, and the democratic citizen.¹⁰ When incarnated in particular histories and places the three types that Tocqueville describes in such detail together constitute a rich

⁸ In seeking to reconstruct Tocqueville's account of the beneficial role that elites can play in democratic societies, I am following Richard Avramenko and Brianne Wolf's work in "Disciplining the Rich: Tocqueville on Philanthropy and Privilege" (2021). While their focus is mostly on the role of economic elites whereas I examine educational elites, I largely share their conclusion that "the central obligations of [Tocquevillian] philanthropy" are "1) moral leadership, 2) safeguarding local liberties, and 3) the maintenance and improvement of the local community" (354).

⁹ See Jech (2013, 87): "Tocqueville assigns the unifying role that Plato and Aristotle gave to the regime to social state instead."

¹⁰ The observation that the two states give rise to three types because aristocracy creates a binary I owe to Jech (2013, 98).

tapestry of postures towards being in the world, revealing the almost infinitely varied set of combinations possible between the cruel, radical particularism towards which aristocracy inclines and the enervating universality that is the final point democracy seeks. All actual societies exist somewhere between these poles. *Democracy in America* argues that the United States has found a relatively stable balance between them, for as Peter Lawler summarizes, “the greatness of American life is in its incoherence. It mixes aristocracy and democracy, greatness and pettiness, political and apolitical experiences of liberty.”¹¹ The countervailing, balancing impulses are at least as much internal to the soul as they are institutional. *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution* is an extended lament on the inability of France to find such a balance, to successfully embrace incoherence.

This chapter proceeds by first establishing Tocqueville’s general view of the American regime and what makes it work as well as it does. A key ingredient turns out to be leadership, provided by the ambitious and powerful who would have a lot to lose in an entirely populist regime. This prescription, I go on to show, is descended from Montesquieu’s view of aristocracy as a moderating element in a monarchy. Tocqueville’s view of the despotism that would result if moderation were to fail also owes much to Montesquieu. I then argue that in Tocqueville’s view, the greatest threat to this kind of excellent leadership is the kind of psychology democracy cultivates: a restless, solipsistic selfhood that struggles to find fixed standards of value or meaning beyond itself. Whereas Pascal in the seventeenth century had described this disposition as endemic to the human condition, Tocqueville identifies it as specifically democratic. In sharp contrast to Pascal’s remedy of Christian humility, Tocqueville prescribes a measured dose of pride. To cultivate these leaders who love greatness to such an extent that they are inflamed by a longing to rise above the mediocrity of mass society, it seems an education is needed. Tocqueville speaks directly about formal education only in a few brief passages, but they

¹¹ Peter Lawler, *The Restless Mind: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Origin and Perpetuation of Human Liberty* (1993), 138.

are portentous. I read them by contrast with Rousseau's educational views to draw out the implications: Tocqueville is defending a poetic, literary, and classical education that draws young people out of themselves by an act of the imagination which he knows will tend to make them restless with the world as it is. I conclude by pointing to the ways that Tocqueville's account of education's purposes and content influenced Irving Babbitt, who would in turn attack John Dewey for being Rousseauian.

Tempering Tyranny of the Majority and the Leveling of Leadership

In itself, defining *Democracy in America* as an attempt to find balance between aristocracy and democracy in the United States says little; *The Federalist Papers* are also an attempt to temper majoritarian democracy through incorporating certain institutional devices borrowed from aristocratic constitutions. Self-consciously, Publius distances himself from ancient democracies "on behalf of a more tranquil and largely apolitical understanding of liberty" (Lawler 1993, 133). The first volume of *Democracy in America* concurs in seeing the grave danger as "the tyranny of the majority" (Tocqueville 2010, I.II.7).¹² Tocqueville recounts two dramatic examples in his chapter entitled "Of the Omnipotence of the Majority in the United States and Its Effects." In Baltimore, a mob could not be restrained from attacking an unpopular newspaper's offices, because the local militia agreed with the mob. They could not even be punished *ex post facto*, because the jury sympathized with them. In Philadelphia, Tocqueville reports being told, "The majority is imbued with the greatest prejudices against Negroes, and magistrates do not feel they have the strength to guarantee to the latter the rights that the legislator has conferred" (Tocqueville 2010, fn I.II.7), so that black citizens *de facto* could not

¹² Tocqueville cites *Federalist* 51 and 62 approvingly for their identification, respectively, of the danger of tyranny in concentration of power, and of the erosion of competence as a core tendency of democratic governance. In "Tocqueville's 'New Political Science' as a Correction of *The Federalist*?" (2020) Rory Schacter takes up this relationship to argue that improving on Publius' theory is a major motivation for *Democracy in America* as a whole.

vote, even though *de jure* they had the right to. These cases are perhaps the most serious defects of American democracy that Tocqueville points out in Volume I, which largely confines its discussion of means of preventing this tyranny to institutional solutions: federalism, the separation of powers, and the long experience of self-government cultivated in the New England townships.

Volume I contains a section praising the Federalist Party for its stewardship of the anti-popular aspects of the fledgling constitutional order, explicating Jackson's struggle with the bank of the United States in the context of the Federalist tradition. The Federalists "wanted to limit popular power," while their Republican opponents sought to expand it (2010, I.II.2). "The Federalists struggled against the irresistible inclination of their century and country" (2010, I.II.2). Whereas Tocqueville's preface to the work, read in isolation, would suggest that to struggle against the democratizing trend of history is to spite Providence itself,¹³ here he praises the Federalists for doing exactly that: "The transitional period when [they] held power is, in my opinion, one of the most fortunate events that accompanied the birth of the great American union" (2010, I.II.2). The merchants in the coastal cities who constituted the Federalist base of support had reason to fear the hegemony of the vastly more numerous backcountry farmers, Jefferson's yeomen, and this fear inclined them to seek moderate government. This is a fertile and perennial polarity: "These opinions [of the Federalists and Republicans] were as old as the world, and they are found under different forms and given various names in all free societies" (2010, I.II.2). Here Tocqueville, who has claimed that democracy will come to represent the only legitimate or even intelligible form of government in the modern world, suggests that the template of politics set by the Roman Republic, with a constant see-saw between *optimates* and *populares*, patricians and plebeians, is unavoidable and in fact salutary. Like a classical mixed-regime

¹³ "If long observations and sincere meditations led men of today to recognize that the gradual and progressive development of equality is at once the past and the future of their history, this discovery alone would give this development the sacred character of the will of God. To want to stop democracy would then seem to be struggling against God himself" (2010, I, "Introduction").

theorist, he indicates that the only real alternative to the dialectic between the few and the many is to crush them both under the heavy hand of a despot. Yet it appears that a group like the Federalists could only govern during the infancy of a democratic polity. Already by his day, he claims, the wealthy can no longer name themselves as a faction or an interest, but increasingly look to conceal themselves from public view. “Wealth, far from being a right, is a real cause of disfavor and an obstacle to reaching power. So the rich prefer abandoning the contest to sustaining an often unequal struggle against the poorest of their fellow citizens... in the middle of the State, they form something like a society apart with its own tastes and enjoyments” (2010, I.II.2). Wealth, the most enduring divide between citizens,¹⁴ is already suspect.

One section of Volume I anticipates the concern with the soul that becomes central to Volume II: “Of the Power Exercised by the Majority in America over Thought.” Noting how generally impotent the overt censorship practiced by European monarchies is in the face of true conviction, which “scoffs at all tyrannies” (2010, I.II.7), Tocqueville claims that the soft pressure exerted by the majority’s opinion in America delegitimizes heterodoxy, making it harder to think and not merely to express. The “strength simultaneously physical and moral” of the majority “prevents [both] the deed and the desire to do it” (2010, I.II.7). Gadflies, the sort of writers and thinkers who could prod the majority into reexamining its orthodoxy, are not executed; they do not even arise. The language of this chapter is strong, even exasperated, echoing Montesquieu: “Today civilization has perfected even despotism itself, which seemed however to have nothing more to learn” (2010, I.II.7). As a result, “the majority lives in perpetual self-adoration; only foreigners or experience can bring certain truths to the ears of Americans. If America has not yet had great writers, we do not have to look elsewhere for the reasons: literary genius does not exist without freedom of the mind, and there is no freedom

¹⁴ The most enduring divide with the exception of race, which Tocqueville portrays as a holdover from the worst kind of aristocracy, one founded on irrational domination.

of the mind in America” (2010, I.II.7). This habit of adoration also means that the American sovereign demands praise, spreading a “courtier spirit” among public officials (2010, I.II.7).

But in a parallel to his praise of the Federalists, Tocqueville describes the Founding generation’s leaders as an exception to this rule. “When the American Revolution broke out, outstanding men appeared in large number; then public opinion led and did not tyrannize over wills. The famous men of this period, freely joining the movement of minds, had a grandeur of their own; they shed their brilliance on the nation and did not derive it from the nation” (2010, I.II.7). The effect was to start American democracy off with an enormous amount of borrowed capital that it would struggle to replace. Every ruler attracts toadies and flatterers, but the diffusion of power in democracy also diffuses flattery. “Democratic republics put the courtier spirit within reach of the greatest number and make it penetrate into all classes at the same time,” so that “a much more general debasing of souls results” (2010, I.II.7). The result is a general decline in leadership, since each one who puts himself forward to lead in a democracy must win the approval of his peers. “Among the immense crowd, in the United States, that pushes into a political career, I saw very few men who showed this virile candor, this manly independence of thought, that often distinguished Americans in former times and that, wherever it is found, forms the salient feature of great characters” (2010, I.II.7). In addition to the Revolutionary War, one might think of the Civil War as the sort of crisis that could generate leadership much better than what would naturally rise to the top in American democracy. Lincoln was not a flatterer of the people.

Tocqueville gives a more general account of why democracy struggles to find elevating leadership in “Of the Government of Democracy.”¹⁵ There are certain profound inequalities that

¹⁵ See Tocqueville’s letter to John Stuart Mill of December 3rd, 1835: “It is much less essential for the partisans of democracy to find means of governing the nation, than to teach the nation to choose the men most capable of governing; and to exercise sufficient influence over the general nature of their

Tocqueville claims inhere in the human condition: one is the unequal distribution of intellectual gifts, and another is the varying possession of the leisure time to cultivate them:

“It is impossible, no matter what you do, to raise the enlightenment of the people above a certain level. Whatever you do to make human learning more accessible, improve the methods of instruction and make knowledge more affordable, you will never be able to have men learn and develop their intelligence without devoting time to the task. So the greater or lesser facility that the people have for living without working sets the necessary limit to their intellectual progress” (2010, I.II.5).¹⁶

Mass politics suffers from glaring information asymmetries. Tocqueville notes that to gain an accurate idea of the character of one’s dearest friend is the work of decades; the mass of voters has only scraps of impressions by which to judge the character of those who would lead them. “The people never find the time and the means to give themselves to this work. They must always judge in haste and attach themselves to the most salient objects. As a result, charlatans of all types know very well the secret of the people, while their true friends most often fail” (2010, I.II.5).¹⁷ And there is a third, more sinister contributing factor. Tocqueville describes democracy as a potentially seductive force, stirring a desire for absolute equality that it can never still. Democratic people who initially sought to find wise leaders to place above themselves but lacked the knowledge to identify truly virtuous ones may stop even desiring wise and virtuous leaders. Finally they may even resent all those who purport to have exceptional merit.

“Democratic institutions awaken and flatter the passion for equality without ever being able to satisfy it entirely... People become heated in search of this good, all the more precious since it is close enough to be known, but far enough away not to be savored.... Then, everything that is in some way beyond them seems an obstacle to their desires, and there is no superiority, however legitimate, that they do not grow tired of seeing” (2010, I.II.5).

government without interfering with their individual acts of means of execution,” cited in Danoff’s *Educating Democracy: Alexis de Tocqueville and Leadership in America* (2010), 64.

¹⁶ I.I.4 affirms the same point in stark terms: “Intellectual inequality comes directly from God, and man cannot prevent it from always reappearing.”

¹⁷ As Edward Gargan has demonstrated, as a deputy to the National Assembly during the Second Republic, Tocqueville did not contribute to efforts to establish a national educational system to enlighten the people, due to his consistent pessimism that “all plebiscitarian movements tended towards disorder and despotism,” in “The Silence of Tocqueville on Education,” (1980), 572.

Although Tocqueville describes the two great difficulties for democracies in elevating the right kind of leaders in logical sequence, he hints at a temporal sequence as well. From struggling to find good leaders to actively resenting the good may represent stages of decay separated by many generations. On this reading, he is giving an account of the degeneration of democracy that resembles the succession of regimes of Book VIII of the *Republic*. But the immediate result is that the exceptionally wise or virtuous do not seek public office in a democracy. Tocqueville thus positions himself as a (qualified) defender of the timocracy which in Plato was one of the shadow regimes unable to overcome the fear of death.

Montesquieuian Echoes: Democracy's Self-Undermining through the Erosion of Honor

The fact that Tocqueville goes beyond the institutional prescriptions of *The Federalist* to look at what can be psychologically destructive about majoritarian democracy does not mean he does not value the constitutional wisdom of Publius. Similarly, in deploying Tocqueville to develop a theory of elite formation, I do not intend to imply that training a wise and virtuous elite is the only desideratum for a good democratic regime.¹⁸ The call for an elite is one of Tocqueville's counterweights for democracy's inertial tendency, because his abiding concern in *Democracy in America* is that democracy may become a victim of its own success. Though he endorses democracy's efforts for the "relief of man's estate"¹⁹ and legitimates its desire for bodily comfort and security, he censures it for being too willing to sacrifice individual greatness. No institutions in the new order now aim at securing leisured contemplation, noble self-sacrifice, and the heroic pursuit of honor—the very goods for which medieval society diverted resources away from feeding the people. Yet the human impulses for these

¹⁸ It is of course true that Tocqueville denies in I.II.7 that any permanent mixed regime is possible; sovereignty will reside somewhere in the constitution. Nevertheless, his project is to infuse aristocratic elements into the regime without eroding the sovereignty of the people.

¹⁹ Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (2001), I.V.11.

things still exist, even if they exist in concealment and confusion. Alan Kahan argues that Tocqueville's intellectual commitment throughout his career was to marry the foundation of utilitarian welfare-maximization that democracy made possible with the greatness and perfection of individuals that aristocracy had worked to cultivate.²⁰ The plays of Cornellie helped to shape Tocqueville's image of free individuals, with the protagonists combining aesthetic nobility with strength of will for an image of glory. Heroic, chivalric characters like Cornellie's El Cid Campeador defined themselves on stage as paragons of "moral and political independence from the sovereign," legitimating for their audiences an aspiration to be so self-reliant as not to bow to the monarch's whims (Kahan 2015, 21). But on a theoretical, not merely aesthetic, level, Tocqueville learned his appreciation for the political value of this mode of being free from Montesquieu. *The Spirit of the Laws* argues that, amid the centralizing tendencies of Louis XIV's *ancien régime*, aristocrats' concern for their own honor at times moved them to resist even royal commands: "The prince should never prescribe an action that dishonors us because it would make us incapable of serving him."²¹ ²² This honor-driven ethos remains "equally central to Tocqueville's notions of greatness and freedom" (Kahan 2015, 21). The sovereign may no longer be the crown, but the will of the majority contains its own tyranny, and unlike monarchy, democracy does not naturally cultivate an honor culture.²³ Democracy has much greater potential for greatness, since all have the freedom to pursue it, but its risks are also greater. And Tocqueville is not confident that all will understand or value freedom. In the *Ancien Régime*, he pronounces, "What has always kindled such a powerful love of liberty in the hearts of certain men is its intrinsic attractiveness, its

²⁰ Alan Kahan, *Tocqueville, Democracy, and Religion: Checks and Balances for Democratic Souls* (2015).

²¹ Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1989), IV.2.

²² For further analysis of Montesquieuan honor, see Céline Spector, "Honor, Interest, Virtue: The Affective Foundations of the Political in the *Spirit of the Laws*," (2009). In *French Political Thought From Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?* (2008), Annelien De Dijn traces the influence of this Montesquieuan identification of liberty with aristocratic mores on Tocqueville.

²³ For Montesquieu, honor's nature "is to demand preferences and distinctions" (1989, III.7), which requires a monarch to define the relative degree of honor for each.

inherent charm, independent of its benefits... Whoever seeks in liberty anything other than liberty itself is born for servitude” (2011, III.3) Thus, “to mediocre souls that have never felt [the desire for liberty], one cannot hope to make it comprehensible (2011, III.3).²⁴ The worry is that dedication to the goods of the body will sap any willingness to risk life in defense of liberty.

To understand what exactly Tocqueville affirms in Montesquieu’s view of the good qualities of the Ancien Régime, we must examine how he accounts for its collapse in *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*. He holds that the concentration of power in the monarchy had over time eroded the intermediary bodies and quashed the aristocratic prerogatives that sustained them. But the claim is not narrowly institutional; he particularly praises the spirit of aristocratic honor that the institutions fostered: “Rather than subject this nobility to the rule of law, the monarchy cast it down and uprooted it. This... deprived the nation of a necessary portion of its subsistence and inflicted a wound on liberty that will never heal.” (2011, II.11, 104). Yet these aristocratic guardians failed to fulfill their function of resistance in the late monarchy. To combine Montesquieu’s terminology with Tocqueville’s conclusion, honor was already so enervated by the mid-eighteenth century in France that the regime’s motivating principle had been irrecoverably lost. Yet Tocqueville did not consider this tradition irrelevant to the world of popular sovereignty after the French Revolution.²⁵ Tocqueville translated the concepts of this tradition to apply them to America, where he saw much cause for ambivalence about commercial society and a surprisingly enduring relevance for honor.

²⁴ Kahan reads Tocqueville as holding that freedom potentially belongs to all, but will only be actualized by some: “Since the desire for freedom is universal, and greatness is born of freedom, the road to greatness is open to all... Unfortunately, those sublime pleasures may be fully felt only by a few” (2015, 66).

²⁵ A recent argument that the Montesquieu-Tocqueville analysis remains relevant to contemporary liberal democracy is Paul Carrese’s *Democracy in Moderation: Montesquieu, Tocqueville, and Sustainable Liberalism* (2016).

Moving from the *Ancien Régime* to *Democracy in America*, one of Tocqueville's central concerns is that debilitating individualism may follow from the pursuit of self-interest.²⁶ It is apparent that Tocqueville thinks this problem is characteristic of democratic societies, by contrast with the feudal order: "Aristocracy had made all citizens into a long chain that went from the peasant up to the king; democracy breaks the chain and sets each link apart" (2010, II.2.1).²⁷ But it is less often remarked that Tocqueville is talking in this passage not just about democracy, but specifically about popular rule combined with commerce; the fully-realized phenomenon of a commercial republic that Montesquieu had described in its embryonic form. Montesquieu portrayed the inhabitants of commercial republics as lonely and atomized; the English were "a withdrawn people, each of whom thought alone" (Montesquieu 1989, XIX.27) and the Dutch preferred peace with neighboring countries but were still always looking to make a buck off them. In one of the most sweeping and suggestive judgments from Book XX, devoted to commerce, Montesquieu says of Holland, "If the spirit of commerce unites nations, it does not unite individuals" (1989, XX.2).

Tocqueville too considers commerce an inadequate social glue, perhaps even a solvent. While he does base much of the positive analysis of *Democracy in America* on the "equality of conditions" that the great wealth of the United States has brought about, and he praises the dignity of work that both derives from and helps sustain the broad ownership of land, he does not consider these inherent features of a commercial society. They are precarious, in real danger of erosion. In the chapter entitled "How Aristocracy Could Emerge from Industry," he speculates on the concentration of wealth and power made possible by capital and specialization. Even as the number of experts capable of

²⁶ For a treatment of individualism in each work, see "Das Tocqueville Problem: Individualism and Equality between *Democracy in America* and the *Ancient Regime*," by Ivan Jankovic (2016).

²⁷ In "The Most Common Sickness of Our Time": Tocqueville on Democratic Restlessness," Dana Jalbert Stauffer describes this form of alienation as endemic to democracy on Tocqueville's account, and as a formidable barrier on "the path to human happiness" (2018, 439).

understanding the intricacies of production processes narrows, most manual laborers will become increasingly ignorant of the process beyond their own repetitive tasks. The result is that a kind of aristocracy returns:

“So every day more opulent and more enlightened men are found who devote their wealth and their knowledge to industry and who seek, by opening great workshops and strictly dividing labor, to satisfy the new desires that appear on all sides. Thus, as the mass of the nation turns to democracy, the particular class that is concerned with industry becomes more aristocratic” (2010, II.2.20).

But these new industrial overlords feel no bond with those beneath them, who in turn have no grounds to respect their authority. The employee-employer relationship is transactional and short-sighted in a way that the lord-peasant relationship could not be, leaving it with, Tocqueville fears, less accountability and restraint. Tocqueville cannot imagine assembly-line workers shedding their blood for their CEOs as the peasants of the Vendée once did for their *seigneurs*. Montesquieu, who did not yet have the phenomena of the Industrial Revolution before his eyes, nevertheless anticipated that commerce could reduce all social bonds into transactable quantities.

Most importantly, Tocqueville’s closing description of a soft, democratic despotism, which the citizens welcome because it puts an end to the de-linked anxiety of individualism without re-establishing personal authority (“Each individual endures being bound, because he sees that it is not a man or a class, but the people itself that holds the end of the chain” (2010, II.4.6)) closely resembles Montesquieu’s second vision of a despotism all the more insidious because it arises from the bourgeois’ desire for security.²⁸ Tocqueville’s intense concern with the vitality of the American “science of association,” his term for the lessons of mutual dependence and trust that Americans learn through their dense network of civil society institutions, stems from his desire to draw citizens out of themselves. This is a means of compensating for the lack of the initiative and contestation that the

²⁸ See Roger Boesche, “Fearing Monarchs and Merchants: Montesquieu's Two Theories of Despotism” (1990).

intermediate powers derived from feudalism had made possible. “In aristocratic societies, men do not need to unite in order to act, because they are held tightly together... Among democratic peoples, on the contrary, all citizens are independent and weak... So they all fall into impotence if they do not learn to help each other freely” (2010, II.2.5). In Montesquieu’s terms, the motive principle of Tocquevillian democracy would be self-interest rightly understood.

Tocqueville pays much less positive attention to honor as a social force than Montesquieu does. He even appears to call honor absurd and at odds with natural morality, in “Of Honor in the United States and in Democratic Societies.” Yet he argues that all societies will have some definition of what is praiseworthy and shameful based to an extent on what is socially beneficial; the Americans do not share the values of the warrior caste who dominated medieval Europe, but laud the heroic entrepreneur²⁹—“The Americans, who make commercial temerity into a kind of virtue, cannot, in any case whatsoever, stigmatize those who are daring” (2010, II.3.18). In the civilian vast majority of the people, the social state and the prosperity commerce brings make war less and less intelligible and even conceivable:

The ever-increasing number of property owners friendly to peace, the development of personal wealth, which war so rapidly devours, this leniency of morals, this softness of heart, this predisposition towards pity that equality inspires, this coldness of reason that makes men hardly sensitive to the poetic and violent emotions which arise among arms, all these causes join together to extinguish military spirit (2010, II.3.22).

Despite here sounding as much a true believer in *doux-commerce* as Montesquieu,³⁰ Tocqueville goes on to deny that this peaceable disposition is an unmitigated good. Because every citizen now has some

²⁹ Despite the clear anachronism, the term conveys the positive connotations these character traits still enjoy in America today.

³⁰ “When the principle of equality develops not only in one nation, but at the same time among several neighboring nations, as is seen today in Europe, the men who inhabit these various countries, despite the disparity of languages, customs, and laws, are nevertheless similar on this point that they equally fear war and conceive the same love for peace. In vain does ambition or anger arm princes; a sort of apathy and universal benevolence pacifies them in spite of themselves and makes them drop the sword from their hands. Wars become rarer” (2010, II.3.26).

property of his own to protect, few will be inclined to risk themselves to protect the whole. This privatization of life causes an erosion of martial courage that is a real loss, whereas the soldier's love for glory is an enduring reality that may re-manifest in surprising ways:

I do not want to speak ill of war; war almost always enlarges the thought of a people and elevates the heart. There are cases where it alone can arrest the excessive development of certain tendencies that arise naturally from equality, and where war must be considered as necessary for certain inveterate illnesses to which democratic societies are subject (2010, II.3.22).

These passages display Tocqueville's perennial profound ambivalence. On the one hand, Tocqueville laments the loss of heroic grandeur. Yet he values the freedom, dignity, and equality that has lifted up ordinary people in the modern age, and he worries that grandeur will find cruel and unjust ways of reasserting itself.

In partial response to this dilemma, Tocqueville addresses *Democracy in America* to the few who will heed his teaching and not to the ruling many.³¹ This quality makes the work itself "essentially an aristocratic one" (Lawler 1993, 136), whose motivating hope is that a few "true friends of liberty and of human grandeur" (2010, II.IV.7) might be found to steward democracy and curb its worst tendencies. Who are these enlightened few to be, in a society in which we have been told that the rich conceal themselves from public view and which is inclined to resent greatness? Securing any room for greatness becomes a matter of training and forming the soul. As Lawler says, "Tocqueville encourages the legislators to be concerned, primarily, with the perpetuation of the moderate or controlled assertiveness which is characteristic of political life" (1993, 133). Unless those who heed Tocqueville's warnings can provide some protection, the democratic individual is threatened by a cocktail of ills, which at first blush seem to work against one another. How can democracy breed solipsism and self-effacement, sovereignty and impotence simultaneously? The crucial move is the re-conceptualization

³¹ "If these lines ever reach America, I am sure of two things: first, that readers will all raise their voices to condemn me; second, that many among them will absolve me deep down in their conscience" (2010, I.II.7).

of authority that comes with the advent of democracy. By freeing the individual mind from any obligation to obey an external authority, thus relocating sovereignty internally, it may put the self under a pressure it cannot truly bear.

This is the familiar story of the isolation that the democratic social state produces.³² Lacking the tight web of loyalties, the relationships of mutual dependence, that had characterized feudal societies, and dwelling in an intensely commercial world, men and women in democracy tend to seek only their own self-interest and so become atomized. Exhausted and anxious from trying to live in this way, they may finally surrender their political liberties. All alike in their smallness, they will feel powerless before the might of the centralized state, and they would welcome an overweening state that would provide them with a padded cell of security and subsidy. However, a dense web of association life has arisen in America to provide citizens the means to cooperate to achieve their communal goals and replace the aristocrats of yore as an avenue for contesting the power of the sovereign. The family and the church draw the hearts of democratic people outwards. In this way, they learn to participate in politics, to value their freedom, to practice a sociable form of “self-interest rightly understood” that recognizes the benefits of serving the community. While I consider this analysis of individualism deeply insightful and rightly the focus of many scholars,³³ my focus is on

³² Tocqueville in fact claims in *The Ancien Régime* that *individualisme* in French is a new coinage, resulting from the post-Revolutionary social state. “Our fathers did not have the word **individualism**, which we have forged for our own use, because in their day there was no such thing as an individual who did not belong to a group and could see himself as standing absolutely alone; yet each of the thousand small groups of which French society was composed thought only of itself. It was, if I may put it this way, a sort of collective individualism, which prepared souls for the true individualism that we have come to know” (2011, II.9).

³³ Among many others, Vincent Ostrom focuses on association to make a connection to the public choice literature in *The Meaning of Democracy and the Vulnerability of Democracies: A Response to Tocqueville’s Challenge* (1997).

Tocqueville's portrait of the democratic mind and its loss of intellectual authority beyond itself.³⁴ Solipsism proves to be at least as grave a threat to democratic liberty as individualism. Both are instruments of levelling, sapping the instinct for greatness. Both remedies compensate for the loss of certain resources found in aristocratic societies. But the first is participatory, bottom-up learning through civic engagement, whereas the latter is the deliberate modeling of excellent habits and perennial truths by elites.³⁵ Associations can play much of the role of aristocrats in civil society, providing contestation of the sovereign's dictates and preventing the many from passively accepting democratic despotism.³⁶ Yet in America this dense fabric of civil society associations has frayed, calling this Tocquevillian solution into question. Both practically and in principle, it seems that without some real effort to teach greatness, the exemplary role played by the old aristocracy will be lost.³⁷ This second strategy is of course much less palatable to our contemporary sensibilities and takes more effort to understand sympathetically.³⁸

³⁴ In this I follow the psychological emphasis of Lawler, who stresses Tocqueville's debt to Pascal, and of Joshua Mitchell, whose *The Fragility of Freedom: Tocqueville on Religion, Democracy, and the American Future* (1995) casts Tocqueville as an Augustinian.

³⁵ Tocqueville concludes, in the final chapter of *Democracy in America*, "I believe firmly that you cannot establish an aristocracy again in the world; but I think simple citizens by associating together can constitute very wealthy, very influential, very strong beings, in a word aristocratic persons" (2010, II.IV.7).

³⁶ As Avramenko and Wolf argue, "there is, in fact, a virtue that takes on a distinct appearance, scope, and end when exercised by those with political and economic privilege" (2021, 354).

³⁷ In *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, Tocqueville sketches his view of the proper mimetic influence of aristocrats in the context of describing how the *philosophes* assumed the nobility's role in France: "An aristocracy, when it is vigorous, does not merely take the lead in public affairs. It also shapes opinions, sets the tone for writers, and imparts authority to ideas. By the eighteenth century, the French nobility had lost this portion of its dominion entirely. Its credibility had suffered the same fate as its power. The place it had once occupied in the dominion of the mind was vacant, and writers were free to assume this role to the exclusion of all others" (2011, III.1, 130).

³⁸ In his *Teachers of the People: Political Education in Rousseau, Hegel, Tocqueville, and Mill* Dana Villa writes, "This change of optic— from the more familiar bottom-up active learning in associational life to paternalistic intervention in the moralization of *le peuple*—is not simply the result of a change in the object of observation (the turn from America to France). It also flows from Tocqueville's firmly held Rousseauian conviction that [mores are the unwritten constitution]. Without the proper habits and mores, "the people" were like a wild, untutored child who, after exhausting itself in the anarchic

Pascal and the Challenge of Solipsism

The opening Part of Volume II takes Montesquieu's psychological concerns much deeper, to describe not just one passion but the soul itself in terms taken from Pascal. "The Intellectual Movement in the United States" identifies the restlessness that Pascal took to be the human condition ("man's unhappiness springs from one thing alone, his incapacity to stay quietly in one room")³⁹ as characteristic of Americans in particular. In general Pascal does not treat his insights into human misery and self-deception as relative to the regime he lives under but assumes that these foibles will be found everywhere.⁴⁰ For Tocqueville, no longer living under Pascal's regime, the dynamic of restlessness is particularly acute in the flat social world of democracy: here the mind moves outward, but it lacks the clear destination or resting place of a contemplative object. And Tocqueville's Americans lack not only the leisure that would allow them to philosophize, but also the training and skill for it. They prefer tangible results, and when they do indulge in speculative reasoning, it is usually to find simple, mono-causal explanations. Each American seeks to take nothing for granted, to re-found all knowledge on his own judgment, without trusting any authority, bearing a particular skepticism toward the authorities of tradition and of the ancestors.⁴¹ "The principal features that characterize what I will call the philosophical method of the Americans" include "to seek by yourself and in yourself alone the reason for things" (2010, II.I.1). Tocqueville remarks laconically that

liberty of the Revolution, submits to the yoke of a master who secures order at the expense of freedom" (2017, 181).

³⁹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and other Writings*, (1995), fragment #168.

⁴⁰ For an account of Pascal's view of political rule and social hierarchy, see Adrien Louis's *Les meilleurs n'auront pas le pouvoir: Une enquête à partir de Aristote, Pascal, et Tocqueville* (2021).

⁴¹ "To escape from the spirit of system, from the yoke of habits, from the maxims of family, from the opinions of class, and, to a certain point, from the prejudices of nation; to take tradition only as information, and present facts only as a useful study for doing otherwise and better; to seek by yourself and in yourself alone the reason for things, to strive toward the result without allowing yourself to be caught up in the means, and to aim for substance beyond form: such are the principle features that characterize what I will call the philosophical method of the Americans" (2010, II.I.1).

Americans “do not read the works of Descartes, because their social state diverts them from speculative studies, and they follow his maxims because the same social state naturally disposes their mind to adopt them” (2010, II.I.1). Cartesianism is fostered by the American social state because there are no stable, multi-generational hierarchical relations to orient society by instilling reflexive prejudices. Very few social bonds are implicit or given; instead they can be exited at will when they no longer suit one individual’s preferences.

As social relations depend less on the loyalty of particular persons to others, intellectual relations also become more egalitarian: “It is not only confidence in a particular man that is destroyed, but the taste to believe any man whatsoever on his word” (2010, II.I.1). This confidence in their own capacity in theoretical matters stems in part from Americans’ real success in practical matters: “They easily conclude that everything in the world is explicable, and that nothing goes beyond the limits of intelligence. Thus, they readily deny what they cannot understand” (2010, II.I.1). In part it stems from centuries of seemingly contingent intellectual history, which Tocqueville dubs “the turn of events”: Luther opposed to ecclesiastical dogma the opinion of the individual conscience; Bacon extended the same logic into the natural sciences with his empiricism; Descartes brought it into philosophy as critique. Then the revolutionary philosophers of the French Enlightenment asserted the right of each to critique conventional morality and political authority. This last step was dynamite, because the *philosophes*’ political method was “not only French, but democratic” (2010, II.I.1), in principle accessible to every individual everywhere. In *The Ancien Régime*, Tocqueville comments on the curious ignorance of the learned men who inspired the revolution. They reasoned about politics at a high level of abstraction but had no experience of political things.⁴² But the very universality that made them

⁴² “When it came to the great science of government, which teaches one to understand the general direction of society, to judge what is going on in the minds of the masses, and to anticipate what will come of it, they were quite as untutored as the people themselves. Indeed, statesmen can learn that aspect of their art—the principal part—only from the operations of free institutions” (2011, III.1).

fatally incapable of erecting good government in France made their principles compelling to the rest of the watching world.^{43 44}

Joshua Mitchell notes that Tocqueville's sweeping summary of centuries of Western intellectual history from the Reformation to the French Revolution resembles but does not reproduce the narrative Mitchell calls "The Fable of Liberalism" (2006a). This is the family of genealogies, both elegiac and mournful depending on whether they are written from a liberal or reactionary stance, that narrate Western modernity as the rise of the autonomous individual's freedom to express herself by becoming the sole arbiter of truth claims. This interiorization neuters the theological and metaphysical disputes of the Reformation that were once fierce enough to move armies and renders unintelligible the bloodthirsty quest for honor that drove aristocratic ages.⁴⁵ Modern man devotes himself to the pursuit of immanent goods, which in effect entails the accumulation of wealth in the name of security.

But with wry irony Tocqueville channels Pascal's response to Descartes to rebuke this entire story.⁴⁶ Against the Cartesian "philosophers'" trust in interiority Pascal writes, "Our instinct leads us to believe we must seek our happiness outside ourselves. Our passions pull us outwards even when

⁴³ This theme of the universality of the revolutionary doctrines reappears in III.I.21, "Of Parliamentary Eloquence in the United States" (2010).

⁴⁴ Simone Weil's analysis of the French Revolution follows Tocqueville's in this respect: "Rights are always found to be related to certain conditions. Obligations alone remain independent of conditions. They belong to a realm situated above all conditions, because it is situated above this world. The men of 1789 did not recognize the existence of such a realm. All they recognized was the one on the human plane. That is why they started off with the idea of rights. But at the same time they wanted to postulate absolute principles. This contradiction caused them to tumble into a confusion of language and ideas which is largely responsible for the present political and social confusion," (2002, 4).

⁴⁵ For a dramatic illustration of the different idiom in which early modern soldiers remembered and described their experiences of war as contrasted with combatants since World War I, see Yuval Noah Harari, "Martial Illusions: War and Disillusionment in Twentieth-Century and Renaissance Military Memoirs," (2005).

⁴⁶ The movement of the history of the West, for Tocqueville, is from instinct to calculation, sublime illusion to realistic selfishness, material poverty and weakness to prosperity and power, political oppression to liberty, and contentment to misery" (Lawler 1993, 8-9). The recurring motif of Pascalian irony is that "whoever wants to act the angel, acts the brute" (Pascal 1995, #557).

objects to excite them are not there. External objects tempt us in themselves and beguile us even when we are not thinking about them” (1995, #176). Modern man’s emancipation can lead to new forms of slavery, and transcendence itself has a way of returning to the immanent world in new guises. Democratic religion’s future is dialectical, in which the retreat and advance of faith are inseparable. Although “religious experience would, like everything in the democratic age, become tame and self-referential,” simultaneously “the social conditions of the democratic age make new forms of religious experience possible.”⁴⁷ American Christianity remains, for Tocqueville, vital and pervasive, the fundamental institution of the young country, despite the logical consequences of Luther’s revolution. His analysis is similar in the social sphere. The reflexive Cartesianism of Americans seems as if it should be social acid, as “each person withdraws narrowly into himself and claims to judge the world from there” (2010, II.I.1). A kind of solipsism would result; if citizens really shared no common opinions, including even such axioms as the existence of other minds, the sacred dignity of the individual, or the reality of free will, they would be unable to coordinate their actions or trust each other. But the difficulty runs deeper—the individual mind is not ultimately capable of adopting a godlike view from nowhere, of critiquing all notions to arrive at certainty. Why, then, have the Americans not yet become a people “no longer tied together except by interests and not by ideas” (2010, II.I.1),⁴⁸ among whom “human opinions no longer form anything other than a kind of intellectual dust that swirls on all sides” (2010, II.I.1), but one with a high degree of social and political order and one deeply habituated to acting in common?

Tocqueville’s first answer is that American democracy did not come about through an ideological revolution as it did in France. On the contrary, “it is religion that gave birth to the Anglo-American societies” (2010, II.I.1). The following chapter, “Of the Principal Sources of Beliefs among

⁴⁷ Joshua Mitchell, “Tocqueville on Democratic Religious Experience” (2006a), 281.

⁴⁸ As we have seen, this worry about the thin bonds of interest is a Montesquieuian thought.

Democratic Peoples,” further develops this theme of positive and unifying convictions. As a practical matter, no social coherence could be preserved without each citizen “consenting to receive a certain number of ready-made beliefs” on authority (2010, II.I.2). But Tocqueville takes a large step further and deeper: Even at the level of the individual psyche, “I find that dogmatic beliefs are no less indispensable for him to live alone than to act in common with his fellows” (2010, II.I.2). Not only will practical motivation and conviction in most people not survive the Cartesian *reductio*, even those few with leisure and training to pursue truth rigorously must place their trust in the testimony of others.

“If a man was forced to prove to himself all the truths that he uses every day, he would never finish doing so; he would wear himself out with preliminary demonstrations without advancing; as he has neither the time, because of the shortness of his life, nor the ability, because of the limitations of his mind, to act in this way, he is reduced to holding as certain a host of facts and opinions that he had neither the leisure nor the power to examine and verify by himself, but that those more clever have found or that the crowd adopts” (2010, II.I.2).

With Pascal, Tocqueville insists that though some few may be able to take the Cartesian route and philosophize on their own to a coherent worldview, this is an impossibility for most and it would in fact be cruel to expect it. “People capable of originality are rare. The great majority only want to follow” (Pascal 1995, #122).

Thus for Tocqueville a state of trustful dependency on received opinion is “not only necessary but desirable.”⁴⁹ Man’s contingency and mortality (“because of the shortness of his life”) requires him to place his trust in some intellectual authority. But that trust may be placed well or ill. In aristocratic ages, many trusted too blindly in the self-proclaimed wise priesthood at the apex of the social hierarchy. By contrast, democracies “are not easily led to place the intellectual authority to which they

⁴⁹ “A man who would undertake to examine everything by himself would only be able to give a little time and attention to each thing; this work would keep **his mind in a perpetual agitation** that would prevent him from penetrating any truth deeply and from settling reliably on any certitude” (2010, II.I.2, emphasis added).

submit outside and above humanity” (2010, II.I.2), because democratic man is used to thinking of every other as his intellectual equal. He thus tends to rate too highly the wisdom of averages and aggregations, meaning that in practice he relies on the prevailing prejudices of his time. Even this conclusion drawn from the premise of human intellectual weakness stems from Pascal: “Majority opinion is the best way because it is visible and has the force to make itself obeyed. That is what the least clever people think” (Pascal 1995, #119). Echoing his diagnosis of the ills of public opinion in Volume I, Tocqueville deplores this state of affairs. Here his emphasis is less on the mediocrity of the majority and the transience of their judgments and more on the potentially omnipotent intellectual tyranny of democratic majorities. The worst consequence is the degradation of the individual mind, entailing an eventual degradation of humanity itself: “It might well be that it would finally enclose the action of individual reason within more narrow limits than are suitable for the *grandeur* and happiness of the human species” (2010, II.I.2, italics mine). The irony is that all of this intellectual slavery has resulted from the political liberation of democracy: “After breaking all the obstacles that were formerly imposed on it by classes or men, the human mind would bind itself narrowly to the general wills of the greatest number [*volontés générales du plus grand nombre*]” (2010, II.I.2).⁵⁰

As the argument develops, Tocqueville makes it increasingly clear that the fatal alternative he sees is between two conflicting views of the cosmos and of man’s place within it. Having already discussed the weakness of the individual mind and the human need to rely on others’ knowledge, Tocqueville adds that the mind must resort to a number of vague generalizations because it cannot examine every individual case in detail. “General ideas do not attest to the strength of human intelligence, but rather to its insufficiency” (2010, II.I.3). In one central respect, democracy makes visible a great truth, one of the most general ideas. This is the essential equality and identity of all

⁵⁰ The choice of the Rousseauian phrase loved by Robespierre is no mere echo: Tocqueville implies that in the name of liberty man may willingly descend into collectivism.

human beings, which the differentiated and hierarchical societies of aristocratic ages concealed. But from this the democratic mind extrapolates too far:

“All the truths that are applicable to himself seem to him to apply equally or in the same way to each one of his fellow citizens and of his fellow men. Having contracted the habit of general ideas in the one area of his studies that concerns him most and that interests him more, he transfers this same habit to all the others, and this is how the need to encompass a great number of matters within the same form, and to explain an ensemble of facts by a sole cause, becomes an ardent and often blind passion of the human mind” (2010, II.I.3).

The differentiated and hierarchical societies of aristocratic ages concealed this, making humanity appear variegated into natural rulers and masters. It also allowed for the rise of unique geniuses, such as Pascal himself, whose entire ethos of disinterested love of truth Tocqueville thinks is not characteristic of democratic thought.⁵¹ This potential to elevate greatness to recognition is one of the strongest points Tocqueville makes in favor of aristocracy: He cites Pascal favorably on the value of assigning positions by heredity rather than by seniority:

“What also prevents the men of democratic times from easily devoting themselves to the ambition for great things is the time that they foresee must pass before they are able to embark upon them. ‘A great advantage of quality,’ Pascal said, “is to put a man, at eighteen or twenty years of age, in as strong a position as another man would be at fifty; this is thirty years gained without difficulty’ [citing Pascal 1995, #136]. Those thirty years are usually lacking for the ambitious men of democracies. Equality, which allows each man the ability to reach everything, prevents him from growing up quickly” (2010, II.1.10).

Indeed Pascal’s entire case for aristocratic hierarchy is reflected in Tocqueville. The *Pensées* explain that the many “honour people of high birth” because they are impressed by their airs, and the *demi-habilles*

⁵¹ In II.I.10, “Why the Americans Are More Attached to the Application of the Sciences than to the Theory,” Tocqueville describes the contrary of pragmatic or instrumental thinking: “I do not doubt that occasionally, among a few, an ardent and inexhaustible love of truth is born that feeds on itself and gives constant delight without ever being able to satisfy itself. It is this ardent, proud and disinterested love of the true that leads men to the abstract sources of truth in order to draw generative ideas from there. If Pascal had envisaged only some great profit, or even if he had been moved only by the sole desire for glory, I cannot believe that he would ever have been able to summon up, as he did, all the powers of his intelligence to reveal more clearly the most hidden secrets of the Creator.” Paul Franco, in “Tocqueville and Nietzsche on the Problem of Human Greatness in Democracy,” (2014), comments that Tocqueville thinks it easier to produce a Steve Jobs than a Pascal.

dismiss birth as “an advantage of chance,” but the truly learned and “perfect Christians” show honor to the great “from deeper motives” (Pascal 1995, #124). These motives include respect for political order (#128), the understanding that prestige reflects influence (#129), and recognition that glory-seeking is a powerful motive with good effects (#134). Given the functional logic of this system and the power of custom over the mind, Tocqueville asserts that it required the Incarnation to make democracy’s fundamental premise plausible: “Jesus Christ had to come to earth in order to make it understood that all members of the human species were naturally similar and equal,” while even the wisest ancient philosophers belonged to the “aristocracy of masters” and tried to justify natural slavery (2010, II.I.3). The problem is that not all general ideas rest on this firm foundation of supernatural and natural truth: democratic man’s insight in this one area spurs him on to extrapolate too far, to the point of becoming blind to particularity.

This neglect of particularity can potentially be carried to the point of undermining the very conviction in the dignity of all human beings that was democracy’s best impulse. “You get used to no longer envisaging citizens in order to consider only the people; you forget individuals in order to think only about the species” (2010, II.I.6). The story of humanity is (rightly, in Tocqueville’s eyes) no longer narrated as the exclusive province of great men. But if the retold version occludes the glorious struggle of each human soul, poised between eternal beatitude and damnation, it will have gone too far.⁵² Even the primordial distinctions between being and non-being and between Creator and creation may become unwelcome. Noting that the sophisticated German philosophy and French literature of his time are already pantheistic, Tocqueville foretells, “Not only does the human come to discover in the

⁵² Tocqueville adds that the desire not to be subordinate to another can be founded in self-loathing rather than self-respect: “This same man, who cannot bear either subordination or equality, nonetheless despises himself to the point that he believes himself made only for appreciating vulgar pleasures. He stops willingly at mediocre desires without daring to embark upon high undertakings; he scarcely imagines them” (2010, II.III.19).

world only creation and one creator, this first division of things still bothers it, and it readily tries to enlarge and to simplify its thought by containing God and the universe in a single whole” (2010, II.I.7). Precisely because it “destroys human individuality,” such a view “will have secret charms for men who live in democracy” (2010, II.I.7). This discussion again parallels Volume I’s passage on leadership: just as democracy is tempted to use elections to cut down and humiliate those who claim more than common excellences, democratic people are tempted to make their entire worldview a means of levelling.

Tocqueville ends the chapter with another appeal to those wise few who are willing to read his book and heed his warnings, begging for action on behalf of human greatness: “All those who remain enamored of **the true grandeur of man** must join forces and struggle against [such pantheism]” (2010, II.I.7, emphasis mine). Pascal had prescribed a different attitude: though he had said that man’s dignity consisted in the capacity to reason—“It is not in space that I must look for my dignity but in my capacity to reason” (1995, #145)—he had characteristically followed this with “Man’s greatness lies in his capacity to recognize his wretchedness” (1995, #146). Such pious self-denigration is not Tocqueville’s preferred path. In language that almost recalls Bernard de Mandeville’s attempt to transmute “private vices” into “public benefits,” Tocqueville pleads with future legislators,

So far from believing that humility must be recommended to our contemporaries, I would like you to try hard to give them a more vast idea of themselves and of their species; humility is not healthy for them; what they lack most, in my opinion, is pride I would willingly give up several of our small virtues for this vice (2010, III.I.19, “Why in the United States You Find So Many Ambitious Men and So Few Great Ambitions”).

Why is this pride necessary? Not just in the sense familiar from Montesquieu, which was to enable honor-seeking and self-sacrifice, providing a crucial contestation against despotic power. But it is more profoundly because Tocqueville fears that the democratic age will erode even the capacity to desire at all. His notes accompanying Chapter III.I.19 spell this out:

I fear the boldness of desires much less for future generations than the mediocrity of desires. What, according to me, is principally to fear in the coming centuries is that in the midst of

the small, incessant and tumultuous occupations of life, ambition may lose its impetus and its grandeur; that human passions may become exhausted and lower and that each day the appearance of humanity may become more peaceful and less elevated.

In a departure from both Plato and Pascal, Tocqueville seems to fear that democracy will actually succeed in bringing man to contentment, causing him instead to perish by apathy. It is this suspicion of contentment that also marks his main point of contention with Rousseau.

Rousseau's Contrast: An Education to Content the Soul

Tocqueville's debt to Rousseau is more apparent than those to Montesquieu or Pascal, with many scholars seeing *Democracy in America's* ambivalence to modernity as Rousseauian.⁵³ Certainly its characterization of the history of modern societies as one of decreasing material misery but increasing discontentment owes much to the *Second Discourse*: "Progress toward prosperity, self-consciousness, and liberty is accompanied by a decline in virtue and happiness or contentment. Human history is the destruction of illusion and the growth of misery."⁵⁴ To this extent, Tocqueville shares Rousseau's verdict on the aspirations of the *lumières* to self-consciousness. It is, however, immediately apparent that Tocqueville does not second the political solution of *The Social Contract*.⁵⁵ This is finally a version of the modern attraction to pantheism: "Rousseau's state of nature doctrine... points to the destruction of human distinctiveness, the last distinction to be destroyed by the democratic or doubt-filled movement in thought" (Lawler 1992, 19). But there is a third solution to the problem of modern self-consciousness in Rousseau that is neither the primitivism the *Second Discourse* seems to recommend nor the political monism of the *Social Contract*. This is the educational program of the *Emile*, which

⁵³ On the Rousseau-Tocqueville relationship, see John Koritansky, *Alexis de Tocqueville and the New Science of Politics* (1987) and Wilhelm Hennis, "Tocqueville's Perspective," (1988).

⁵⁴ Peter Lawler, "The Human Condition: Tocqueville's Debt to Rousseau and Pascal" (1992), 9.

⁵⁵ "The modern attempt to reduce the self-conscious individual to the citizen, found in Rousseau and certain forms of socialism, is also misanthropic in its extreme hostility to individuality or self-consciousness" (Lawler 1992, 19).

Tocqueville takes to be the logical endpoint of the democratic mind.⁵⁶ Emile is to be a self-contained, independent mind, free of tradition and prejudice and unmoored from religious and political authority, and instead of celebrating such a mind, Tocqueville calls it pantheistic and prescribes a curriculum to prevent its emergence.⁵⁷ Rousseau helps us understand Tocqueville by way of contrast: when compared to Rousseau's educational vision, Tocqueville's often scattered and cryptic remarks on education begin to form a unified anti-Rousseauian whole.

The great concern of the *Emile* is the dividedness of bourgeois man, and Rousseau seeks to restore his pupil to wholeness. He eschews the classical solution of making citizens entirely for the sake of the city as admirable but impracticable in modernity. "By removing the contradictions of man" through "domestic education or the education of nature," Rousseau as tutor will raise his pupil "uniquely for himself" so that he may also live "for others" (Rousseau 1979, 41). Emile is to become, and his story is to make us want to become, a philosopher without the Forms, free from circumstance and yet fully at home in the world. Rousseau's ambition is nothing less than to show us the way from our postlapsarian world back to the Second Adam. The first step is to never resist the infant's desires—for a child cannot develop a tyrannical will if it never meets opposition from another will—but simply to limit their growth. Rousseau repaints the portrait of infantile sinfulness that St. Augustine gives in

⁵⁶ Tocqueville's sketch of the evolution of democratic society in *Democracy in America* reproduces the chronology of the *Second Discourse*, and the *Emile* recapitulates the history of humanity of the *Second Discourse* in the life of a single man without the fall into *amour-propre*. See Susan Shell, "Emile: Nature and the Education of Sophie," (2016), 293: "Rousseau presents the "novel" of Emile and Sophie as an ideal "history of the species"—the way history might have been had "philosophy and experience" been on hand when it first was needed, and the way our history might (perhaps) be written in the future." Tocqueville's portrait of democratic psychology owes as much to the *Emile* as it does to the *Second Discourse*.

⁵⁷ "There is a great difference between the natural man living in the state of nature and the natural man living in the state of society. Emile is not a savage to be relegated to the desert. **He is a savage made to inhabit cities.** He has to know how to find his necessities in them, to take advantage of their inhabitants, and to live, if not like them, at least with them [emphasis mine]" (Rousseau 1979, 205).

his *Confessions*, in which even as a baby he desired to bend others to his will. Emile lacks original sin; indeed, he is destined to disprove the doctrine to the world. But the child's situation is terribly precarious. Even something so apparently natural as parental concern for the crying child can teach them that one will can clash with another. "The first tears of children are prayers. If one is not careful, they soon become orders... Thus, from their own weakness, which is in the first place the source of the feeling of their dependence, is subsequently born the idea of empire and domination" (Rousseau 1979, 66). Although the physical environment will resist the child's ability to realize his desires, that does not instill the *libido dominandi*.

At the next step, the beginning of the child's conscious moral education, the teacher must focus his concern on what is owed to him rather than on what he owes to others:

"Our first duties are to ourselves; our primary sentiments are centered on ourselves; all our natural movements relate in the first instance to our preservation and our well-being. Thus, the first sentiment of justice does not come to us from the justice we owe but from that which is owed us; and it is again one of the mistakes of ordinary educations that, speaking at first to children of their duties, never of their rights, one begins by telling them the opposite of what is necessary, what they cannot understand and what cannot interest them" (Rousseau 1979, 97).

At first glance this seems simply of a piece with the social-contractarian tradition, but unlike Hobbesian or Lockean rationality it represents a radical turn inward to reliance on the emotions. We must first **feel** "the sentiment of" justice before we can understand it. Attempting to use the rhetoric of duties to elicit good behavior would alienate us from our proper desire for self-preservation. Worse still, it would set up an abstract standard outside of ourselves to conflict with our selfish desires.⁵⁸

Rousseau repeatedly warns against addressing children with language for which they lack clear

⁵⁸ The resemblance between Emile's tutor's efforts to educate self-interest and the *intérêt bien-entendu* that Tocqueville perceives among the Americans are clear; yet for Tocqueville this form of self-interest is not adequate to hold society together. Many readers of Tocqueville focus on the praise of *intérêt bien-entendu* in II.II. IV-V where he praises the American art of association, without recognizing that it is a necessary but insufficient part of the set of moderating influences. Paul Franco, for example, addresses association but not education.

concepts, because it would be the intellectual equivalent of stirring desires that exceed their capacity to fulfill. Using the right language cultivates a student entirely pleased with himself and with his lot in life. Emile relates to others with no sense of hierarchy. He is to be an example for others, but only because he teaches them also to look within themselves to find their true desires.

One would say nature is at his command, so easily does he know how to bend everything to his will. He is made for guiding, for governing his equals. Talent and experience take the place for him of right and authority. Clothe and name him as you please. It is not important. Everywhere he will be first, everywhere he will become the chief of the others. They will always sense his superiority over them. Without wanting to command, he will be the master; without believing they are obeying, they will obey (Rousseau 1979, 162).

This implies a vision of politics in which to lead is merely to reproduce the general will that each citizen would find to inhere within himself if he truly understood himself.

One practical upshot of this emphasis on avoiding drawing Emile out of himself is Rousseau's near-prohibition on the use of books in childhood education. Books are only introduced in adolescence, and only then in a carefully controlled sequence. These "instruments" of children's "greatest misery" risk inflaming *amour-propre* and stimulating the imagination (Rousseau 1979, 116). Emile should only learn skills with immediate applications for his circumstances, a principle that excludes many of the traditional disciplines. Greek and Latin, geography, history, and literature are pernicious for children, because "unless one has the ideas of the things represented, the representative signs are nothing" (Rousseau 1979, 109). Literature, therefore, cannot inspire young Emile to virtue; its flowery language is confusing, and even if he can understand any of it, at best he will learn that, "In society there is needed one morality in words and one in action, and these two moralities do not resemble each other (Rousseau 1979, 116). Reading stories to Emile will create in him a dissonance between word and deed, self and other, ideal and real that would subvert the whole aim of his education. Emile will be taught to read, but his only reading material is short, simple notes that communicate information to him that he needs. Tangible, bodily pay-offs stimulate his desires: the first missive he makes sense of "has to do with going tomorrow to eat custard" (Rousseau 1979, 117).

Because literacy has utility, Rousseau teaches it to Emile, but he does so as prosaically as possible to avoid awakening his imagination.

Even when the imagination begins to play a role in Emile's education, it is initially enlisted to limit his horizons and prevent him from developing discontented desires. In adolescence, Emile does get his first book. Rousseau calls *Robinson Crusoe* "the most felicitous treatise on natural education" which "will serve as a test of the condition of judgment during our progress" (Rousseau 1979, 184). The contented, self-sufficient Crusoe providing for his own real needs without any of the distortions of society represents who Emile is to be. Thus the novel can actually serve to restrain Emile's imagination and preserve his wholeness. Rousseau argues, "The surest means of raising oneself above prejudices and ordering one's judgments about the true relations of things is to put oneself in the place of an isolated man to judge everything as this man himself ought to judge of it with respect to his own utility" (Rousseau 1979, 185). The conceit of the novel is metaphorically Emile's own situation: Crusoe teaches Emile to judge society without regard for public perception. This ploy inoculates Emile against materialistic pride and pomp, teaching him to look to use-value and not exchange-value. Emile "ought to appraise all the bodies of nature and all the works of men" only "by their palpable relation to his utility, his security, his preservation, and his well-being" (Rousseau 1979, 187). Emile's first book protects his imagination from society's deceptive notions of wealth; his second, Plutarch's *Lives*, inoculates him from fantasies of power. This is because Emile conceives *amour-propre* and an interest in human society only when he becomes an erotic creature. At this dangerous juncture, Emile could yet become inflamed with the desire to dominate others. Therefore, he needs to see heroes, but to see them in a light that breaks the spell they could exert over him. Plutarch's *Lives* is the ideal text to "portray men" "such as they are" that Emile may "pity them and not want to resemble them" (Rousseau 1979, 236). Having digested the *Lives*, Emile will soon dismiss the conquerors and commanders of the ancient world with one judgment: "They do not know how to be satisfied with

being men” (Rousseau 1979, 242). All ‘great’ men, past and present, will seem to Emile like deluded actors foolish enough to take themselves seriously.⁵⁹ Rousseau introduces imaginative literature to channel the imagination into ensuring its own restraint, rendering Emile immune to the heteronomous desire for power or wealth. In his carefully managed union with Sophie, the couple reproduce the history of the human race, but instead of falling when sexual love and jealousy arise, as in the *Second Discourse*, they are able for a time to love without *amour-propre*.

The sequel, “Emile and Sophie,” shows the moral lessons of Emile’s education enduring, even when all the external goods—domestic and civic happiness—achieved at the end of the *Emile* dissipate (Rousseau 1989). Despite having his wife leave him and being enslaved by Barbary Corsairs, Emile remains far more capable of self-command than his aristocratic fellow prisoners. The *Emile* is thus intended ultimately to reveal how to be free and whole in any circumstances, by heeding the deepest promptings of nature. Rousseau as tutor has produced a philosopher-king without the Forms, a redeemed saint who has never needed repentance nor grace. As Allan Bloom puts it, although “Rousseau held that nature is the nature of modern science—matter in motion,” he undertook “the creation of ideals to take the place of the *ideas*... the very objects of contemplation and longing are the products of poetry rather than nature.”⁶⁰ Sophie’s crucial role in Emile’s education was to serve as a cathexis for the construction of his ideals, to be a stepping-stone on the way to his full self-possession, not a final end. The product is to be a type of humanity no longer torn between all of the classical oppositions: duty and desire, being and becoming, grace and nature. Our happiness is not transcendent but immanent, and our freedom lies in our poetic ability to create values for ourselves.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Tocqueville too stresses the value of Plutarch, but for him the conclusions to be drawn from the *Lives* are quite the opposite.

⁶⁰ *Emile* (1979) “Introduction,” 22.

⁶¹ Benjamin and Jenna Storey, in *Why We Are Restless*, refer to this as an ideal of “immanent contentment” which Rousseau derives from Montaigne (2021, 99).

Tocqueville's Response: Stirring the Soul's Longing

The democratic man that Tocqueville envisions as the inertial product of democratic habits greatly resembles Emile. He believes not in a stern ethic of duty, and still less in the false show of virtue that is the aristocrat's quest for honor. Rather, he treats his fellow citizens justly out of a grasp of "interest well understood," extrapolating from his rights rather than from his duties.⁶² Like Emile, he does not have much patience for metaphysics or theoretical contemplation, instead preferring to learn only what is useful to him. Like Emile, he defers to no tradition and obeys no external authority. He is suspicious of social and political ranks. His imagination has not been deeply shaped by book-learning or by tales of heroic grandeur. Tocqueville's discussion of the "Literary Physiognomy of Democratic Centuries" characterizes democratic readers as, like Emile, interested in books only for practical purposes: "Having only a very short time to give to letters, they want to turn it entirely to account. They love books that can be obtained without difficulty, that are quickly read, that do not require learned research to be understood" (Tocqueville 2010, II.I.13). And yet Tocqueville believes the very potential for success in Rousseau's experiment to be a recipe for disaster, a rapid path towards an alienation and anomie even deeper than the one Rousseau himself identified in the bourgeois of his day. *Democracy in America* hints that it is a short step from the vague, natural religion of the Savoyard Vicar to the undifferentiated pantheism that would enervate the human spirit.⁶³ As Volume II goes on

⁶² Tocqueville appears to commend this American remedy in II.II.8, "How the Americans Combat Individualism by the Doctrine of Interest Well Understood." But it is only a provisional remedy; Tocqueville makes clear in *The Ancien Régime* that liberty cannot be justified on instrumental grounds and must be loved and sought for its own sake. While "self-interest well understood" is certainly preferable to sheer self-interest, it is not capable of eliciting the great, sacrificial deeds from individuals needed to keep a people free.

⁶³ Lawler comments that Tocqueville "did not follow the Rousseau of *The Social Contract* in reducing religion to simply civil religion, which cannot do justice to the anxious longings in the soul of the self-conscious individuals" (Lawler 1992, 19). But Tocqueville does not only think that the religion of the Savoyard Vicar or *The Social Contract* is insufficiently personal; it is also insufficiently **historical**. Tocqueville's claims on behalf of Christianity always trace back to its being a revealed religion of the Incarnation, and therefore dogmatic.

to disclose, Americans have not yet arrived at the end state of democratic psychology because they retain many institutions and habits that predate democratic society. They adhere to dogmatic religion, they are devoted to family life, and they associate intensively.⁶⁴ And Tocqueville envisions an education that could bolster these forces' attempt to prevent the emergence of psyches without direction or conviction. For Tocqueville, the task of education in a democratic age is to serve as a counterweight to democracy's inertial tendencies, not to accelerate them. That will involve teaching pupils to admire Plutarch.

One of Tocqueville's clearest and most programmatic charges to his audiences comes in the course of his exploration of the taste for well-being and the principle of "self-interest rightly understood." Section II.II.15, "How from Time to Time Religious Beliefs Divert the Soul of the Americans toward Non-Material Enjoyments," begins with a discussion of Sabbath rest. Amid the duties of worship, commerce and its bustle fade; "the soul, finally, gains self-possession and contemplates itself." Precisely because this weekly habit runs contrary to democracy's own impulse to seek worldly gain, Tocqueville comments, "it is no less useful to each citizen than to the whole State" (2010, II.II.15). This principle prompts him to give a general principle of statecraft: "The social and political constitution of a people disposes them to certain beliefs and to certain tastes in which they easily abound afterward... 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" (2010, II.II.15). Does Tocqueville intend his allusion to "the legislator" to be understood in Rousseau's sense? Must this legislative work of counteracting the worst effect of a constitution on the soul be done only at the founding, or can it

⁶⁴ "Sentiments and ideas are renewed, the heart grows larger and the human mind develops only by the reciprocal action of men on each other. I have demonstrated that this action is almost nil in democratic countries. So it must be created there artificially. And this is what associations alone are able to do" (2010, II.II.5).

serve a purpose in the course of a nation's history? Tocqueville does make clear that the task of "struggling against the general current of society" changes with the centuries. In an aristocratic age and society, he proclaims, he would have devoted himself to getting attention focused on the material needs of mankind, stimulating citizens to care about accruing the comforts of the body. But the task of his own time is very different. Democratic man must be reminded to care for his soul, because "by wanting to improve everything around him, he may in the end degrade himself" (2010, II.II.15).

Adopting an insider's tone that casts himself and his readers as among the knowing few analyzing the democratic many, Tocqueville applies the term "legislator" to himself and his readers with his call to action:

Legislators in democracies and all honest and enlightened men who live in democracies must apply themselves without respite to lifting up souls and keeping them pointed towards heaven. It is necessary that all those who are interested in the future of democratic societies unite to spread within these societies the taste for the infinite, the sentiment for the grand and the love for non-material pleasures (2010, II.II.15).

Because the trend of democratic society is to focus men's affections only on the goods of this world, materialists are "the natural enemies of the people" (Tocqueville 2010, II.II.15). The language of this passage links a theological imperative (pointing souls towards heaven) with an aristocratic taste ("the sentiment for the grand"), enlisting what Burke called "the spirit of a gentleman" and "the spirit of religion" as complements.⁶⁵ Indeed, for Tocqueville, a reserve of religious conviction is "the most precious heritage of aristocratic centuries" (2010, II.II.15) because it protects belief in the immortality of the soul.⁶⁶ As we have seen, Tocqueville holds that man does not naturally come to believe

⁶⁵ See Burke, (1999, 92): "Nothing is more certain, than that our manners, our civilization, and all the good things which are connected with manners, and with civilization, have, in this European world of ours, depended for ages upon two principles; and were indeed the result of both combined; I mean the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion."

⁶⁶ To this extent, Tocqueville's account of the civic benefits of American Christianity does parallel what Rousseau says of civic religion's dogmas: "The existence of the powerful, intelligent, beneficent, prescient, and provident Divinity, the life to come, the happiness of the just, the

dogmatically in a society when he takes himself to be the arbiter of all that concerns him. But this deficit cannot truly be supplied by state establishment or even support of religion without corrupting both the faith and the state. The rulers must teach, instructing the ruled by their own conduct. This prescription implies that he does consider the ordinary work of governing to be a kind of legislation, in the sense of curbing and channeling the deformations the social state wreaks on the soul: “The only effective means that government can use to honor the dogma of the immortality of the soul is **to act each day as if they believed it themselves**; and I think that it is only by conforming scrupulously to religious morality in great affairs that they **can claim to teach citizens** to know, love and respect religious morality in little affairs” (Tocqueville 2010, II.II.15; emphasis mine). This is a mimetic politics. The great set the example of conduct for the humble to imitate.

Do these leaders need to believe in the immortality of the soul themselves, or can their actions perpetuate a noble lie? Though Tocqueville’s own statements on metaphysics are often hesitant and skeptical, throughout *Democracy in America* he praises leaders who stir their peoples to aspire after a greatness that materialism cannot justify. And perhaps the most striking implication of his language of “apply[ing] themselves without respite” is to make clear that he envisions a tutelage model of leadership as a permanent feature of politics. It could be tempting to assume that Tocqueville’s allusions to the need to educate the people only hold in the epoch of transition from aristocratic to democratic rule. But, as Brian Danoff demonstrates in his study of Tocqueville’s vision of government as compared to those of subsequent key figures in American history, for Tocqueville, “The task of authority is political and moral education. Citizen-formation is thus the most important task of leadership” (Danoff 2010, 35). Constraint is not an enemy of freedom but its servant, because “true freedom, for Tocqueville, arises only when one masters one’s passions, and this can only come about

punishment of the wicked, the sanctity of the social Contract and the Laws; these are the positive dogmas” (Rousseau 2019, IV.8).

through the internalization of authoritative norms that originate outside of the individual” (Danoff 2010, 36). In every generation, these norms need to be recognized, imitated, and finally internalized anew, although Tocqueville is not optimistic that every person will be capable of this internalization.⁶⁷ Simply becoming a wealthy enough society for the average citizen to have time to deliberate about politics will not remove this need, in contrast to the hopes expressed by certain other nineteenth-century aristocratic liberals.⁶⁸ Danoff asks whether Tocqueville really understood the task of rhetoric in democracy, which is to address fellow-citizens, even those who may be inferior in wisdom or virtue, with aspiration and without condescension.⁶⁹ Would Tocqueville have been able to recognize the greatness of a figure like Lincoln, who frequently reproved and taught his supporters, but who at the same time rose from humble circumstances and always communicated respect and affection for ordinary Americans? At the very least, Tocqueville’s own theory helps explain the need for Lincolnian leaders.

Educating the Educators

Thus Tocqueville insists not just on religion and political participation as counterweights against democratic individualism, but also on formal education of elites to make them capable of playing their exemplary role. Tocqueville’s own sparse prescriptions for education can be fleshed out

⁶⁷ “In democracy, experience, mores, and education almost always end by creating the sort of everyday practical wisdom and the skill in the small events of life that is called good sense. Good sense suffices for the ordinary routine of society; and among a people **whose education is already accomplished**, democratic liberty applied to the internal affairs of the State produces greater good than the evil that can be caused by the errors of democratic government. But it is not always so in the relations of one people with another” (Tocqueville 2010, I.II.5, emphasis mine).

⁶⁸ John Stuart Mill, for example, is often interpreted as calling for provisional measures favoring a disproportionate role for educated elites until societies can emerge from tutelage to self-rule. But it is not clear that elite authority is an intrinsically necessary feature of orderly politics in Mill. For an extensive treatment of Mill’s view of politics as education, see Chris Barker’s *Educating Liberty: Democracy and Aristocracy in J.S. Mill’s Political Thought* (2018).

⁶⁹ Danoff notes that Tocqueville commends statesmen “who had the courage to denounce the people from above, but he usually failed to celebrate leaders who remain close to their fellows and seek to persuade them as equals” (2010, 34).

by contrast with Rousseau's democratic education, which Tocqueville rejects nearly point by point. If democracy's leaders are to exhibit greatness to teach the people its value, they must first have been taught to have a taste for it, and the mere experience of democratic life will not teach theoretical knowledge. He never exactly defines the content of the distinctive *theoria* that these tutelary elites need to possess to have authority to rule; he does not follow Plato in giving an extensive account of channeling the desire to rule into knowledge and love of the Good. But in addition to his clear insistence on the propagation of belief in the immortality of the soul and the nobility of the individual human person, Tocqueville gives some indication of what kind of knowledge is an insufficient title to rule. In his discussion of Andrew Jackson's struggle against the Bank of the United States, he makes clear his sympathy for the Bank (2010, I.II.2). Preference for an expert institution insulated from the populist chief executive would imply a need for technical training to create a professional civil service, but Tocqueville makes clear that mere *tekne* cannot be an antidote to democracy's ills. Democratic citizens naturally respect *tekne* and often develop great skill at it: The treatment of democratic intellectual life in II.I commends the fact that the citizens of democracy are not ignorant. Democratic ages in fact are in one sense the most learned, because "the number of those who cultivate the sciences, letters and the arts becomes immense" and "the circle of readers expands constantly and ends by including all citizens" (2010, II.I.9). Yet the knowledge such readers seek is what is immediately useful and applicable to them; they are like Rousseau's Emile. In another parallel to his later charge to "legislators and enlightened men," Tocqueville proclaims it to be the task of "those who are called to lead the nations of today" "to sustain the theoretical sciences" against this inertial tendency (2010, II.I.10). The effect of this practical impulse on the arts in democracy is twofold: Americans love useful things that are within the reach of ordinary consumers, or grandiose sights that express the glory of the entire democratic people. Public architecture and industrial design receive investment, and Americans become the people of the iPhone and the Washington Monument, but there is no

patronage system to sustain the kind of masterworks that adorn aristocratic cultures. Authors change their approach to be attractive to a broad market, so “there will be a very great variety and singular fertility in production. They will try to astonish rather than please, and will strive more to carry passions than to charm taste” (2010, II.I.13). The very language changes, with abstract nouns being preferred to naming individuals and general causes emphasized over particular ones.⁷⁰ Mere technical expertise, divorced from any higher knowledge, cannot elevate democracy.

Since Tocqueville’s day, many American educators have hoped that college could provide that higher knowledge and offset this aesthetic deficit. Tocqueville gives a qualified affirmation of that hope in “Why the Study of Greek and Latin Literature Is Particularly Useful in Democratic Societies.” Yet where the pattern of *Democracy of America*, of a modest embrace of democracy coupled with an insistence on finding aristocratic cultural counterweights to its excesses, might lead us to expect that he would want as much classical learning as possible to be spread throughout the body politic to refine everyday language, his actual prescription is to restrict carefully who should drink at ancient wells. Nor does he make a direct connection between a study of ancient statesmanship and a qualification for modern rule. What the ancient authors possess that is so valuable is a formalism and ambition that nothing in democratic life teaches. Tocqueville acknowledges that this is not an inherent feature of Greek and Roman society but is partly a result of the filtration process through which only a few texts have been passed down to us. The ancient authors also did not write to market themselves to a mass public but to please their elite patrons.

Tocqueville regards even the ancient republics of Athens and Rome as essentially aristocratic within his typology of aristocracy and democracy. Their narrow franchises meant that elites dominated

⁷⁰ See Richard Avramenko, “The Grammar of Indifference: Tocqueville and the Language of Democracy” (2017) for an exploration of the linguistic effects of democracy that concern Tocqueville.

their domestic politics, and their foreign policies certainly demonstrated an aristocratic ethos of prideful domination towards other peoples. Their social state thus inclined them to “give to their literary productions the particular vices and special qualities that characterize literature in aristocratic centuries” (2010, II.I.15). In these works, “the search for ideal beauty is shown constantly” and thus “this study is, of all, the most appropriate for combatting the literary defects inherent in these [democratic] centuries” (2010, II.I.15). But it is these very merits that make the study of this canon potentially dangerous within modern democracies. This vivid passage deserves to be considered at full length:

A study can be useful to the literature of a people and not be appropriate for their social and political needs.

If you persisted stubbornly in teaching only literature in a society where each man was led by habit to make violent efforts to increase his fortune or to maintain it, you would have very polished and very dangerous citizens [*des citoyens très polis et très dangereux*]; for **since the social and political state gives them needs every day that education would never teach them to satisfy, they would disturb the State, in the name of the Greeks and the Romans,** instead of making it fruitful by their industry.

It is clear that in democratic societies the interest of individuals, as well as the security of the State, requires that the education of the greatest number be scientific, commercial, and industrial rather than literary.

Greek and Latin must not be taught in all schools; but it is important that those destined by their nature or their fortune to cultivate letters, or predisposed to appreciate them, find schools where they can perfectly master ancient literature and be thoroughly penetrated by its spirit. **A few excellent universities would be worth more to achieve this goal than a multitude of bad colleges** where superfluous studies done badly prevent necessary studies from being done well (2010, II.I.15; emphasis mine).

This is the only point in *Democracy in America* in which Tocqueville focuses on universities as an institution, and he gives a far-sighted account of their cultural and political role. They will overstep if they try to educate the entire people in the letters of antiquity, yet they serve a vital function as counterweights to the natural trend of democratic language. Here as elsewhere Tocqueville acknowledges the presence of stubborn inequalities in democratic society, discrepancies produced by “nature” or “fortune” that make it impossible for all to cultivate a life of leisure. Is this esotericism?

Does Tocqueville insist that only some should know the grandeur and beauty of the ancients, lest their undemocratic ways produce desires that cannot be satisfied in the social state most occupy? It is striking that he concedes the need for “scientific, commercial, and industrial” studies to dominate, which are already the ones that democratic peoples acknowledge the need for. Yet those who make their way to the “few excellent universities” must be “thoroughly penetrated” by the spirit of ancient literature. Here Tocqueville appears to connect the possession of wealth to the ability to study fruitfully. For those few who already possess comfortable means and are given intellectual ability, the pursuit of leisured and liberal studies poses no danger to the public. In fact, it serves the cultural common good.⁷¹

Tocqueville’s argument against literary excess seems twofold. There is simply the imperative of productivity; in a world where money is mobile and families do not pass on their wealth between generations, most citizens need to develop the skills to win employment. “The violent efforts to increase his fortune or maintain it” that every man must make necessitate a certain suspicion of leisure. This aspect is the reason why the “interest of individuals” militates against literary education. But the second consideration, “the security of the State,” seems stranger. Why would reading Plutarch and Cicero create “very polished and very dangerous citizens” who might “disturb the State, in the name of the Greek and Romans”? The probable answer is that Tocqueville feared, based on his own experience, that the classics had the power to create an impossible gulf between what is desired and what is attainable. Tocqueville received a somewhat irregular classical education, but he recorded the vivid impressions his first encounters with classical texts made on him. He apparently did not read Plato before 1836, a year after the publication of the first volume of *Democracy in America*. An 1838

⁷¹ Avramenko identifies this discussion of liberal arts education as one of the only sources of renewal for democratic language, through its concern with form, nobility, and ideal beauty: “It is Tocqueville’s hope that studying such grammar will inculcate the otherwise frantic democratic mind with the habits missing from the average everyday democratic milieu” (2017, 515).

letter to his friend Beaumont recounts his experience of reading Plutarch's *Lives*: His mind "crammed with a heroism that is hardly of our time," he feared becoming "mad in the manner of Don Quixote."⁷² Plutarch has exactly the opposite effect on Tocqueville from the one Rousseau hoped it would have on Emile: rather than teaching pity for the great men of past ages, it instills a yearning to imitate their greatness.⁷³ Tocqueville respects the power of such texts and does want society to learn from them; his very hesitation stems from concern about their lessons being taken to excess. Tocqueville worried less that classical learning would inflame the grievances of the lower classes, and more that irresponsible students carried away by their reading would seek to reimpose an aristocratic order that could not be either viable or just in modern societies. Democracy really is more just than aristocracy, because it is in accordance with the nature of man. But it is precisely the unnaturalness of aristocracy that made it able to fulfill certain aspects of man's nature.⁷⁴

The chapter of II.III entitled, "How Mores Become Milder as Conditions Become More Equal," makes clearer Tocqueville's view of the peril anachronistic aristocratic mores could represent. Human beings have a very limited capacity for empathy, only truly pitying others whose ways of life they share. *Ancien régime* aristocrats were inured to the brutal suffering of peasants even as they could be deeply tender to one another and capable of refined artistic taste. Modern democracy, by rendering all divisions between states of life suspect, diminishes social distance and inclines even the wealthy

⁷² *Selected Letters on Politics and Society* (1985), 125.

⁷³ For Françoise Mélonio, Tocqueville's interest in Plutarch is typical of his class and his period, but what is not typical is his sense of historicity, that the ancient world is radically different from his own, allowing him to deploy Plutarch for comparative purposes, just as Tocqueville himself was capable of comparative study of different countries: « *Somme toute, la culture de Tocqueville est celle, fondée sur des textes traduits et des souvenirs scolaires, des notables, avec deux traits particuliers : un goût vif pour Plutarque où trouve à se satisfaire le sentiment de l'honneur et la nostalgie de l'héroïsme ; un intérêt pour l'histoire et surtout pour la pratique de la comparaison historique, qui va nourrir toute l'œuvre* » (2008, 81).

⁷⁴ Pierre Manent writes in *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, "In the matter of democracy, it is nature that puts nature in danger. This paradox goes to the heart of the very nature of democracy, in Tocqueville's view. He affirms the two terms with equal insistence" (1996), 69.

and powerful to recognize they could become destitute themselves. This closeness makes all citizens more *semblable* and induces each to “show a general compassion for all the members of the human species” (2010, II.III.1). A merely intellectual recognition that all share a common humanity, or even a rigorous moral formation based on that truth, could not truly elicit empathy for outsiders or the downtrodden. The Romans, Tocqueville notes, viewed their entire people as aristocrats relative to the rest of the world (“The struggle of the patricians and the plebeians of Rome” was in reality “only an internal quarrel between the junior members and the elders of the same family. All belong in fact to the aristocracy and had its spirit” (2010, II.I.15). Even such a sympathetic figure as Cicero, whose intellectual life was devoted to discerning the moral laws common to all humanity and whose professional life was devoted to securing the benefit of law to Roman citizens, could very easily avoid taking his principles to their logical conclusions. Tocqueville laments:

At the time of their greatest enlightenment, the Romans cut the throats of enemy generals, after dragging them in triumph behind a chariot, and delivered prisoners to the beasts for the amusement of the people. Cicero, who raises such loud cries at the idea of a citizen crucified,⁷⁵ finds nothing to say about these atrocious abuses of victory. It is clear that in his eyes a foreigner is not of the same human species as a Roman” (2010, II.III.1).

In this, Tocqueville agrees with Machiavelli and Rousseau’s analysis of Christianity’s political consequence, but he celebrates what they had decried. The ancient paganism that undergirded ancient republicanism could elevate civic duties over universal ones, whereas Christianity deprived the City of Man of ultimate loyalty, making it only a provisional association for this life.⁷⁶ In this Christian universalism Tocqueville saw an affirmation of a natural truth that pride would deny: the equal dignity of all human beings. In this sense, *Democracy in America* can claim that the advent of modern democracy has a providential quality as an outworking of the New Testament ethic: “Christianity, which has made

⁷⁵ Tocqueville presumably has Cicero’s *In Verrem* in mind, in which Cicero prosecutes a corrupt governor for crucifying a citizen in the course of an extortion plot.

⁷⁶ Niccolo Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, (1996, I.12) and Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, (2018, IV.8.)

all men equal before God, will not be loath to see all citizens equal before the law” (2010, I, “Introduction”). The discussion of higher education thus helps clarify that Tocqueville’s philosophy of history is not unidirectional or deterministic. The triumph of the egalitarian ethos is not in fact inevitable; it could be lost amid a resurgent paganism.

Tocqueville clearly does hope for an elite with different tastes than the majority to be able to lead in democracy. If widespread reading of the classics cannot be trusted to address the “social and political needs of democracy,” could it have an indirect effect by shaping those elite tastes? One of democracy’s greatest defects is the lack of suitable matter for poetry. Tocqueville defines poetry as “the search for and the portrayal of the ideal. . . the aim of poetry will not be to represent truth, but to embellish it and to offer a higher image to the mind” (2010, II.I.17). Democracy gives an outlet to so many human desires that it diminishes the opportunity for them to be sublimated. Instead of devoting itself to conceiving of ideals far higher than bodily life and its pleasures, the “imagination is not extinguished, but it devotes itself almost exclusively to imagining the useful and to representing the real” (2010, II.I.17). Poets in democratic ages are discouraged from making particular individuals their subjects, for when all are alike and well-known to each other, honoring a hero for exceptional nobility comes to seem implausible. The poetry that is appropriate to democratic ages is that which portrays great forces and abstractions: the future, nature, ideologies, classes, and man as a species. In a note to himself on this chapter, Tocqueville comments, “So I do not fear that democratic people lack poetry, but I am afraid that this poetry aims for the gigantesque rather than for grandeur” (2010, II.I.17). What those who have drunk deeply from the wells of older, aristocratic poetry can seek to preserve is a sense of the grandeur of individuals.

He remarks on the distinctively aristocratic mode of writing history in the chapter that soon follows, “Of Some Tendencies Particular to Historians in Democratic Centuries.” Aristocratic historians tend towards what we now call the “Great Man” view of history—they describe events as

the results of great minds and wills exerted against the backdrop of fortune. The result is a lack of theory, of systematic effort to interpret history.⁷⁷ As we have seen, the classic exemplar of aristocratic historiography for Tocqueville is not Thucydides or Herodotus but Plutarch. But democratic historians, in a pattern Tocqueville has already identified in his analysis of the appeal of pantheism, tend to over-systematize, to the point of abstracting away from real human beings acting at particular points and times. “It seems that ancient historians did not make enough use of these general theories that our historians are always ready to abuse” (2010, II.I.20). But it is precisely the grandeur of the acting human person and the authority that that grandeur properly exerts upon others that Tocqueville worries will be eclipsed in democratic thinking:

It seems, while reading the historians of aristocratic ages and particularly those of antiquity, that, in order to become master of his fate and govern his fellows, man has to know how to control himself. You would say, while surveying the histories written in our time, that man can do nothing, either for himself or around him. The historians of antiquity taught how to command; those of our days scarcely teach anything except how to obey. In their writings, the author often appears great, but humanity is always small (II.I.20).

Instead of focusing their counsel on mastering one’s own soul, democratic treatises on governance prescribe management by technique, as if human beings were simply puzzle pieces to be rearranged.⁷⁸ Democratic people incline towards viewing themselves as simply stuff to be manipulated, because they feel themselves weak and interchangeable as individuals, and struggle to believe that they are of a different metaphysical order than the surrounding universe. Tocqueville warns historians, “Care must be taken not to obscure this idea [of free will], for it is a matter of lifting up souls and not finally

⁷⁷ Tocqueville’s characterization of ancient historiography surely relies more on Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy, and Plutarch than it does on St. Augustine. But he would likely regard *City of God* from the near side of the decisive break with antiquity, which he takes to be the Incarnation.

⁷⁸ Tocqueville said, “a new political science is needed for a world entire new,” but not that the science needed was the one democratic people would naturally discover for themselves (I.I, “Introduction”). See Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, “Tocqueville’s New Political Science”: “The upshot for the political scientist is to pay attention to particular facts, not only to general truths, and this lesson is aristocratic in character rather than democratic” (2006, 103).

demoralizing them” (2010, II.I.20). Again it seems that intellectuals must have nourished their minds on something to lift up their own souls before being able to uplift others. There are real sources of poetry in democratic life, although democracy may need reminding.⁷⁹

Why Revere the Great Books?

Given the historical gap between the university as he knew it and our own institutions—Tocqueville had only minimal experience with a research university, gained from a visit to Bonn in 1854—what relevance for our time can be gleaned from his prescriptions?⁸⁰ Is it warranted to describe Tocqueville as a partisan of liberal education in the Great Books tradition *avant la lettre*? Of course, Tocqueville is not Robert Maynard Hutchins or Mortimer Adler, but he does offer an implicit account of canonicity, suggesting that, because certain texts have stood the test of time, they offer access to perennial truths of the human condition and so must be read with more care and reverence than others. As we have seen, democratic man, in the loneliness of his mind, tends to rely slavishly on popular opinion. Thus he binds himself inadvertently to the present moment and to vague hopes about the future, and is tempted to accept a materialism that would deny him a soul. In such a situation, reading old books is intellectually liberating, because they can unmask present dogmas as simply passing fads. It is significant that Tocqueville chooses Plato as his example of one who reveals the distinction between opinion and knowledge:

⁷⁹ Benjamin Storey offers a sanguine account of the poetry that resists mere technicity but is still appropriate to a democratic age: “Tocqueville does not simply disenchant; rather, understanding that human beings must have poetry of one kind or another, he replaces the poetry of technology with a poetry of his own. That poetry celebrates the distinctive excellences of *American* democracy: its combination of the spirit of liberty and the spirit of religion; the natural charms of its democratic families; the vigor of its small-scale political life; its magnanimous openness to genuine, and genuinely liberating, liberal education. He encourages us to nurture those aspects of ourselves that open us to the divine, to the past, and to human others: our love of truth, of God, and of the exercise of that liberty which consists in ruling and being ruled in turn” (2013, 71).

⁸⁰ See Mélonio, “De la démocratie en Europe: les voyages d’Alexis de Tocqueville en Rhénanie” (2018).

“When you read Plato, you notice that in the times prior to him and in his time, many writers existed who advocated materialism. These writers have not survived to our time or have survived only very incompletely. It has been so in nearly all the centuries; most of the great literary reputations are joined with spiritualism. The instinct and the taste of humanity uphold this doctrine; they often save this doctrine despite the men themselves and make the names of those who are attached to it linger on. So it must not be believed that in any time, and in whatever political state, the passion for material enjoyments and the opinions that are linked with it will be able to suffice for an entire people. **The heart of man is more vast than you suppose; it can at the same time enclose the taste for the good things of the earth and the love of the good things of heaven;** sometimes the heart seems to give itself madly to one of the two; but it never goes for a long time without thinking of the other” (2010, II.II.15; emphasis mine).⁸¹

Tocqueville suggests here that the highly partial process of preservation and transmission of ancient texts reflects an essential wisdom; where others might see only randomness, he sees a purgative and elevating process. This passage suggest both that there is such a thing as humanity *simpliciter* for Tocqueville, and also that the aristocratic and democratic principles recur in some form in every society. Their balance may differ in different circumstances, but they are correlated to two real sets of goods, those of the body and the soul. Thus the two different social states he compares throughout his works are not mutually exclusive, nor can democracy ever definitively lay aristocracy to rest.⁸²

⁸¹ In a private letter to Gustave de Beaumont from April 22, 1838, during the period between the publication of the two volumes of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville elaborates on his view of Plato and of canonicity:

“I was reflecting the other day, going over in my mind the works of the human spirit which have most seized the imagination of the human race... I found that in a great majority of cases it was those books in which the great principles of the beautiful and the good, as well as the high and salutary themes of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul have penetrated the most profoundly; these great works have best put in relief and exhibited those principles and those theories... it is in that direction that the heart of mankind tends in the most energetic and continuous manner.

“Deprive Plato, for instance, of this aspiration toward immortality and the infinite which transports him, and leave him only with his useless forms, his incomplete and often ridiculous knowledge, his eloquence that escapes us at great distance, and he falls into obscurity and becomes unreadable. But Plato addressed himself to the noblest and most persevering instinct of our nature, and he will live as long as there are men; he will carry along even those who half understand him, and he will always be an enormous figure in the world of intellects,” (1985, 130).

⁸² Manent notes that, for Tocqueville, even “in a complete democracy [like the United States], where the seeds of aristocracy have never been sown, the aristocracy/democracy distinction remains the

Modern democracies may not produce many Marcus Aureliuses or St. Simeon Stylites, but the glory of the one and the sanctity of the other remain intelligible when their works are read with patience and with reverence. If this is a truth gleaned from reading the Great Books, it is a truth Tocqueville can teach, and one that earns him his own place in the canon.

Tocqueville does not just want these elites to provide some aesthetic polish for democratic society, but also demands that they deliberately foster a taste for greatness in the people by the way they lead. Within the characteristic constraints of democratic rhetoric, there may be means to move listeners in this direction. His analysis “Of Parliamentary Eloquence in the United States” is relatively complimentary. Although legislators are amateurs in American democracy and make their speeches as much to please their constituents as to persuade their fellow representatives, they must also speak in the name of the whole and so their words acquire “a character of generality that often makes those discussions captivating to the human species. All men are interested in them because it is a question of man, who is everywhere the same” (2010, I.I.21). Even though these speeches must be expressed plainly, the subject matter is actually grander than the disputes over rank and privilege that characterize aristocratic assemblies. In his draft for this chapter, Tocqueville remarks, “The English orators of the last century constantly quoted Latin and even Greek at the rostrum. Their sons of America quote only Shakespeare, the democratic author par excellence” (2010, I.I.21). If Shakespeare with all his greatness qualifies as the democratic author, there may be a way in which legislators, themselves steeped in the classics, can express themselves in language that moves ordinary citizens’ hearts. The later chapter entitled “Why in the United States You Find So Many Ambitious Men and So Few Great Ambitions,” Tocqueville warns, “What seems to me most to fear is that, amid the small incessant occupations of private life, ambition may lose its impetus and its grandeur.” He calls for “the heads of these new

key to political life. Despite the unopposed dominance of the democratic social state, aristocratic and democratic individuals are still identifiable” (1996, 15).

societies” to “sometimes give [the citizens] difficult and perilous things to do, in order to elevate ambition there and to open a theatre to it” (2010, I.III.19). We might think of John F. Kennedy’s proclamation of the space program, stirring Americans to do something unnecessary, perilous, and noble, something that would be a point of pride for generations to come.

Comparison: From Tocqueville to the Research University

Today we are hardly faced with a profusion of “polished but very dangerous” (2010, II.I.15) reactionaries pining quixotically for a world out of keeping with the spirit of the age. The salient danger, as highlighted by Young, Lasch, and Sandel, seems to be that the highly-credentialed few, possessed of abundant technical skills but unread in Shakespeare and the Bible, will be unable to comprehend why the many question the legitimacy of their rule. In our present moment, with liberal arts programs increasingly obliged to justify their existence, and with fears growing that reckless populism threatens democratic institutions themselves, Tocqueville would make liberal learning all the more central to his system of counterweights to democracy. We have seen that, despite his celebration of the freedom and equality and comfort that the many have attained, Tocqueville sees a need for an enlightened elite, the beneficiaries of a far-sighted education, to provide intellectual and moral leadership to restrain democracy’s basest impulses. This need is not just rooted in the exigencies of policy-making, but in the nature of humanity, which is to seek reference points for mimesis, exemplars to follow, cathexes for *eros*.⁸³ ⁸⁴ But his advocacy of studying the great texts of antiquity is not easily

⁸³ Manent comments, “By placing certain men in a sublime social position, the aristocrats set forth a sublime idea of man, and stimulate in some men (who are not necessarily the same as the first) sublime efforts towards the truth. Aristocracy favors intellectual *eros*. Nothing of the kind takes place in democracies, where nature is left to itself, and where it therefore runs the risk of falling short of its potential” (1996, 68). Manent notes that Tocqueville does not think intellectuals in aristocracies always came from the nobility, only that the social state lent a supporting infrastructure to the rise of a genius like Pascal.

⁸⁴ In *The Fragility of Freedom*, Mitchell compares the value of the mediating loci of authority that even associations provide to the appeal of veneration of the saints in Catholic devotion: “It is not, then, simply that mediating bodies (which stand between the many and the sovereign) are necessary in all

assimilable to the arguments of 20th-century proponents of Great Books programs like Allan Bloom, whose paragon of the liberal-educated mind is Socrates the gadfly, not the Socrates who went to his death out of his conviction about justice.⁸⁵ Whereas Bloom would seek to make the Great Books egalitarian and skeptical, a Tocquevillian defense of the canon embraces the task of instilling conviction and not merely critical competence in the rising generation of leaders. As Ralph Hancock writes, offering Tocqueville as a better alternative to Bloom,

“The Great Books cannot be defended without defending some greatness beyond these books. This does not mean that the big questions must be taught with corresponding big answers dogmatically attached. But without a serious, respectful concern for the possibilities embodied in the answers—a sharing of the common human interest in the Good, the True, and the Beautiful—Bloom’s openness to the Good becomes a mere openness to openness, just a slightly more refined or esoteric version of the specious openness he derides. If the critical examination of such problems, or philosophy, is understood as the pinnacle of liberal education, then we must not sever the ties that link it with moral, political, and indeed religious education.”⁸⁶

Not only must the greatness that makes the Great Books great be defended, but a mode of reading that is appropriate in the face of greatness must be defended. If the hermeneutic of suspicion is characteristic of the democratic mode of reading, and the hermeneutic of deference is what aristocratic ages employ, surely Tocqueville is right that some deference needs to be instilled in those who are to lead democracies and that that attitude must first be modeled by their teachers.

Do the norms that Tocqueville wants to be instilled in elites have a sound basis? Does he follow Plato in trying to educate the desires of potential rulers to conform them to what is transcendently true and good? Both proponents of Tocqueville’s view who seek a justification for an

societies, democratic ones or otherwise; more precisely than this, *what is necessary is that there be sites of authority toward which the many—themselves without the authority of station that the aristocrat possesses—may be drawn. Mediating bodies provide this*” (1995, 126, italics mine).

⁸⁵ Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* frames the death of Socrates as a conflict between open questioning and dogmatic allegiance to the gods of the city (1987, 276-7).

⁸⁶ Hancock, “Tocqueville on Liberal Education and American Democracy” (1999, 66).

authoritative curriculum, like Hancock, and his sternest critics, such as Dana Villa, insist that he does: “He is a monist who fears eccentricity, the critical questioning of regnant norms and beliefs” (2017, 183). Monism, here, stands in for believing in a single end of human life that defines the good for all people, with Plato usually taken to be the archetypical monist.⁸⁷ In this framing, Plato and Tocqueville are arrayed together against John Stuart Mill, Isaiah Berlin, and the tradition of modern liberals who celebrate a variety of visions of the good life. But for Villa to chide Tocqueville for a lack of courage because he does not tell democratic citizens to seek to build certain knowledge from their own critical reason is to sidestep his central argument: that it is simply impossible for the human mind to function without trusting some intellectual authorities. As Tocqueville warns in his analysis of atheism’s influence on the French Revolution, “When religion deserted souls, it did not leave them, as so often happens, empty and debilitated. For a time they brimmed with new feelings and ideas” (2011, III.2). The choice may not be between having dogmatic convictions and being free of them, but between a set of convictions that is liberating and one that is degrading. Compared to Plato, Tocqueville does not seem to care to subject the stories the poets tell to the strictest rational scrutiny. For him, the longing for immortality is part of human nature, but he does not argue that that means the immortality of the soul is real. In a striking parallel to his lack of fear of elite domination, which causes him to stir up ambition to protect freedom, Tocqueville assumes that under democratic conditions, it is more important to incite souls to desire at all than to verify the objects of their desires. In this analysis of

⁸⁷ John Rawls, in *Political Liberalism*, gives an influential definition of the alternatives of monism and pluralism: “Plato and Aristotle, and the Christian tradition as represented by Augustine and Aquinas, fall on the side of the one reasonable and rational good. Such views hold that institutions are justifiable to the extent that they effectively promote the good. Indeed, beginning with Greek thought the dominant tradition seems to have been that there is but one reasonable and rational conception of the good... By contrast... political liberalism supposes that there are many conflicting reasonable comprehensive doctrines with their conceptions of the good, each compatible with the full rationality of human persons” (2005, 134-135). The language of “value pluralism” is articulated explicitly by Isaiah Berlin before Rawls takes it up. See Jonathan Riley, “Interpreting Berlin’s Liberalism” (2001, 283-295).

the drying-up of *eros* even as consumption and entertainment make it apparently possible to satisfy all desires instantaneously, Tocqueville anticipates not only Christopher Lasch's analysis of narcissism but an important twentieth- and twenty-first-century theme: technology's power to shape desire.⁸⁸

Despite the severity of his diagnosis, the Tocquevillian task of elite education in democracy can be seen a hopeful and noble one. A country like the United States, lacking an aristocratic class built up over many generations but also free of the cruelty that one would entail, must seek in each generation to build up a love of greatness in its leaders.⁸⁹ In the generations after Tocqueville, Irving Babbitt would take up this Tocquevillian theme to offer a vision of American education as an aristocratic element serving the democratic regime by reminding it of a hierarchy of standards. John Dewey's pluralist response would be that the university should represent precisely the most democratic aspirations of the surrounding society, while at the same time taking up the Rousseauian task of forming self-contented individuals. As denizens of American academia, we are inheritors of an incoherent mixture of Babbittian and Deweyan ideas that shape our institutions. To get purchase on the promise and peril of the American educated elite in the twenty-first century, we must turn to these early twentieth-century arguments.

CHAPTER 4:

“Socratic Remnant” vs. “Creative Democracy”:

Irving Babbitt's anti-Deweyan Vision of Leadership

“If we can secure a real university in this country and a real program of general education upon which its work can rest, it may be that the character of our education can slowly change. It may be that we can outgrow the love of money, that we can get a saner conception of democracy, and that we can even understand the purpose of education.”¹

⁸⁸ Along these lines I think of Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (2005).

⁸⁹ As Manent concludes, “Democracy, from the point of view of political art, thus has the task of fabricating what was **given** in aristocratic societies” (1996, 26).

¹ Robert Maynard Hutchins (2009, 118-9).

Introduction: Contemporary Reverberations of a Nineteenth-Century Debate

What unites both Plato and Tocqueville as sympathetic critics of democracy is their claim that democracy can flatten the soul and render it incapable of choosing among its desires; both hold that a rightly-ordered psychological hierarchy, an “aristocratic soul,” can play a beneficial role in democracy. It is this psychological and educational analysis that is the common thread linking Plato and Tocqueville to Irving Babbitt. Whereas the first two thinkers are central figures in the canon, perhaps the authorities on the psychology of ancient and modern democracy respectively, Babbitt is today much less known. Yet to examine him is to make our analysis much more contemporary; not only did Babbitt die less than a century ago, but the university that he cherished and criticized was structurally recognizable as the same institution we inhabit as academics today. Babbitt is also a deeply American thinker, who celebrates the access that the many in this regime may have to the highest but who also regrets how easily wealth or mere notoriety seize the public square. This chapter therefore recovers a neglected episode in the history of higher education to demonstrate that our current polemics about higher education often unwittingly reprise earlier ones, and that today’s debates would benefit from wider historical perspective. The academy is hierarchical, a guild whose origins lie in the medieval society of orders, and it has arguably become even more stratified as it has become the arbiter of prestige and scientific research. This hierarchy seems at odds with the surrounding society which conceives of itself as a free democracy of equals. Alexis de Tocqueville, in his prescriptions for America, called for the friends of democracy to preserve and cultivate the “precious heritage of aristocratic centuries”² to counterbalance egalitarianism’s worst impulses. For Tocqueville, universities

² Tocqueville (2010, II.II.15), was referring in this case to religion, although he intends the principle to be general.

teaching the Greek and Roman classics form a central part of that heritage.³ John Dewey and Irving Babbitt, both friends of democracy in Tocqueville's sense, advanced contrasting understandings of the role of the American research university in the early twentieth century. Russell Kirk called Babbitt Dewey's "most ardent adversary."⁴ Whereas Babbitt explicitly followed Tocqueville in describing a fruitful tension between the intellectual excellence that defined the university and the restless zeal for newness of the surrounding democratic society, Dewey described the university as more democratic than society at large, characteristically responding to the suggestion that democracy might have flaws with a call for democracy to be extended. For Babbitt, universities ought consciously to select and train students to be democracy's leaders, in the best scenario, and its gadflies in the more likely one. Dewey portrayed universities as the site of perpetual questioning of dogma and of open-ended debate; this contestation was for him the essence of democracy.

Both of their accounts are in part attempts to rationalize a *fait accompli*. In the decades immediately following the American Civil War, the system of East Coast colleges rooted in the colonial era was radically overhauled along the lines of the rising German research university.⁵ The most prominent leaders of the educational institutions at the heart of these changes largely left copious and articulate theoretical defenses of their practical decisions.⁶ Administrative work at universities was not as thoroughly divorced from educational philosophy as it is today, largely because the institutions were smaller and more fragile. The historiography is therefore copious and detailed, but most histories of

³ I discuss Tocqueville's view of classical education as essentially aristocratic and of real but ambivalent value for a democratic age in "Tocqueville on the Mixed Blessing of Liberal Learning: Higher Education as Subversive Antidote" (2020).

⁴ "The Conservative Humanism of Irving Babbitt," (1952, 245).

⁵ The classic study of this period in the history of higher education is Laurence Veysey (1965). Three other notable works in this vein are R. Freeman Butts (1971) and Frederick Rudolph (1962 and 1977).

⁶ E.g., Noah Porter's 1871 "Inaugural Address" when he became President of Yale, (2017, 248-264), and the Charles Eliot collection edited by Edward Krug (1961).

the university that address this period focus on two major (and closely interwoven) themes: secularization⁷ and the rise of *Wissenschaft*.⁸ The ambition to systematize, institutionalize, and professionalize all knowledge stemmed not only from the prestige and explanatory power of the natural sciences after Darwin, but also from the massive body of scholarship produced by philological study of the biblical texts.⁹ Often histories of these two trends, whether they are framed as positive or negative, give the impression of a linear development which minimizes the real dynamic of ebb and flow and the conscious efforts to develop alternative curricular models. At the same time, the growing specialization of the economy created a demand for professional training, and universities reoriented their curricula in order to meet this trend. Thorsten Veblen in 1918 identified and denounced this trend with *The Higher Learning in America*, memorably subtitled *An Essay on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men*, a polemic against the corruption of the liberal arts by vocational training. “The consequences which an habitual pursuit of business in modern times has had for the ideals, aims, and methods of the scholars and schools devoted to the higher learning” (1918, 4) have been deleterious, with faculty governance increasingly transferred to the oversight of corporate interested in applicable research. Both Dewey and Babbitt’s defenses of humanism should be understood as in a similar genre to Veblen’s, although their responses to the dominance of wealth-seeking were opposite: Babbitt

⁷ In this category are George Marsden, *Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Unbelief* (1996) and Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (2009).

⁸ See Chad Wellmon, *Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Invention of the Modern Research University* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015) and William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (2006). For an account of the parallel process in Britain, see A.J. Engel, *From Clergyman to Don: The Rise of the Academic Profession in Nineteenth-Century Oxford* (1983).

⁹ On the role of philological study of the Scriptures, see Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450-1800* (1991), Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present* (2013) and James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Humanities* (2014).

advances an aristocratic vision against the *nouveau-riche* whereas Dewey seeks a more radically democratic education.

This chapter complements the existing literature by focusing on the political and moral ambitions of the educational reformers. The older colleges were primarily seminaries, prioritizing the moral and theological formation of undergraduates through the internalization of a small canon of essential texts. Their pedagogy relied on memorization, aiming to instill “mental discipline” through years of practice in the classical languages and rewarding reasoning that reached correct moral conclusions.¹⁰ Residential life was unabashedly paternalistic, exercising the authority of *in loco parentis*.¹¹ I follow Laurence Veysey’s typology of four models that emerged in response: the research university, the liberal arts college, the state university, and the land-grant college.

The new research university that posed the decisive critique to the didacticism and dogmatism of the older collegiate seminaries was neither morally agnostic nor politically neutral. At the inception of this model in 1809 in Prussia, Wilhelm von Humboldt had articulated the process of the open-ended pursuit of knowledge as one of Romantic *Bildung*: “What matters to the state, just as to humanity, is not merely knowing and talking but character and action, and only the kind of knowledge that comes from within and can be cultivated within transforms character.”¹² The new American universities built after the Civil War along Humboldtian lines, like Johns Hopkins and the University of Chicago, felt an urgent imperative to promote national identity and unity, hoping that the end of slavery had heralded a more democratic and inclusive Republic. Yet they were ironically much more

¹⁰ “Mental discipline” is Eric Adler’s phrase in *The Battle of the Classics* (2020, 10) to describe the traditional defense of the humanities based on the skills they inculcate rather than the content studied.

¹¹ This summary description is largely drawn from the opening chapter of Laurence Veysey’s classic study, *The Emergence of the American University* (1965, 21-56), “Discipline and Piety,” portraying the pre-1865 college model and its vulnerability to critique.

¹² Wilhelm von Humboldt, “On Germany’s Educational System,” in *The Rise of the Research University* (2017, 110).

rigidly hierarchical than the informal structures of the old, small colleges, introducing, along with the German PhD degree, new ranks among both professors and graduate students. The political ambitions of the new university presidents were often sweeping. Chicago's Harper claimed for the new universities the role of spiritual guides of democracy.¹³ Woodrow Wilson, who replaced the conservative James McCosh at Princeton, hoped that social science could make political judgment a matter of rational calculation. He developed a theory of **administration**—which was to be the rational task of an elite civil service along the lines of the French and German models—as opposed to *governance*, the task of elected officials.¹⁴ In an article early in his career he wrote, “It will be necessary to organize democracy by sending up to the competitive examinations for the civil service men definitely prepared for standing liberal tests as to technical knowledge. A technically schooled civil service will presently have become indispensable.”¹⁵ He promised there would be no fundamental tension between these professionals and the popular will, because the civil service would simply execute the vision conveyed to them by their elected superiors.

In response to the ambitions and success of the research university, each of the other three characteristic models of American higher-educational institutions also arose. In the vision of men like William Foster of Reed College, the new American liberal arts college was not simply a preservation of the pre-Civil War Ivy League model.¹⁶ It promised a different kind of *Bildung* than the specialized,

¹³ William Rainey Harper, “The University and Democracy,” in *The Rise of the Research University* (2017, 225).

¹⁴ Wilson's hero of civil service reform in Prussia was Lorenz von Stein. Both Max Weber and Michel Foucault would later problematize the Wilsonian distinction between administration and governance as in practice inevitably confounded.

¹⁵ Woodrow Wilson, “The Study of Administration,” (1887, 216). He goes on to concede, “I know that a corps of civil servants prepared by a special schooling and drilled, after appointment, into a perfected organization, with appropriate hierarchy and characteristic discipline, seems to a great many very thoughtful persons to contain elements which might combine to make an offensive official class,” though he insists that the civil service will remain accountable to public opinion.

¹⁶ See Foster's *Should Students Study?* (1917).

graduate-oriented research model could offer, a self-conscious and defensive humanistic alternative. Then the research ideal of pure investigation for its own sake had already by the late nineteenth century become a kind of victim of its own success, fostering such scientific breakthroughs that it created the expectation that research should always have tangible results. Thus it became possible and normal to chastise the ivory-tower scientist for being impractically detached from the manipulation of real phenomena beyond the university's gates. The land-grant college, conceived "for the benefit of agriculture and the mechanic arts"¹⁷ and designed to boost the productivity of the interior of the country, represented an explicitly applied understanding of the value of learning. A fourth kind of higher education, more humanistic than the land-grant colleges but still more applied than the research universities or the liberal arts colleges, was the education for citizenship developed at the new state universities.¹⁸

This chapter's protagonists were two contrasting contemporaries who offered compelling reasons to be skeptical of the new research university's political value: Irving Babbitt, a scholar of comparative literature at Harvard, led a New Humanist school that made the case for liberal learning through communion with a canon of texts chosen for their time-tested value as sources of wisdom. This was to be both a good in itself as well as promising the added benefit of instilling an ethic of self-restraint in the student, cultivating an aristocratic soul in Plato's sense.¹⁹ John Dewey saw this model as overly Platonic. His 1916 *Democracy and Education* argued that learning must be practical and experimental because in democracy truths are created through living, speaking, and practicing politics

¹⁷ In the language of the Morrill Act, <https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/morrill.html>.

¹⁸ Veysey argues that the state universities did not come to constitute a distinct educational model until the end of the nineteenth century. Veysey links them closely with the land-grant colleges as both fundamentally oriented towards utility for the surrounding society. In some cases the two types overlapped in the same institutions, with many state universities in the Western states being established with the help of federal land grants (1965, 111-113).

¹⁹ *Literature and the American College: A Defense of the Humanities* (1908) is Babbitt's primary apologia for the liberal arts.

together.²⁰ In other words, Dewey sought to bolster democracy by cultivating democratic souls; his rejection of the Platonic solution was based on his denial of the Platonic assumption that the structure of the soul and the regime resemble each other. Both Babbitt and Dewey follow Plato in assuming a link between the possession of knowledge and the authority to rule. But against Babbitt, Dewey hoped that the entire body politic could participate in the necessary knowledge, so he charged that to prescribe a canon of texts would be to concede authoritarian assumptions and remove knowledge from firsthand experience.²¹ He focused on the public school as the foundation of democracy's future and treated the university as an outgrowth of the school. This chapter performs a close reading on several major works of Babbitt's corpus to detail his account of leadership in light of his overall political and educational theory. Along the way, I will sketch Dewey's much more thoroughly-studied philosophy as a foil for Babbitt's view of the kind of authority knowledge confers and the role it is to play in American political life. I conclude by suggesting that Babbitt's theory of worthy and unworthy elites offers us today a healthier vision of education for excellence than what contemporary critics of meritocracy have so far offered.

Babbitt's Characteristic Concerns

While Dewey and his importance needs no introduction, Babbitt (1865-1933), a professor of early modern French literature at Harvard, is today a little-known figure.²² Perhaps chiefly remembered for his influence on T.S. Eliot, who was his undergraduate student at Harvard, Babbitt published a number of writings on politics, education, and ethics, emphasizing the power of literature to shape the imagination. Folke Leander in Sweden was the first scholar to consider Babbitt's oeuvre as a

²⁰ *Democracy and Education* (2009).

²¹ Dewey, "President Hutchins' Proposals to Remake Higher Education," (1937, 103-4).

²² I do not attempt to provide a complete biography of Babbitt here, but an excellent sketch of his life and works can be found in the Introduction to his *Character and Culture: Essays on East and West* (1940, ix-1).

philosophical whole, publishing *Humanism and Naturalism* in 1937, and comparing him to Dewey at some length in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*.²³ Claes Ryn, a student of Leander's, is the leading contemporary authority on Babbitt's philosophy, expounded in such works as *Will, Imagination, and Reason*.²⁴ George Panichas treated Babbitt as a literary critic in *The Critical Legacy of Irving Babbitt*.²⁵ As a political thinker, Babbitt is most known for his influence on Russell Kirk and American conservatism in the second half of the twentieth century. Kirk named him in *The Conservative Mind*'s canon of conservative thinkers,²⁶ helping spur later book-length treatments in the 1970s and 1980s.²⁷ More recently, Babbitt's theory that democracy is paradoxically prone to imperialism has generated a study of his writing on foreign policy, *Democracy and Imperialism: Irving Babbitt and Warlike Democracies*.²⁸ His constitutional theory has generated a volume of essays reflecting on the present state of American constitutionalism, *The Historical Mind: Humanistic Renewal in a Post-Constitutional Age*.²⁹ A few scholars have engaged seriously with Babbitt as an educational theorist, with the detailed work of Kipton Smilie and the recent treatment by Eric Adler in *The Battle of the Classics* particularly notable.³⁰ But this essay builds on this growing literature by connecting Babbitt's political and educational theories and showing them to be a unified whole concerned with cultivating and promoting excellent leaders in democracy.

²³ *Humanism and Naturalism: A Comparative Study of Ernest Sellière, Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More* () and *The Philosophy of John Dewey: A Critical Study* (1938).

²⁴ *Will, Imagination, and Reason: Irving Babbitt and the Problem of Reality* (1986). Ryn also makes extensive use of Babbitt in his *Democracy and the Ethical Life: A Philosophy of Politics and Community* (1990).

²⁵ *The Critical Legacy of Irving Babbitt: An Appreciation* (1999).

²⁶ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (2016, 415-456).

²⁷ See J. David Hoeveler, Jr., *The New Humanism: A Critique of Modern America, 1900-1940* (1977), George Nevin, *Irving Babbitt: An Intellectual Study* (1984), and George A. Panichas and Ryn's *Irving Babbitt in Our Time* (1986).

²⁸ William Smith, *Democracy and Imperialism: Irving Babbitt and Warlike Democracies* (2019). Smith is a student of Ryn.

²⁹ Eds. Justin Garrison and Ryan Holston (2020).

³⁰ See "Unthinkable Allies?: John Dewey, Irving Babbitt and 'the menace of the specialized narrowness,'" (2016), "Irving Babbitt's New Humanism: An Outsider's Perspective on Curricular Debates at the Turn of the 20th Century," (2010), and "Humanitarian and Humanistic Ideals: Charles W. Eliot, Irving Babbitt, and the American Curriculum at the Turn of the 20th Century" (2012).

Though it was once conventional to dismiss Babbitt's educational views as "counter-revolutionary," I will bring out some surprising parallels to Dewey's thought and insights that are pertinent to our own time.³¹ Along the way, I will show that Babbitt adapts the Platonic city/soul analogy to develop a psychic parallel to the constitutional order of the United States.

Babbitt's oeuvre is marked by a number of recurring tropes, which to an unsympathetic reader could make him seem repetitive. Chief among these, from *Literature and the American College* (1908) to *Democracy and Leadership* (1924), is the contrast between "humanitarianism" and "humanism." Humanitarianism he characterizes as a modern movement dedicated to the elimination of human suffering, with twin forms that are superficially opposed but actually united in a profound and insidious kinship: naturalism (represented by Francis Bacon) and sentimentalism (embodied by Jean-Jacques Rousseau). For Babbitt, Bacon reoriented education away from contemplation of the liberal arts for their own sake and towards gaining experimental knowledge for practical action in the world. This mode of thinking is inclined to be rationalist and reductive, but confident in human progress through the accumulation of knowledge. Rousseau apparently rejected the meliorism and rationalism of the Baconians of his day, his profound skepticism towards the achievements of the modern sciences coming to a head in his famous break with Diderot and the Encyclopedists.³² But, for Babbitt, the Rousseauian and the Baconian have a common enemy when it comes to education: Rousseau's *Emile* and Herbert Spencer's *Education: Physical, Moral, and Intellectual* share a suspicion of classical education,

³¹ See for example Michael R. Harris, *Five Counterrevolutionists in Higher Education: Irving Babbitt, Albert Jay Nock, Abraham Flexner, Robert Maynard Hutchins, and Alexander Meiklejohn* (1970).

³² Viewed *en passant*, Babbitt seems less to seriously engage Rousseau than to use him as a stand-in for a whole set of ideas he finds unpalatable. But Babbitt as a professor of French literature did engage with Rousseau at length and in depth, notably in his 1919 book *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1960). In the Introduction to that work, Babbitt says "It is [Rousseau's] somewhat formidable privilege to represent more fully than any other one person a great international movement. To attack Rousseau or to defend him is most often only a way of attacking or defending this movement" (1960, 3).

although their reasons differ widely.³³ Though Rousseau accepts the Aristotelian assumption that paideia must be ordered to the creation of a stable politeia, Babbitt claims that Rousseau's effort to liberate the individual's consciousness from social constraint effectively valorizes whatever is useful to the individual as he finds himself at the present moment. Babbitt characterizes the Rousseauian teaching as, "Virtue is no longer to be the veto power of the personality, a bit and a bridle to be applied to one's impulses, and so imposing a difficult struggle" (1908, 50). Rousseau hopes to make virtue spontaneous, flowing authentically from the student's deepest desires (once successfully disentangled from the corrupting influence of *amour-propre*, a heteronomous influence from society). But this aspiration towards self-discovery through unearthing the authentic self contrasts sharply with what Babbitt sees as the aspiration of the traditional curriculum: anchored on classical languages, ancient literature, and metaphysics, it was to lead the student out of himself into a knowledge of reality, an orientation that was essentially contemplative, liberal, and hierarchical (because dependent on subjecting the student's impulses to undertake difficult study).

Babbitt saw contemporary universities, especially Charles Eliot's Harvard, as dominated by a schizophrenic hybrid of Baconian and Rousseauian notions, and the elective system (at the time a radical proposal, but the predecessor of the now-default structure of American college education, in which undergraduates choose a field of "major" study, subject to minimal distribution requirements and not obliged to go through any unified curriculum) as the proverbial worst of both worlds. Though Eliot justified it in Baconian terms, claiming it would produce leaders capable of changing America for the better, Babbitt saw in it a deeply Rousseauian assumption: that the untutored, raw inclinations of students reflected a wisdom greater than that of their teachers or the accumulated wisdom of the

³³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or, On Education*, (1979) and Herbert Spencer, *Education: Physical, Moral, and Intellectual* (2009).

educational tradition.³⁴ Babbitt characterized Eliot's position satirically as implying that the student "should make his selection entirely with reference to his own temperament and its (supposedly) unique requirements. The wisdom of all the ages is to be as naught compared with the inclination of a sophomore" (1908, 47). But for Babbitt this apparent paradox was not actually so surprising: the formlessness and aimlessness of Rousseauian education cannot satisfy the student's search for purpose. The resulting restless desire for meaningful activity gets channeled into scientific or technical projects, reinforcing the marginalization of the humanities. He quipped, "Having bestowed upon the student the full liberty of Rousseau, it is evident that President Eliot would have him use this liberty in a Baconian spirit" (1908, 52).

To give his critique of humanitarianism sharper philosophical and political teeth, Babbitt contrasts it with his own preferred vision, humanism. Whereas humanitarianism assumes that human nature is basically benevolent (or adopts an anti-essentialist view of human nature) and focuses on cultivating sympathy as the chief virtue and knowledge as the chief power for human beings, humanism concentrates on what it takes to be the most difficult and valuable task: forming individual souls. The humanist is "interested in the perfecting of the individual rather than in schemes for the elevation of mankind as a whole; and although he allows largely for sympathy, he insists that it be disciplined and tempered by judgment" (1908, 8). It is a philosophy that seeks the principles for "selection" of the best and most worthy, not of "sympathy" with the average or the common. The humanist fears one-sidedness and seeks to cultivate a breadth of knowledge that encompasses familiarity with all human pursuits and questions. He seeks to become a complete human being, not by expansion but by concentration. Babbitt thus ties humanism essentially to the Greek vision of man

³⁴ Babbitt does not really consider the paradoxical role of Emile's tutor, which is one of teaching the truth by means of deception, of artfully drawing out the student's nature.

as *mikrokosmos*, a distilled deposit mirroring universal reality.³⁵ The political dimension of this vision becomes apparent as Babbitt claims that the relationship of One and Many is first and foremost the relationship of the individual to the whole of phenomena in the world: “If man’s nobility lies in his kinship to the One, he is at the same time a phenomenon among other phenomena and only at his risk and peril neglects his phenomenal self” (1908, 28). This makes the goal of education synthesis, teaching the student to see an underlying unity behind the apparent heterogeneous flux of experience and events. Babbitt cites the Buddha to claim that man’s fundamental defect is not malice or pride as in the Christian understanding of original sin, but indolence. The meaning of work for human beings is first and foremost to work on oneself: “What is important to man in the eyes of the humanist is not his power to act on the world, but his power to act upon himself” (1908, 56).

There is a central paradox in Babbitt’s position: though churches might be the very institutions most receptive to his defense of a traditional hierarchy of curricular authority in which the wisdom of great texts and past minds aimed to form the young to self-knowledge and self-restraint, he remained cold and sometimes hostile towards Christianity after his vaguely church-going upbringing. Babbitt’s personal sympathies actually lay with Buddhism, and he was at pains throughout his corpus to distance himself from dogmatic Christianity. In his telling of the story of Western intellectual history, the Renaissance humanists rightly rebelled against the rigidity of the medieval university. Man’s temporal needs had been suppressed in favor of purported spiritual goods, inhibiting the holistic development of human nature. Babbitt saw theology’s dominance over the curriculum as an overspecialization parallel to the scientific one he denounced in his own day. “The humanities need to be defended today against the encroachments of physical sciences, as once they needed to be against the encroachments

³⁵ This vision of education is not just Greek but also medieval. It is apparent for instance in Hugh of Saint Victor’s use of Pythagoras in his 12th-century *Didascalion*: “The mind, imprinted with the likenesses of all things, is said to *be* all things” (1991, I.1).

of theology” (1908, 31). This put Babbitt in a difficult position; he sought to attack the “democratic absurdity of asserting that all studies are, and by right should be, free and equal” (1908, 97)³⁶ that he saw as implicit in Eliot’s elective system, but at the same time wanted to avoid a return to the old hierarchy of disciplines.

This early work, *Literature and the American College*, already contained a sharp and memorable provocation on the political role of the college, which was to be developed in *Democracy and Leadership*.³⁷ Babbitt stated clearly that in a choice between democracy and the mere snobbery or oligarchy he had seen around him as a Midwesterner of working-class background at Harvard, he would choose democracy: “Evidently the college should be democratic in the sense that it should get rid of all distinctions of family and rank” (1908, 75). Yet the college, because it insists on the excellent and the difficult, must exist in a fruitful tension with the surrounding democratic society. “The purpose of the college is not to encourage the democratic spirit, but to check the drift toward a pure democracy... what is needed is not democracy alone, nor again an unmixed aristocracy, but a blending of the two—an aristocratic and selective democracy” (1908, 80). Democratic society is fragile, always in danger of being corrupted by oligarchic interests. The target of Babbitt’s critique of democracy is more often the millionaire industrialist than the man in the street.

Here as throughout his writing, Babbitt warns against the acquisitive restlessness of the captains of industry who can so quickly obtain great power and wealth in America, but with very little self-restraint or concern for the common good. Babbitt views limitless acquisition and the

³⁶ The echo here of the language of the Declaration of Independence’s final paragraph, “these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States,” is certainly deliberate; Babbitt contended that Americans were particularly prone to dismiss the need for authority in education.

³⁷ It is important to distinguish this specific term from the more general “higher education,” because Babbitt held that the collegiate tradition in Britain and the United States contained a wisdom alien to the German research university model and therefore a distinct advantage compared to it.

emancipation of desire of the wealthy as the logical extension of the democratic elite. But since ambitious people tend to rise to constitute a new elite, Babbitt seeks to prevent it from being merely plutocratic: The college must foster “that aristocracy of character and intelligence that is needed in a community like ours to take the place of an aristocracy of birth, and to counteract the tendency toward an aristocracy of money” (1908, 105). Babbitt’s concern is explicitly rooted in Plato and Tocqueville. “The final test of democracy, as Tocqueville has said, will be its power to produce and encourage the superior individual” (1908, 105). He then cites the *Laws* on the danger of “encyclopaedic smattering and miscellaneous experiment” (Babbitt 1908, 84; Plato 1980, 819a) in the education of young minds, leaving them with no sense of order or unity. Babbitt proposes a different kind of democratic principle, one he ascribes to Lincoln, to unify the curriculum. This would be the accumulated experience of human beings, what many generations have found valuable.³⁸ “What is imperative in the college is humane selection, in other words, a choice of studies that will reflect in some measure the total experience of the race as to the things that have been found to be permanently important to its essential nature” (1908, 85). This principle makes it essential to education not to let students follow their initial inclinations.

Though elite colleges avoid the language of “aristocracy” in their publicity today, the dilemma Babbitt sketches is a very familiar one for today’s administrators and op-ed columnists.³⁹ How can the goods of selectivity and inclusivity be reconciled? Babbitt suggests that the two goods be assigned as tasks to different levels of the educational system. Whereas “the humanitarian inclines to see in the college a means not so much for the thorough training of the few as for the uplift of the many” (1908, 78), the “function of the college, on the other hand, should be to insist on the idea of quality” (1908,

³⁸ “The good sense of the whole people tends to triumph in the long run—this is true democracy according to Lincoln” (1908, 83).

³⁹ Among many possible examples, see Benjamin Schmidt, “The Humanities Are in Crisis” (2018).

81). Yet “in the lower schools the humanitarian point of view should have a large place” (1908, 80). Babbitt concedes a great deal of ground to the humanitarian here, acknowledging the great importance of sympathy for those left behind by society and for those whose education must primarily be oriented toward practical needs and making a living. This is a point of possible reconciliation with Dewey, since Dewey’s educational writings focus on the relationship between elementary schooling and the perpetuation of democracy. Yet Dewey does speak of higher education in fundamentally the same terms as the rest of his educational theory, which Babbitt is obliged to see as an elision of a necessary distinction.

Babbitt’s Rhetorical and Leisurely Education

Another familiar challenge for universities today is how to give their students a sense of responsibility for and connection to their fellow citizens. If Babbitt opposed education in the service of self-expression or in the service of humanitarian action in the world while refusing to call simply for a return to the traditional Congregationalist curriculum of Harvard, did he offer any positive vision? While there is no single text from Babbitt laying out a curriculum, he wove into his polemics and his advocacy of the classical canon a distinctive and subtle account of intellectual activity and the special importance of what students encounter at college age. *Literature and the American College* criticizes the prestige of the newly imported doctoral degree. Hugo Münsterberg, a Leipzig-trained psychologist and Harvard colleague of Babbitt’s, had claimed in an influential book that the life of a student was divided into only two stages: the “receptive” and the “productive,” thus assimilating late-teenagers pursuing a bachelor’s degree to elementary-school pupils and setting both off against the graduate researcher, who became the archetypical student and the apex of the educational system.⁴⁰ The

⁴⁰ *American Traits: From the Point of View of a German* (1901).

practical effect was to deny college a distinct status and make it simply an inferior version of the research university.

Babbitt insists instead that college represents an intermediate stage of “reflection” (1908, 100), one which had the potential to offer the greatest social benefit because it is where moral principles are internalized to become habits. The student at this stage, if well taught, has a chance “to coordinate the scattered elements of knowledge, and relate them not only to the intellect but to the will and character” (1908, 101). For Babbitt, this implies that a true teacher is not merely a skilled receiver who had successfully navigated the expectations of secondary education, nor even a highly-trained researcher capable of contributing to the stock of human knowledge, but one “carrying with him into his task the consciousness that he is forming the minds and characters of future citizens of a republic” (1908, 178). This led Babbitt to speculate about alternatives to the standard bachelor’s and doctoral degrees: perhaps an honors concentration for undergraduates, or a PhD that required taking a wide-ranging examination on a canon of texts rather than writing a specialized dissertation. But he did appreciate the rigor that the German model had brought to the American academy: “What is needed is a training that shall be literary, and at the same time free from all suspicion of softness or relaxation; a degree that shall stand for discipline in ideas, and not merely in facts” (1908, 132). The humanists could not defend their form of learning effectively if they were suspected of being soft or lacking rigor.

Babbitt therefore tied his skepticism about the value of the PhD to what he viewed as an epistemological error, “this German notion of knowledge as something that is dumped down on one mind and then “distributed” in some mechanical fashion to other minds” (1908, 102). Instead, he recommended spending years reflecting on the great works of Western literature, both ancient and modern, as a way of digesting wisdom and transmitting it. This curriculum would challenge the student to work first on her own soul, rather than simply seeking power to affect the surrounding world, as the Baconians would. And it would also make the student continually aware of her smallness in the

face of great authors across the centuries, restraining the impulse of self-expression and self-indulgence that the Rousseauists would unleash. Citing John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University*, Babbitt argues that that the task of the college "is not, as is so often assumed, merely to help its students to self-expression, but even more to help them become humane" (1908, 240). Here humaneness means an acquaintance with the range and breadth of human experience, as opposed to its contemporary sense of an aversion to cruelty. The student needs urgently to learn how to judge what he sees in himself and in the world, finding "a humane standard to which he may defer... that will help him to discriminate between what is truly original and what is merely freakish and abnormal in himself and others" (1908, 243-4). Most are not capable of such profound reflection without having their imaginations furnished by a great deal of matter on which to reflect. "Now this humane standard may be gained by a few through philosophic insight, but in most cases it will be attained, if at all, by a knowledge of good literature" (1908, 244). The special value of literature, Babbitt implies, is that its value can readily be appreciated by the general public as well as rewarding years of expert study. If, as he claims, "education should represent the conservative and unifying element in our national life" (1908, 240), education must be largely grounded in a common literary imagination and foster a sense of transmitting a literary tradition.

The concluding essay of *Literature and the American College* gives further definition to Babbitt's view of intellectual activity, defending leisure in the classical sense of *skole*, a life of contemplation worthy for its own sake. He noted that the twin villains in his telling of the story of modern education, Bacon and Rousseau, both tended to erode leisure. Once again, although they diverge, their divergence is founded on a common assumption. Bacon despised the monasteries as inefficient and anti-humanitarian, impediments to necessary activity in the world, an attitude that Babbitt calls "strenuousness." On the other hand, Rousseau degraded leisure by turning it into mere "revery," a self-indulgent escape from responsibility. "The fruitful opposite of strenuousness is not revery, but

leisure and reflection” (1908, 260). Citing Plato’s *Statesman*, Babbitt contends that the task of political wisdom is to allow space for both active and contemplative modes of life, statecraft as creating the conditions of possibility for philosophy. This is particularly necessary amid the restlessness of a commercial and democratic society: “The tendency of an industrial democracy that took joy in work alone would be to live in a perpetual devil’s sabbath of whirling machinery, and call it progress” (1908, 262). Babbitt makes clear that the allusion to Plato is not accidental, but rather that to celebrate contemplation as worthy in itself necessitates being a metaphysical Platonist, believing in a single, transcendent Good as the anchor of all goodness.

Dewey’s Platonic Egalitarianism

Dewey’s educational program was the consistent target of Babbitt’s critique. Was the critique at all justified? Viewed from the perspective of the twenty-first century, their shared philosophical assumptions are perhaps more striking than their divergences. As Kipton Smilie’s work has made clear, Babbitt saw himself as sharing with Dewey a fundamental emphasis on experience as the basis of a student’s true learning, as opposed to metaphysical speculation, dogmatic theology, or rote memorization.⁴¹ Along these lines, Dewey wrote in *Democracy and Education* of the task of teaching, “Making the individual a sharer or partner in the associated activity so that he feels its success as his success, its failure as his failure, is the completing step” (2009, 28) of the task of teaching. Dewey certainly acknowledged that a central purpose of education was passing on a tradition, bringing new members into a shared sense of belonging in society. But he insisted, “Any social arrangement that remains vitally social, or vitally shared, is educative to those who participate in it. Only when it becomes cast in a mold and runs in a routine way does it lose its educative power” (2009, 13). Real education required constant experimentation to internalize its lessons and make it vivid. Babbitt, with

⁴¹ This commonality is the thesis of Smilie’s 2016 article “Unthinkable Allies?”

his theory of the “assimilative” stage of education, largely agreed, but he insisted that reading the canon of classic texts was a form of experience, albeit a vicarious one. In this way an individual student could become far wiser and better grounded than by relying on the experience of only her own lifetime. Smilie notes that Babbitt saw himself as in this respect fulfilling Dewey’s logic. “In using experience within the American curriculum, Babbitt simply asked for Dewey and his supporters to practice fully what they preached: using experience from the past that both stood firm on critical and positive grounds” (Smilie 2010, 186). Folke Leander notes that Dewey shared another key concept with Babbitt: that of the imagination as “the experience of the infinite in and through symbols,” which should lead to a kind of intellectual humility in the face of the complexity of the world (Leander 1938, 141). But unlike Babbitt, Dewey associated Christianity, Buddhism, and transcendent religion in general with an attitude of pride that would substitute certainty for honest doubt (Leander 1938, 140). This lost opportunity for rapprochement between their initial assumptions plays out into very significant consequences for their educational theories.

Dewey generally avoided being too specific in his curricular prescriptions, preferring to focus on the process rather than on the content of education. *Democracy and Education* goes on from identifying education’s dual tasks as transmitting the community across generations and drawing out the child’s potential to situate this view in contrast to three other philosophical conceptions of education: those of Plato, Rousseau, and the German idealists. Plato was right to teach an essential connection between the structure of the regime and of the psyche, and to hold “that an individual is happy and society well organized when each individual engages in those activities for which he has a natural equipment” (Dewey 2009, 157), but he lacked a sufficient sense of the uniqueness of each individual and still tried to arrange the city into classes, assuming that a fixed hierarchy between Being and becoming necessitated a strict hierarchy among persons. Rousseau made a step forward by putting individuality at the center of his education, but in so doing he set this natural spontaneity against the

broader society and neglected the institutions needed to make this education available to the many. German idealist education, as represented by Fichte and Hegel, was right to introduce universal public education, but in so doing it defined the purposes of education too much in terms of the needs of the state. Here Dewey shares to an extent in Babbitt's skepticism about the German university, even if he holds that in America the partial truths of each of these three previous models can be distilled into an education that is at once about the individual and about the community. Dewey and Babbitt share an American-pragmatist outlook and therefore a critical distance from idealism.

According to Dewey's definitions, democracy, education, and philosophy all turn out to be mutually constitutive. Democracy is the "mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (2009, 151) that makes the widest variety of experiences and activity possible for the individual, which in turn draws her out into the most open-minded engagement with the community. "These more numerous and more varied points of contact denote a greater diversity of stimuli to which an individual has to respond; they consequently put a premium on variation in his action," (Dewey 2009, 151) thus drawing out the capacities with otherwise would have remained dormant in each. Seeking to avoid Plato's method of judging regimes based on their conformity to a set of values fixed *a priori*, Dewey defines the good regime as one that is most open to different and competing values, "which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life" (2009, 171). The implications for education entail encouraging the great variety of talents and interests found among the citizenry. "A progressive society counts individual variations as precious since it finds in them the means of its own growth. Hence a democratic society must, in consistency with its ideal, allow for intellectual freedom and the play of diverse gifts and interests in its educational measures" (2009, 522). Here Dewey echoes John Stuart Mill's earlier celebration of "experiments in living," yet without any of Mill's sense that his preferred liberal individualism is in

tension with a conformity endemic to democratic societies. In Dewey, majoritarian conformity may exist as a holdover from pre-democratic mores or as a corruption due to oligarchic interests, but if so it always contradicts democracy's true meaning. Philosophy, too, is never definitive or closed, "an idea of what is possible, not a record of accomplished fact" (2009, 555). The definition of philosophy with which he closes *Democracy and Education* as "thinking which has become conscious of itself — which has generalized its place, function, and value in experience" (2009, 555) applies in context also to democracy and to education.

This experimental definition of education and its effort to avoid being morally prescriptive reveals the most important difference that separates Dewey from Babbitt. Dewey viewed attempts to turn inward to heal the soul before working to reform the world as escapist, a self-deceived quest for certainty outside the flux of the changing world.⁴² He thus rejected Aristotle and the entire classical tradition's quest for leisure to side decisively with Bacon's activity, choosing *praxis* over *theoria*.⁴³ Babbitt took this to be a disingenuous and untenable position: he complained in his introduction to *Democracy and Leadership* that Dewey and other progressive reformers were not in fact "complete positivists." In their attempt to do without metaphysics they had stumbled into a very old metaphysical view, a Heraclitean celebration of the Many that insisted on the variety and transience of experience to the exclusion of any unifying One. Against this Babbitt argued that Aristotle was right in discerning, amid all the vast variety of human experiences, ethical themes that amounted to an underlying unity. Teachers had a duty to pass the fruit of that experience on to their students. At the conclusion of *Rousseau & Romanticism*, Babbitt argued:

The notion that in spite of the enormous mass of experience that has been accumulated in both East and West we are still without light as to the habits that make for moderation and

⁴² As Leander explains, Dewey identified "the 'classical mentality'" with "the need for inner peace, the longing to escape from all difficulties and all responsibility for the development of events," i.e., with "sloth" (Leander 1938, 127).

⁴³ For more on Dewey's view of religion as escapist, see *A Common Faith* (1934).

good sense and decency, and that education is therefore still purely a matter of exploration and experiment is one that may be left to those who are suffering from an advanced stage of naturalistic intoxication—for example, to Professor John Dewey and his followers. From an ethical point of view a child has the right to be born into a cosmos, and not, as is coming to be more and more the case under such influences, pitchforked into chaos (1960, 293).

Dewey responded with high-handed dismissal in his only published writing to take Babbitt and his New Humanism on by name in a brief 1930 essay titled “What Humanism Means to Me.” Here he claimed for himself the legacy of the anti-theological movement of the Renaissance and the Baconian effort to ameliorate the human condition, movements truly worthy of the “humanist” name. Babbitt and his associates had only a “negative” creed to offer. Any such philosophy, “which sets man off from nature, and which condemns science as a foe to higher human interests” must be doomed to “sterility” (1930, 265). Dewey considered it an essentially Romantic movement which must recognize, like the 19th-century Romantics, that their real vision was religious. Their logic would “terminate... in the bosom of the church” (1930, 265). Their humanism of restraint and discipline would be only a footnote in literary history, while Dewey’s humanism would reign triumphant: “What humanism means to me is an expansion, not a contraction, of human life, an expansion in which nature and the science of nature are made the willing servants of the public good” (1930, 266). Notably Dewey did not engage with the New Humanist concern that expansion of human power over nature went together with an expansion of desire and a loss of self-control in the individual.

The disagreement between Dewey and Babbitt cannot be explained away as simply a matter of emphasis, with one focusing on the needs of the elementary level and the other concentrating on colleges. Dewey consistently rejects the suggestion that the different levels of education are different in kind. In *Democracy and Education* he explicitly denies the classical distinction between liberal or leisured education and the servile or mechanical arts. For him this distinction stems from the limitations of Aristotle’s vantage point in a slave society and does not reflect any essential dichotomy. Dewey acknowledges that some would now seek to fix the distinction on the difference between

college and high school learning rather than on a strictly class basis. This too was wrongheaded, because democracy demands that necessary work be made as creative and spontaneous as possible, and that culture be rendered maximally useful to the general public. Thus, “the problem of education in a democratic society is to do away with the dualism and to construct a course of studies which makes thought a guide of free practice for all and which makes leisure a reward of accepting responsibility for service, rather than a state of exemption from it” (2009, 446).

In a series of more occasional pieces on education, Dewey confirms his view of the essential unity of education in its different stages. The 1922 lecture “Social Purposes in Education” restates that teachers ought to prepare future working men and women to make thoughtful and reflective use of their leisure (which he contrasts to the status-quo view “almost any way to have a good time” “as legitimate” (Dewey 1983, 168). “What Is a School For,” from 1923, aligns Dewey with Charles Eliot’s major system at Harvard, which he says reflects a “a generous view of the capabilities of human beings and of social life” (Dewey 1983, 191). The paired pieces “Prospects of the Liberal College” and “The Liberal College and Its Enemies” take up and reject the view that the university should in some essential way contrast with the ethos of the surrounding democratic society. Dewey reveals he does worry about the philistinism of mass, industrial society, because “our college life shares in the defects and excellencies of our general life” (1983, 203). But a pre-set curriculum that picks and chooses texts accidentally associated with the education of gentlemen in a bygone past reflects an “assurance of just what a liberal mind is and contains, just what it will do and believe” that is “the root of intellectual and moral illiberalism” (1983, 202). The solution is not *a priori* commitments, because the scholar should be loyal only to “thought, inquiry, and discriminating judgment” (1983, 206). The solution is rather a renewed dedication to what Dewey calls “the integrity of intelligence” (1983, 210), which he equates with “the spirit of scientific method” (1983, 210). This is critical questioning that takes all

knowledge as only a provisional explanation of experience, fully aligned with the anti-foundationalism that for Dewey defines democracy.

From Education to Politics in Babbitt

Understanding the political implications of Babbitt's disagreement with Dewey requires considering his most ambitious, or at least his most political, book, the 1924 *Democracy and Leadership* (1971). Therein Babbitt directly related the educational argument of *Literature and the American College* (1908) to a Platonic vision of the relationship between the soul and the city. Partly motivated by discomfort with the jingoism surrounding American participation in World War I, the book seeks to advance a case about fundamental flaws in the American regime and self-understanding. Complacent invocations of "democracy" obscure rather than illuminated political questions, Babbitt claims: "Genuine leaders, good or bad, there will always be... democracy becomes a menace to civilization when it seeks to evade this truth" (1971, 28). Therefore, "In the long run democracy will be judged, no less than other forms of government, by the quality of its leaders, a quality that will depend in turn on the quality of their vision" (1971, 28). Where will this vision come from? What will it see? Babbitt continues, in Platonic mode, by calling for a philosophical education to equip future leaders. Yet the primary moral benefit of this philosophical education will be to foster an awareness of a transcendent will that checks and subordinates the individual's temporary inclinations.

Babbitt does not make recourse simply to the Socratic argument that just action follows from true knowledge of the good, while ignorance is the source of moral error. Instead he invokes the Buddhist and Christian traditions' distinction between the will and intellect and their insistence on humbling one's own will. This humility is, paradoxically, the source of human greatness: "I do not hesitate to affirm that what is specifically human in man and ultimately divine is a certain quality of will, a will that is felt in its relation to his ordinary self as a will to refrain" (1971, 28). Drawing from Henri Bergson, Babbitt conceives of human life as lived in the dualism between two wills or drives,

the *elan vital*—which is self-asserting—and the *frein vital*—which is self-denying. But it would be misleading to think that Babbitt conceives of morality as purely negative, since the *frein* does not always deny the desires asserted by the *elan*; it is more like a court of appeals that reviews the inclinations initially submitted to it.⁴⁴ His accusation is that Rousseuian influence on education had unleashed the base, ordinary will of selfish inclination, inoculating students against the very sense of restraint they so needed.⁴⁵ He portrays this denial of hierarchy among the desires as a democracy of soul that is a deadly solvent of political democracy. He echoes Plato’s language of the transformation of this democratic soul into a tyrannical soul, by speaking of the connection between psychic “expansionism” and international “imperialism”: “The outcome of yielding to a mere expansive conceit of the emotions is not fraternity, but a decadent imperialism.... One finds behind every other form of imperialism the imperialism or push for power of the individual” (1971, 39).

Democracy and Leadership frames ancient philosophy as a friend to modern individualism rightly understood, in contrast to the medievals who relied on revelation, for “to be critical and individualistic in one’s outlook on life and to be modern come to very much the same thing” (1971, 52). Here Bacon’s role is reduced as compared to in *Literature and the American College*. Babbitt credits Rousseau with having transformed the meaning of virtue, by making it not a difficult external standard to which one must measure up, but rather a native, default inclination that need only be recognized and expressed.

⁴⁴ See Eric Adler’s helpful treatment of this aspect of Babbitt’s anthropology in *The Battle of the Classics* (2020, 181): “While the term “inner check” (confusingly) suggests pure restraint, in Babbitt’s view it serves more as an ethical compass or means of calibrating moral life, with both a restraining and an affirming component.” Adler’s discussion relies on Ryn’s book-length treatment in *Will, Imagination, and Reason*, which defends Babbitt’s surprising assertion that the higher will is superior even to the intellect.

⁴⁵ Despite his allusions to Plato, Buddhism, and Christianity, Babbitt was himself skeptical towards metaphysics or revelation, and wanted to make his arguments usable by those who shared his anti-foundationalism. “In general I have sought in my attack on the utilitarian-sentimental movement to avoid metaphysical and theological assumptions, and to rely on psychological analysis supported by an immense and growing body of evidence” (1971, 29).

Babbitt's reading of Rousseau relies perhaps too much on the radical egalitarianism of the *Second Discourse*, but his more profound critique concerns the political psychology of the *Social Contract* and the *Emile*. Babbitt notes that Rousseau followed Hobbes in portraying the state as not a natural body but an artificial one, with characteristics mirroring those of an individual person. The deeper allusion is to Plato's city-soul analogy, which Rousseau inverts: Whereas Plato had used the parallel to establish a strict hierarchy in the state, justified by the claim that the powers and faculties of the individual must work in due order and subordination, "the informing spirit of the Rousseauian conception was the idea of equality" (1971, 111). The general will cannot harm an individual any more than a person can will the destruction of any of her limbs. The general will becomes in fact the restoration of the goodness of the individual in the state of nature. This doctrine of popular sovereignty was a transposition of the theory of the divine right of kings onto a horizontal axis: "The king, if not responsible to what is below him, is at least responsible to what is above him—to God. But the sovereign people is responsible to no one. It is God" (1971, 112). Babbitt understands this radical self-assertion of the individual against social hierarchy and the human against the supernatural as part of the inspiration for the Caesarist democracies he saw taking power in the 1920s.

Edmund Burke's "moral imagination" becomes Babbitt's foil to what he calls the "idyllic imagination" of Rousseau. Babbitt reads Burke as a Christian Platonist, whose central concern was how human souls can be formed by imitation of things nobler than themselves: "In his imaginative grasp of all that is involved in the task of mediating between the permanent and the fluctuating element in life, the Platonic art, as one may say, of seeing the One in the Many, he has had few equals in the field of political thinking" (1971, 130)."⁴⁶ This mediating task required symbols for political and social

⁴⁶ For an illuminating treatment of Babbitt's view of Burke and its importance for his critique of Rousseau, see Peter Stanlis' essay "Babbitt, Burke, and Rousseau: The Moral Nature of Man" in *Irving Babbitt in Our Time* (1986, 127-154).

life, because symbols enable one to grasp the deeper unities in the apparently infinite multiplicity of experience. Babbitt focuses his analysis on the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, aiming to draw out a larger set of principles from the immediate political argument of that work. Burke defended prescription and tradition not out of some simple-minded defense of the existing order in the England of 1790 or out of naïve trust in the self-serving mythologies woven by every oligarchy, but from a conviction, shared with Tocqueville and Plato, that human nature was inherently mimetic. On this account, one honors and respects the past not because past actions are necessarily nobler, but because they provide the imagination with a reference point that moves the individual away from his own self. Thus Babbitt's gloss on Burke: "A man's first need is to look up to a sound model and imitate it. He may thus become exemplary in his turn. The principle of homage and service to what is above one has its culmination and final justification in fealty to God, the true sovereign and supreme exemplar" (1971, 125). Babbitt cites Burke's arguments for social hierarchy to approve of their nuance: "Burke is in short a frank champion of aristocracy. It is here especially, however, that he applies flexibly his Christian-Platonic, and humanistic principles. He combines a soundly individualistic element with his cult of the traditional order." Even though Burke "does not wish any static hierarchy" (Babbitt 1971, 129), he placed an Aristotelian emphasis on the need for leisure in early life to undergo education for virtue.

In contrast to Dewey's attempt to blur the classical boundary between leisure and labor, Babbitt makes leisure central to his theory of the aristocratic task of education. "[Burke] recognizes, to be sure, that it is hard for the manual worker to acquire such virtue and wisdom for the reason that he lacks the necessary leisure. The ascent of rare merit from the lower to the higher levels of society should, however, always be left open, even though this merit be required to pass through a severe probation" (Babbitt 1971, 129). This is of a piece with his desideratum in *Literature and the American College* that the college be open to Americans of all social backgrounds, yet without taking it upon itself

to remedy all social inequality. While Burke at times criticized rationalist intellectuals in terms that can be read as anti-intellectual, Babbitt believes this is simply a defense of a higher, more permanent intellect. The salutary contrast with Rousseau, who was like Burke an inspiration for the Romantics and organicists of the nineteenth-century, was that “the wisdom that Rousseau proclaimed was not **above** reflection but **below** it” (Babbitt 1971, 131). Babbitt therefore celebrates three essential themes in Burke: the urgent need for individuals to feel a sense of ethical responsibility for the formation of their own souls, the Platonic metaphysics that the single One and Good were to be imitated, and the Christian ethic that humility was the disposition that enabled that imitation.

This assessment of Burke brings Babbitt to the contemporary situation that moved him to write the book: the fallout of World War I and the Versailles settlement.⁴⁷ He argues that Wilson’s actions have pushed the United States to assume an imperial role in the world, and that there is no logical stopping point for empire once its ambitions are unleashed. The central claim is that this disordered political appetite is rooted in disordered appetites of the soul. “Behind all imperialism is ultimately the imperialistic individual, just as behind all peace is ultimately the peaceful individual” (1971, 160). Without using Plato’s term explicitly, Babbitt sets up the imperialistic individual as a parallel to the democratic soul of Book VIII of the *Republic*, who is the prelude to tyranny. The concluding section of *Democracy and Leadership*, “Democracy and Standards,” gives an interpretation of the entire political tradition of the United States as a conflict between two impulses: the Jeffersonian one, which stands for pure democracy, the immediate will of the majority, and the assertion of the abstract rights of the individual (which Babbitt sees as also stemming from an assertive will). Individuals are taken to be naturally good, while authority is always suspect. The Declaration of

⁴⁷ For Smith, the parallels between this Wilsonian moment and George Bush’s call for the 2003 invasion of Iraq were part of the impetus for writing *Democracy and Imperialism* on Babbitt’s ideas (2019, 1-15).

Independence represents this tradition. Parallel to it and much nobler is what Babbitt calls the “unionist tradition,” embodied in Washington and in the sober provisions of the Constitution. “Just as man has a higher self that acts restrictively on his ordinary self, so, [the unionists] hold, the state should have a higher or permanent self, appropriately embodied in institutions, that should set bounds to its ordinary self as expressed by the popular will at any particular moment” (Babbitt 1971, 273). Again echoing Tocqueville, Babbitt argues that the wiser view has been on retreat in the United States at least since Jackson triumphed over John Quincy Adams’s Federalists in 1828.⁴⁸ But Lincoln’s unionism was on the scene to save the Union from Jefferson-inspired secession.⁴⁹

Here the argument returns from American history to the American present of the 1920s. If being able to look up to principles higher than our desires is so essential, it must be embodied in political institutions, and this requires worthy leaders like Lincoln.⁵⁰ “A man needs to look, not down, but up to standards set so much above his ordinary self as to make him feel that he is himself spiritually the under dog. The man who thus looks up is becoming worthy to be looked up to in turn, and, to this extent, qualifying for leadership” (Babbitt 1971, 283). But, Babbitt acknowledges, the incentives and mimetic inheritance that could sustain a hereditary aristocracy are gone in industrial societies. This makes Burke’s theory an unsatisfactory solution for the present day. “The modern problem, I have been insisting, is to secure leaders with an allegiance to standards, now that the traditional order Burke associated with his standards and leadership has been so seriously shaken” (Babbitt 1971, 284). So Babbitt turns to education: under modern conditions, a leadership elite cannot simply be reproduced;

⁴⁸ *Democracy in America* (2010, II.II) speaks highly of the Federalists’ era but calls them “the remnants of the aristocratic party.”

⁴⁹ For Babbitt, Calhoun’s theory of nullification and secession derives from Jefferson’s theory of government of consent.

⁵⁰ For those who concede Babbitt’s major premise that we must have examples to look up to, it remains worth asking why those examples must be persons as opposed to institutions, literary or historical exemplars, or symbols. The implicit argument may be that human mimesis requires embodiment in concrete lives, but Babbitt does not say this.

in each generation it must be produced anew. And there is a great danger in such a project, that of creating a selfish or tyrannical new elite. Babbitt considers three of the leading possibilities and identifies each one with a form of greed (for knowledge, for sensuality, or for power) condemned in Augustinian ethics:

“One cannot grant that an aristocracy of scientific intellectuals or indeed any aristocracy of intellect is what we need. This would mean practically to encourage the *libido sciendi* and so to put pride in the place of humility. Still less acceptable would be an aristocracy of artists; as the word art has come to be understood in recent times, this would mean an aristocracy of aesthetes who would attempt to base their selection on the *libido sentiendi*. The Nietzschean attempt, again, to found the aristocratic and selective principle on the sheer expansion of the will to power (*libido dominandi*) would lead in practice to horrible violence and finally to the death of civilization” (1971, 285-6).

This prescient passage certainly foresees uses of Nietzsche like the Nazis’ (*libido dominandi*), but it also sounds a note that resonates with Dewey’s concern’s about hubristic technocracy (*libido sciendi*). A referent for the *libido sentiendi* is less clear.

To prescribe a better kind of elite, Babbitt turns again to the question of the purpose of college education. Once again he expounds the moral benefits of a classical, humanistic education, as teaching humility, shaping students to subject their lower will to a higher will. This is an explicitly Platonic vision: the elite he calls for must be “Socratic”: “Under existing conditions we must get our standards and our leadership along Socratic rather than traditional lines” (1971, 307). In fact, it must be a “Socratic remnant” (1971, 307), because its chief purpose is to subject popular illusions to ruthless criticism to prevent democratic impatience of standards from permitting the rise of tyranny. Many of the historical instances of democracy’s failures can be attributed to the people’s difficulty discerning its real friends, Babbitt argues: “The sophist and the demagogue flourish in an atmosphere of vague and inaccurate definition. With the aid of the Socratic critic, on the other hand, Demos must have

some chance of distinguishing between its friends and its flatterers” (1971, 307).⁵¹ It might seem that the higher principle than popular will that Babbitt seeks could be secured by more religious piety in the elite. Why then speak of a **Socratic** elite? Babbitt holds that the principal religion in the American context, Christianity, has become too easily confounded with humanitarianism: the social gospel neglects the “inner life” essential to traditional, ascetic Christianity.⁵² This makes it necessary “to bring Socrates to the support of Christ” (Babbitt 1971, 310) and to rely on philosophy rather than theology.

This diagnosis of the state of American Protestantism shapes Babbitt’s educational prescription. He seeks liberal education, not simply the return of the traditional, pre-Civil War curriculum of the Protestant college. The old education subordinated classics to theology in order to train clergy. And it needed broadening and adapting for a new cultural situation. But Babbitt holds that educational innovators like Charles Eliot erred by not trying to work from what was good in the traditional religious college and razing the foundation to start anew: “The old education was, in intention at least, a training for wisdom and character. The new education has been summed up by President Eliot in the phrase: training for service and character” (Babbitt 1971, 329). The practical effect was to make Babbitt’s concerns about the ethos instilled in Harvard-educated elites difficult to even articulate. Behind Eliot’s practical errors Babbitt discerned a philosophical error stemming from John Dewey’s system.

One might view this idealistic development with more equanimity if one were convinced with Professor John Dewey that the growing child exudes spontaneously a will to service. If we look, however, on this form of spontaneity as a romantic myth, we shall be forced to conclude that we have been permitting Professor Dewey and his kind to have an influence on our education that amounts in the aggregate to a national calamity (Babbitt 1971, 339).

⁵¹ Babbitt acknowledges, but does not address at much length, the possibility that Demos might reject the Socratic remnant as once Socrates himself was rejected.

⁵² This shift from emphasizing inner to outer work and from resisting personal to social sins is apparent in Walter Rauschenbusch’s *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917), an influential text for the mainline Protestantism of the period.

The starting premise cannot be the goodness of the child's default inclination, but the difficult and necessary ascent from our inclinations to virtue in accordance with the higher will. Babbitt saw Dewey as an heir to Rousseau who mis-framed the fundamental question of education's political mission. Instead, "in the interest of our experiment in free institutions, we need educational leaders who will have less to say of service and more to say of culture and civilization" (Babbitt 1971, 339). There are only six mentions of Dewey in Babbitt's published writings, but all, like this one, come at a highly strategic juncture and accuse Dewey of not having not just committed philosophical error but of having caused political corruption.

Dewey and Babbitt: Divergence and Convergence

The profound shared assumption in both Babbitt and Dewey's views of education and democracy is the Platonic motif that the soul and the regime tend to mirror one another. But whereas Babbitt held that education in a democratic society must work against this tendency by cultivating aristocratic souls in some few, in order to create the healthy tension of a mixed regime, Dewey insisted that education must aim to instill a democratic psyche in all citizens. Dewey's emphasis on the intrinsic rather than instrumental value of democracy is well known. In a late, wartime work, "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us," he wrote, "To get rid of the habit of thinking of democracy as something institutional and external and to acquire the habit of treating it as a way of personal life is to realize that democracy is a moral ideal and so far as it becomes a fact is a moral fact" (Dewey 1988, 224-230). For this conception, it was not enough to have a democratic society or polity; democratic people were needed. This is a perennial theme in Dewey's oeuvre. One of his first essays, in 1888, lauded what it took to be the goal of the *Republic*, to bring about "such a development of man's nature as brings him into complete harmony with the universe of spiritual relations, or, in Platonic language, the state" (Dewey 1969a, 227-252). "The heart of the ethical problem," correctly identified in the *Republic*, is "the relation of the individual to the universal." Dewey's objection to Plato's approach is

against the attempt to found that state on static truths, which led Plato to enthrone a small group of citizens as the ones capable of grasping and teaching those truths. Because Dewey thinks learning consists in the active embrace by individuals of a wide variety of experiences, he rejects this aspect of Platonism. He thus celebrates precisely the features of democratic regimes that Plato scorns most in Book VIII of the *Republic*: the unpredictable, spontaneous, expressive movement of human desire through the phenomenal world. As Jeff Jackson notes in an excellent article on Dewey's Platonism, these qualities, "which signify slavery to appetite for Plato, are what distinguish freedom from slavery for Dewey" (Jackson 2014, 25). Jackson sees in Dewey's rapt description of the democratic ethos as "a free, flexible and many-colored life," which concludes *The Public and Its Problems* (Dewey 1927, 217), an echo of Plato's description of the democratic city as "like a many-colored cloak" (Plato 2016, 557d). Instead of neglecting the individual psychology that Dewey celebrates, Plato explicitly considers it and describes it as miserable: the man who is like the democratic city:

Lives along day by day, gratifying the desire that occurs to him, at one time drinking and listening to the flute, at another downing water and reducing; now practicing gymnastic, and again idling and neglecting everything; and sometimes spending his time as though he were occupied with philosophy. Often he engages in politics and, jumping up, says and does whatever chances to come to him; and if he ever admires any soldiers, he turns in that direction; and if it's money-makers, in that one. And there is neither order nor necessity in his life, but calling this life sweet, free, and blessed, he follows it throughout (2016, 561c-d).

For Babbitt, this restless, never-satisfied quality of democracy has a very sinister aspect: it explains the readiness of American democracy to become an imperial power.

A final point of perhaps surprising convergence is Dewey and Babbitt's shared fear of technocratic governance, and of the educational specialization that fosters it. Babbitt's aversion to an "aristocracy of scientific intellectuals" founded on the lust for knowledge has already been made apparent, but Dewey's own view of technocracy requires more explication because of his devotion to the scientific method and scientific progress. In "Socializing the Schools," a brief address given to the Indiana State Teacher's Association in 1916, Dewey repeated his case against the idea that learning

should set one apart from the community as a member of a special class. He denies that this emphasis on scientific learning would create a new, aloof elite. Instead it is precisely the educated individual who should see himself as a co-participant in democratic society: “The individual who can not see his own knowledge in its relation to the common and cooperative life of man, who can not see where that touches and comes home to the life of the community to which he belongs, is not really an educated man. He is merely a learned specialist” (Dewey 1990, 76). Eventually, Dewey was confident, even the most specialized knowledge would prove useful to society, thus revealing specialists to be part of the social whole (Dewey 1969b, 239-388). Leander comments that Dewey saw his Baconianism as necessarily democratic, because “the adoption of a scientific attitude towards social problems” removes these problems from the thrall of “chance, inherited custom, religious magic, class egoism, and individual egoism” (Leander 1938, 144). Yet Dewey was not insensitive to the possibility that the scientific attitude could simply introduce a new form of coercion to replace these older forms.⁵³

Whereas Babbitt’s worry was more that specialists were prone to hubristic and reckless innovation, identifying the dangers of their attitude with artists and businessmen as well as scientists, Dewey’s worry was that scientific policy experts would diminish popular participation and diminish democratic deliberation. Dewey was aware that his fondness for describing politics as experimental and his insistence that modern technological change had created new and more complicated needs could appear to lend support to a technocratic vision of politics. This was precisely what the radical writer Randolph Bourne accused Dewey of during World War I: that his philosophy provided an account only of political means, not of ends, meaning it could easily lend itself to an imperialistic effort to seize control of the international order for experts.⁵⁴ Dewey wrote his 1927 *The Public and Its Problems*

⁵³ For a larger sense of Dewey’s view of the relationship between science and philosophy, see *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought* (1910).

⁵⁴ Daniel Levine provides a helpful summary of Bourne’s critique of Dewey and finds it ultimately unjustified in “Randolph Bourne, John Dewey and the Legacy of Liberalism” (1969). See also Casey

to resist the conclusions of Walter Lippman's 1925 *The Phantom Public*, an explicit argument from progressive premises that they both shared for diminished citizen participation and entrusting a larger share of policy to experts.⁵⁵ Laura Westhoff has argued that Dewey's anxiety about the undemocratic danger of expertise led him to make the "popularization of knowledge" central to his career and thought.⁵⁶ Yet Babbitt's rejoinder no doubt would have been that the problem of technocracy is inherent to Baconianism; without a classical standard of leisure to orient human ends, activity is always in danger of becoming merely power for its own sake.

Thus, reading Dewey and Babbitt together produces a number of interesting juxtapositions and raises doubts about key assumptions each of them made. Babbitt's attempt to separate his ethical Platonism from any particular metaphysical view seems dubious, since the assertion of an underlying unity beneath the flux of human experience is his biggest divergence from Dewey. Dewey may have been right to say that Babbitt's logic inevitably led to religious and dogmatic conclusions. At the same time, Dewey's desire to re-frame politics in scientific terms without cementing the power of scientific experts seems somewhat naïve from the perspective of the era that was just beginning in Dewey's time, in which much of foreign and domestic policy is made by professionals whose names are never mentioned in election campaigns. Babbitt certainly thought this was inherent to Dewey's logic, saying "A utilitarian philosophy like that of Professor Dewey will be found to lead as a rule to the enthronement of the specialist" (Babbitt 1940, 179). Dewey objected to the rule of specialists because he believed them to be cut off from the democratic community, and therefore necessarily from

Blake's treatment in *Beloved Community: The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford* (1990).

⁵⁵ Robert Westbrook offers this reading of Lippmann and Dewey's relationship in his *John Dewey and American Democracy* (1991).

⁵⁶ See "The Popularization of Knowledge: John Dewey on Experts and American Democracy" (1995).

wisdom. Babbitt objected to the rule of specialists because he believed them to be cut off from wisdom, and therefore necessarily from the community.

Conclusion: The Value of Babbitt for Democracy Today

Can Babbitt's critique of Dewey provide insight for the current American educational system's role in elite formation? In particular, can it help move us past sterile alternatives of meritocracy and inclusivity to find a richer definition of merit? Babbitt reframes our assumptions in a number of helpful ways.

- First, he insists that some kind of elite will come to the fore in any human society—very often, it will be the plutocracy of the Gilded Age or the technocracy of scientific management. The challenge, then, is not simply to protect equality from elitism but to select for an elite that best serves equality. This insistence that the success and failure of all political systems depends on the quality of their leadership puts Babbitt in a long tradition of philosophers of the mixed regime.
- Second, Babbitt's Tocquevillian argument that the college can best serve democracy by embodying a set of essentially aristocratic values that cannot be found elsewhere in democracy appears worthy of fresh consideration in a society that struggles to define other principles than equality.⁵⁷ His more specific conclusion that a classical education ought to be the path to acquiring the virtue and wisdom to lead others also forms part of a long tradition. Babbitt hopes that dedicating one's youth to the reading of texts drawn from millennia of the human experience will instill a sense of being the heirs of a tradition much older and richer than oneself. This tradition is at once national (Babbitt thinks of the United States, saying literature ought to be "a unifying element in our national life"), civilizational (the West) and universal

⁵⁷ Anthony Kronman, former Dean of Yale Law School, has recently made this argument explicitly, invoking Tocqueville, in *The Assault on American Excellence* (2019).

(Babbitt asserts the fundamental unity of human nature and the recurrence of the essential human questions, leading him to argue for the interconnectedness of the Orient and the Occident and to commend the humane learning of East and South Asia especially). The unifying concern of Babbitt's educational prescriptions across his works is that higher education must be demanding, selective, and dedicated to transcendent standards that can define what each generation coming of age must seek to become.⁵⁸

- Third, Babbitt's insights are pertinent because the two sets of views he critiqued are still with us. One is a tradition he attributes to Rousseau that views natural human desires as fundamentally benevolent, and therefore education as serving only to preserve those desires from the corrupting influence of custom. The other, which seeks to empower the human intellect to gain mastery over an inert nature, he attributes to Francis Bacon. Dewey, by contrast, explicitly endorsed Rousseau's ethics and Bacon's epistemology, and Dewey largely won the debate in his own day. For Babbitt, the combined effect of these philosophies in the educational realm was to produce students with great power to act in the world but no sense of self-restraint. Instead, the desirable college graduate is a humanist who has a sense of the misleading potential of sympathy and who prioritizes order in his own soul over order in society. The curricular consequence of this humanism is a principle of selection and discipline, as opposed to the elective or consumer principle which would valorize the student's individual inclinations. Translated into the language of economic theory, this is an argument that

⁵⁸ Here Eric Adler's article "Was Irving Babbitt an Educational Counterrevolutionist?" (2021) is both helpful and limited. Adler rightly emphasizes that Babbitt did not resort to the facile defenses of the humanities that were conventional in his day—that they fostered mental discipline or reflected Christian tradition. But then Adler claims that Babbitt's ecumenism and interest in both Eastern and Western ideas translate to a global curriculum with texts arranged only by theme. I think this under-emphasizes Babbitt's sense of the importance and integrity of traditions in the humanities.

education is a domain where to take preferences as given does not suffice to determine what goods should be supplied; education inherently works on and shifts the preferences of its consumers.⁵⁹ The modern elective system, by contrast, teaches the student to think of herself as a consumer of a product and a product herself. This seems to be one factor in the proliferation of luxurious campus student centers even as tenured faculty positions in traditional majors are sacrificed.

- Fourth, Babbitt's prescriptions for the content and mode of education, insisting that vicarious experience through the close study of great authors of past epochs can cultivate both a love of noble action and a humble willingness to set aside one's immediate desires. The unique benefit to the student that is possible at the college level, as opposed to the more passive receptivity of high school or the production of new research possible in graduate school, is what Babbitt calls "reflection" (1908, 100), which is a kind of assimilative drinking in of ideas and examples. Reflection is not merely theoretical; it necessarily involves the question of how and to what end to live. And such a student becomes capable of such reflection when, under the guidance of a true teacher, he is taken out of himself to enter imaginatively into the experiences of authors from other epochs. Babbitt thinks that the student who has the chance to do this will be moved beyond the desire to express himself and toward self-knowledge. As the next chapter shows, for Michael Young, Christopher Lasch and Michael Sandel, the two consistent defects of the meritocrats are a simultaneous arrogance and small-mindedness. Both stem from the meritocrat's sense that he has earned his high position in society by his academic ability. But this ability is usually a narrow technical aptitude, not virtue or wisdom, and the sense of privately possessing one's talents as endowments without any accompanying duties

⁵⁹ This is an application to the educational context of Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976).

to others makes meritocrats incline to treat the losers of the system without pity. Babbittian elite education via reflection and imaginative literature aims at curing both of these meritocratic vices, instilling magnanimity and humility and redefining excellence without sacrificing it. Babbitt assumes that literature appeals to both elites and people, and its beauty is apparent to those without the privilege of a college education. This implies a duty on the part of the academic elite to respect and study seriously the literature that shapes the culture outside the academy's walls.

As visionary as Babbitt is in speaking to the anxieties of our time, we should remember that Babbitt is very modest in his hopes for the leadership role that the products of his prescribed educational system should have in political life. While Babbitt insists strenuously on the theoretical importance of mimesis, he does not think it can play much of a beneficial role in the political realm. Babbitt at times sounds like a fairly counter-majoritarian institutionalist, hoping for not much more than a brake on democracy's worst impulses, analogous to his view of the individual soul as a two-story entity, with one's initial, default desires subject to review by the higher will. But at the level of the individual's moral education, his ideal is certainly not entirely negative. Babbitt actually expects this ethos of restraint to be inculcated through a process of successive imitation of higher principles or symbols, which he calls "standards." This humble "spiritual under-dog" leadership, Babbitt makes clear, does not necessarily consist in the holding of formal political office: Socrates the gadfly is its exemplar. This implies also that the basis of its authority is educational and its role is largely critical. The educational criterion means that the desired sense of restraint and duty to past and future generations cannot be entrusted to a hereditary aristocratic class, but to individuals from all classes of society who have risen

to undergo a superior education.⁶⁰ The critical aspect of this leadership role is reflected in Babbitt's choice to invoke the name of Socrates, the questioner of established standards and the seeker for true ones, as opposed to Plato, who might be invoked in the name of imposing a dogmatic vision of absolute standards upon society. Babbitt also calls it a "remnant," alluding apparently to the remnant of the Israelites after the Babylonian exile. Neither "gadfly" nor "remnant" implies an assured or dominant position. Will Demos be able to recognize the critic as a true friend, or will it resent the hard questions the critic raises? This issue of practical discernment in democracy may be why Babbitt places so much emphasis on the experience gained vicariously through liberal learning, because it provides a way of refining the practical judgment. Such a bold argument for liberal education may revitalize American humanities departments, faced as they are with the simultaneous accusations that their curricula fail to prepare students for the living of life but that they succeed in producing haughty meritocrats without magnanimity or wisdom. Neither Deweyan experimentation nor a merely aesthetic commitment to the Great Books answers these accusations as comprehensively as Babbitt's theory can. And his theory, derived from Plato and Tocqueville but original in decisive respects, helps us to develop a practical account of the civic value of the liberal arts in our own time.

⁶⁰ Babbitt leaves it an open question whether in the abstract a hereditary elite or one educated anew in each generation would be preferable. His praise of Burke in *Democracy in Leadership* includes a sympathetic treatment of Burke's qualified defense of aristocracy.

CHAPTER 5:

Meritocracy as the Democratic Soul in New Guise

The Dissatisfying Status Quo: From Babbitt's Day to Our Own

The questions of an elite's role in an egalitarian society that Plato and Tocqueville raised have not gone away. And since the unusual degree of clarity and depth that Dewey and Babbitt achieved in discussing the state of the elite American research university, that institution has only come to play a larger and larger role in public life. But since the time of Charles Eliot, Babbitt's worry that Harvard would produce graduates who combine a Baconian vision of knowledge with a Rousseauian picture of ethics has not diminished in relevance. Babbitt's solution, to acknowledge the neo-aristocratic status of elite college graduates and prescribe for them a humane education in the classics of the liberal arts to foster moderation and restraint, has not been the dominant resolution to the felt tension between aristocratic and democratic principles. In this chapter, I sketch out the logic behind what **has** been the dominant attempted resolution: meritocratic selection. Of course there are other impulses at work in the elite university context—these institutions also seek to produce a diverse elite to reflect the nation, as well as to socialize their students into a common set of values. But the central, and least controversial with the general public, commitment is to select the most intellectually accomplished and gifted students and reward their work on the basis of its quality. The graduates then go on to influential positions in business, culture, and politics propelled by their academic credentials. This is superficially an attractive ideal compared to other models of elites, since it allows talent to rise and it ensures some connection between position attained and competence. Yet it has partially-invisible negative consequences; not just for equity as is frequently remarked, but especially for the character it cultivates in future elites. My view is that ironically meritocracy has created a situation in which the negative qualities Plato attributed to the democratic soul are today most true of elites. To be a credible

antidote, aristocratic education in Babbitt's mode must show that it avoids these perverse dynamics and does not instill new and worse vices.

I argue in this chapter that the most insightful analysis of the contemporary elite is one that focuses on meritocracy in the educational system as the relevant factor of distinction. This approach has the virtue of being attuned to material conditions without being reductive. In the economy of Western, post-industrial countries (and to a large extent in the world economy), remuneration increasingly flows to those who can perform services through verbal and intellectual skill, rather than those who labor physically to produce goods or serve clients face-to-face. Innovation to imagine new products and entrepreneurial acumen to identify new opportunities—the features of “start-up culture”—are valued, much more than consistency in executing responsibilities over the long-term. Higher education both selects for these qualities and seeks to foster them. This education-focused approach has the further advantage of addressing the socialization process by which the tastes and prejudices of members of the elite are formed through the years spent together studying in the same institutions, resulting in a largely-shared outlook even for those who after graduating pursue careers in business, academia, and the arts. It also takes into consideration the legitimating logic of the contemporary elite—not simply how it acquires its position, but how it justifies being there. As we have seen in the opening chapter's survey of elite typologies, the legitimating logic matters for how an elite conducts itself.

In America, the ideal of meritocracy is closely associated with our self-understanding as a classless society, one characterized by “social mobility.” One of the most formative expressions of this idea comes from James Conant, president of Harvard after Charles Eliot, whose 1940 speech “Education for a Classless Society” claimed that “a belief in careers open to all through higher education, and a faith in universal schooling” was the fulfillment of an American tradition dating back to Jefferson. Yet this vision, once something like a reality in an agrarian society, had lost relevance in

the industrial America of the twentieth century. Conant alluded to Frederick Jackson Turner's famed Frontier Thesis: As the vast Western plains had once made it possible for the poor to rise by claiming their own land, now education would step in to ensure that power and wealth circulated without becoming fixed in a few hands. For Conant, "If large numbers of young people can develop their own capacities irrespective of the economic status of their parents, then social mobility is high." The practical implications that Conant draws from this are familiar: the educational system will have to make new efforts to find talent in deprived portions of society, through both financial aid and widespread aptitude testing. As the economy has become much more specialized, with more professions requiring advanced training, universities have only become more and more essential. Conant recognizes that Harvard and its peers will be the source of the elite of the future, but he hopes that the profusion of knowledge will create a plurality of elite groups and interests: "We look forward to the opening of many channels which lead to a variety of attractive goals; we can envisage the building up of more than one 'elite.'" In a sense, Conant's speech seems to resonate with this dissertation's own goal: to envision how higher education might contribute to the creation of an elite appropriate for the needs and principles of a democratic society.

Yet in equating elite education with technical training for economic success, and in focusing on the social outcomes desired at the cost of instrumentalizing the curriculum, Conant was accepting Thorsten Veblen's nightmare, the reduction of the university into a site of vocational training. At the 1946 Harvard Commencement Exercises, the poet W.H. Auden saw the implications of Conant's program and satirized it as a technocratic endeavor compromised by its cooperation with the United States government's World War II and Cold War military ambitions. With the poem "Under Which Lyre," Auden opposed the whimsical, liberal-educational ethos of Hermes to the spirit of Apollo, in

which “Truth is replaced by Universal Knowledge.”⁶¹ His closing injunction to the gathered Phi Beta Kappa inductees was, “Thou shalt not answer questionnaires / Or quizzes upon world affairs / Nor with compliance / Take any test. Thou shalt not sit / With statisticians or commit / A social science” (1947, 509). In a tongue-in-cheek way, Auden was taking up some of Babbitt’s polemic against Charles Eliot and making it his own vis-à-vis a new president of Harvard.

While the poets may have long objected to meritocracy because it tends to erect technocracy, philosophers have often found it wanting on distributive-justice grounds. Although meritocracy is usually associated with liberalism, liberal philosophers have been among its most prominent critics. The question of whether and to what extent unequal access to social goods such as wealth and honor can be justified is central to John Rawls’ left-liberal *Theory of Justice* (1971). Rawls avoids basing any of his justification for inequality on the greater and lesser claims of actors to meriting particular goods: “None of the precepts of justice aims at rewarding virtue” (1971, 311). For Rawls, this is partly because so much of our capacity even to be virtuous is a result of the way we have been raised and socialized: “The initial endowment of natural assets and the contingencies of their growth and nurture in early life are **arbitrary from a moral point of view**” (1971, 312; emphasis mine). Whatever the complex relationship of nature and nurture in producing someone of exceptional character or talent, Rawls treats both as equally arbitrary. On the other side of the political spectrum, the influential case made by the pro-market liberal F.A. Hayek in *The Constitution of Liberty* criticizes policies of redistribution on the grounds that the state lacks the information that economic actors participating directly in transactions lack. But, perhaps surprisingly, he no more than Rawls wishes to say that those the market rewards deserve their bounty. Rather, “the inborn as well as the acquired gifts of a person clearly have a value to his fellows which does not depend on any credit due to him for possessing them” (Hayek

⁶¹ Auden (1947, 509).

1960, 94). Remuneration thus essentially follows perceived value and is not a reward for virtue. Robert Nozick's 1974 pro-market reply to Rawls in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* extends the same line of reasoning about moral desert, even if he resists the extreme Rawlsian skepticism, arguing that we can speak meaningfully of individuals like basketball star Wilt Chamberlain as more or less deserving of their wages. Yet at a more popular level, Conant's argument has found many successors, like John Gardner's 1961 *Excellence*, which argued that selection of highly-talented students into elite colleges was not only perfectly compatible with American democracy but a requirement of it, especially given the pressures of the Cold War to compete in the arms race of global science. This impulse—not to theorize about the just *per se* when it comes to merit, but to recognize pragmatically our collective need for specialized competence—has certainly not disappeared.

This chapter aims to disentangle meritocracy's virtues from its vices via a close reading of the work of three of its prominent and prescient critics, Michael Young, Christopher Lasch, and Michael Sandel. These three authors span a wide swathe of the political spectrum, from Young's left-critique of social democracy to Sandel's left-communitarianism to Lasch's right-populism. Together they show why the contemporary status quo view is not a satisfactory mixed regime that reconciles the claims of excellence and equality. Despite their trenchant worries about the social implications of the new hierarchy educational meritocracy can create, all three do not categorically dismiss the need to recognize and reward excellence that serves the common good. All three of them at times contrast meritocratic elites unfavorably with other forms of elites, whether aristocracies of birth or the elected leaders of ancient republics. These hints suggest that we should think about elite reform in the tradition of the mixed regime, which would involve asking what unusual qualities we should promote for the common good and how we might prevent those possessed of high position from abusing it. That even such far-sighted theorists as these are not able to sketch a positive way forward suggests that the prevailing horizon in contemporary democratic thinking is too low, and suggests the necessity of this

dissertation's genealogical quest to understand the relationship between knowledge and power. The most important insight these theorists offer comes from Lasch's description of the narcissistic narrowness of the psyche that develops in a typical person who has succeeded in the meritocratic selection process. Disturbingly, this elite psychology very much resembles Plato's portrait of the democratic soul as flat and complacent. If our educated elite has truly come to share in vices that were once assumed to be demotic, we must ask ourselves whether an alternative elite education can be devised. Can the liberal education that Plato, Tocqueville, and Babbitt prescribe really cultivate a different psychology? If so, we also need to consider whether that different psychology is on the whole an improvement, rather than being possessed of fatal vices of its own.

Michael Young's Jeremiad

The book that coined the term "meritocracy" in English vividly depicts its negative social consequences, without the attention to its psychic effects that characterizes Lasch and Sandel's works. Though the book is cited wherever there is a scholarly discussion of meritocracy, its quality as a parable is rarely considered in depth. In imagining a society completely structured around rewarding intelligence, Michael Young anticipated a hyperbolic version of today's cleavages. In 1958 he described a dystopian Britain of the year 2033 that has erected a whole society around rigorous intelligence testing and the rational allocation of both prestige and wealth. *The Rise of the Meritocracy* criticized Young's own Labour Party in their postwar hour of triumph. Even as Labour were realizing their long-standing agenda of neutralizing the influence of hereditary wealth by making all careers open to talent, Young saw that the rule of talent could itself become oppressive.⁶² Young reasoned that early childhood circumstances play an enormous role in later-life success, and so he recognized that to realize this aspiration to social mobility would entail furnishing the best education to the talented

⁶² The book's inspiration, and one of the inspirations for Labour's agenda, was the success of the Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1854 in provoking British civil service reform.

children of poor families starting in infancy. This would require the state to supersede many of the family's functions, eventually producing a society even more stratified because freed from the influence of accidents of birth.

Young puts his vision in the mouth of an official sociologist of the ruling regime of the transformed Britain who describes the tremendous achievements of meritocracy, and whose utter lack of critical distance is supposed to make the satire doubly effective. The wealthy pay exorbitant inheritance taxes, salaries are equalized by law, and education is entirely public. Britain remains a democracy, with one-person, one-vote representation in Parliament. Yet the narrator insists triumphantly that this is not socialism; socialism dug its own grave. "For the socialists nothing succeeded like success in the short run just as, in the long run, nothing failed like success" (Young 1961, 131). For a brief period (Young refers to his own mid-twentieth century, although his narrator ostensibly views this as a backward period) socialism created a measure of real social equality by introducing the principle of merit to counteract the principle of heredity which had stratified the old society. "In feudal times the country was governed by a ruling caste. In modern times we have a casteless society and the country is governed by a ruling class. In between it was governed by neither caste nor class, but by a combination of both" (1961, 134). In those irrational and hoary days, "every social class was, in ability, the miniature of society itself; the part the same as the whole" (1961, 14), with a random distribution of talents. Just as there were many infamous cases of stupid scions of the idle rich, there were many brilliant sons of coal miners. Since the privilege of the wealthy was "sanctioned by only half the moral code, the beneficiaries were only half at home in their station in life" (1961, 104) and they at least occasionally had to acknowledge that they could learn from their quicker-witted subordinates. The very incoherence of this system helped to create a measure of mutual respect between the lowly and the great. In an image that is central to Young's vision, he remarks that a dim Earl could always have in the back of his mind that his gardener might be smarter than he.

These combined and opposing logics suggest the desirability of a kind of a mixed regime, but Young does not develop this possibility.

Whatever its merits for social peace, this old incoherence could never be justified on abstract philosophical grounds, whereas reward proportionate to merit (defined as the intelligence and talents to be productive) was easier to defend publicly. It soon became the only ruling principle, sweeping away heredity or custom. Young's narrator describes a system that is not just ideologically pure but unrealistically free of corruption in implementation, in order to show that none of the meritocracy's problems are from the abuse of its principles. Now children are IQ-tested at three years of age (though periodically retested in case their numbers change) and tracked into schools that determine whether they will be "technicians" (the euphemism for manual laborers) or professional scientists and engineers. Education itself was transformed by the single-minded focus on productivity, with classical education jettisoned in favor of technical. "In order to combine the best of England, our régime for children, with the best of America, their régime for adults, [schoolboy] competition had to last for life" (Young 1961, 80). A national agency with openly eugenic aims tracks IQ across multiple generations, encouraging the highly-intelligent to reproduce with others of like intellect. It is increasingly rare for the children of "technicians" to rise, though the great still fear one of their children not inheriting their brains. An expanded Whitehall civil service governs in the place of a rump House of Commons, subject to oversight by the superlatively brilliant gathered in a (reconstituted) House of Lords where life peerages are allocated to the highest test-scorers. Technocracy has displaced both monarchy and democracy.

Meritocratic Britain is logically consistent, unlike its predecessor regimes, but it struggles to inspire loyalty. The lower classes, after two full generations under this system, are more alienated than ever and are beginning to rise up in fury and despair. The narrator explains this by speculating that those who are downtrodden under pure meritocracy have none of the old comforting objects to shift

blame upon: once poverty or disadvantage could be chalked up to the circumstances of birth, bad luck in life, or the malice of the dominating class that fails to give one's hidden talents a chance to shine. Now, "for the first time in history the inferior man has no ready buttress for his self-regard" (Young 1961, 108), while "the eminent know that success is just reward for their own capacity" (1961, 106). So the lowly are filled with self-loathing and the great with an arrogant complacency. "Some members of the meritocracy, as most moderate reformers admit, have become so impressed with their own importance as to lose sympathy with the people they govern, and so tactless that even people of low caliber have been quite unnecessarily offended" (1961, 107). The sociologist knows that showing contempt is the fastest ticket to overthrowing the regime. But as the excellent engineers' technological innovations have brought more and more automation, manual labor has lost even the veneer of respect and acknowledgement it was once accorded. Only the brain-work to arrange the machines is valued. Naturally this working class has become completely bereft of a social stratum Young knew to have been central to the history of Labour in the industrial era: the bright and ambitious men from working-class backgrounds who could provide leadership to their fellow workers and advocate for them. Labour has in fact renamed itself the "Technicians Party," and its rolls have dwindled amid rising voter apathy.

How then does the system endure at all? Most citizens have difficulty articulating any objection to the justice of the hegemonic arrangement of bestowing all rewards on the meritoriously productive. And pragmatism seems decisive: the exigencies of foreign competition make everyone value having the most competent people at responsible posts (Young implies that the world's other great powers are all now organized like Britain's). Plus, the lower classes almost never interact with the upper and so lack much occasion to develop envy for the comfortable lives of their betters. The technicians are educated in, or sedated by, a "Mythos of Muscularity" that pervades the media, honoring physical prowess and serving up excellent sports to keep them constantly entertained and distracted. Yet the

one unlikely alliance with the potential to unsettle this society has arisen: a group of class traitors from among the brilliant has begun to spread egalitarian propaganda among the lower classes. Significantly, these “Populists” are all upper-class women, the wives of prominent scientists. Fed up with being desired only for their ability to breed intelligent children, they began by seeking out beauty and romance among the exotic lower class. This erotic quest eventually broadened into “a protest against the standards, those of achievement, by which men judge each other” (Young 1961, 173). Without rejecting the idea of merit entirely, they claim it is defined too narrowly by the regime, that human excellence comes in many different forms, and that the educational and economic system should allow those many different forms to be developed and flourish. This intriguing argument, with its echoes Plato’s understanding of *eros*, is not developed further. Perhaps the Populists, themselves a product of meritocratic society, struggle to articulate a standard beyond the regnant *nomos*. At the same time, the narrator notes with disquiet, a new faction of Conservatives has arisen that openly proposes to reintroduce the principle of heredity. The narrator admits that this, more than the ideas of the Populists, has stirred popular anger and caused riots, but expresses confidence that order will be restored shortly. In a final satirical twist, the book concludes with a postscript explaining that the author was killed in the civil strife that erupted as the Technicians rose up against the meritocrats.

As a vivid parable crafted in the form of a futuristic dystopia, Young’s work has been compelling enough to become the obligatory citation in every subsequent discussion of meritocracy. Though the Britain or the United States of today is not nearly as comprehensively given over to the rule of merit as in Young’s story, we can descry definite parallels in the power of the educational system and in the mounting frustrations of working-class voters who complain of contempt from the professional classes. Young does hint at some possible alternatives to merit as the sole ruling principle in public life; ways of mixing the regime, as it were. *The Rise of the Meritocracy* is surprisingly sympathetic to the apparently irrational logic of hereditary aristocracy, which allocates high position with no regard

for having earned it.⁶³ It also expresses sympathy for the traditional institutions, including trades unions and the unionist Labour Party, which softened the hard edges of industrial life. But its narrator seems at his most earnest when he argues that the exigencies of international competition for scientific and engineering talent have necessitated a national mobilization of children. A country that neglects to undertake a *levée en masse* of high-IQ children in elementary school, he implies, will soon lose its status as a great power and perhaps even its independence. Young foresaw this theme of the Cold War world even in the decade before Sputnik galvanized American educational policy. He assumes that a highly-stratified educational system that fast-tracks the gifted as soon as they enter school will be necessary under these conditions because he agrees with Tocqueville that the distribution of human intelligence is profoundly varied, causing ineradicable inequality.⁶⁴ Yet Young is also Tocquevillian in implying that this inequality makes democracies uncomfortable, so they rarely face it openly.

In an interesting echo of Babbitt and Dewey, Young hints in passing that classical education may be one of the most serious threats to the total-meritocracy regime inspired by Bacon. Young's narrator little laments the fate of the traditional humanities in the remodeled curriculum. Perhaps he is not capable of fully perceiving its significance, as a product of the new education himself. The applied sciences displaced humanistic learning in the curriculum during the early stages of overhauling the educational system for maximum efficiency. The reformers perceived that the old education's piety

⁶³ There is a conceptual distinction here between desert (in the generic sense being owed something) and merit (in the specific sense of being owed something because it has been earned). This distinction is revisited in the discussion of Michael Sandel.

⁶⁴ Cf. I.I.4 of *Democracy in America* (2010): "Intellectual inequality comes directly from God, and man cannot prevent it from always reappearing." This motif itself reappears in I.II.5: "It is impossible, no matter what you do, to raise the enlightenment of the people above a certain level. Whatever you do to make human learning more accessible, improve the methods of instruction and make knowledge more affordable, you will never be able to have men learn and develop their intelligence without devoting time to the task. So the greater or lesser facility that the people have for living without working sets the necessary limit to their intellectual progress." Tocqueville's pessimism about the practical prospects for universal education is detailed in Edward Gargan's article "The Silence of Tocqueville on Education" (1980).

had made its pupils reluctant to manipulate human nature. Deference toward classic texts had made pupils backwards-looking and fatalistic, too prone to question the merits of technological progress. By contrast, “the modern attitude to life” is Baconian, with “humility toward Nature though not toward man, that passionate detachment” (Young 1961, 68). We learn that “the meritocracy replaced Gibbon with Galton” (Young 1961, 68), substituting the study of tools for history.

The positive paths that Young sketches are only suggestive, but they will be of interest for other critics of meritocracy. Both the Populists and Conservatives that challenge the regime do not question the value of excellence or intelligence per se. They seek to temper the rule of merit with another principle. The elite women leaders of the Populists seek to introduce a fuller-orbed vision of human excellences that includes qualities like physical beauty or virtue of character, building on the new regime’s initial success in creating forms of social recognition for the ‘Technicians’ athletic and physical achievement. This is recognizably a communitarian impulse that is perhaps most thoroughly developed by Michael Walzer in *Spheres of Justice* but that also animates Michael Sandel. We might also see in Young’s ascribing discontent with the regime to the women who have ostensibly benefited most from it a feminist suggestion that women are more likely than men to see beyond the narrow paradigm of success offered in masculine competition for economic success. It also may be that *eros* can transcend the *doxa* prevailing in a society. But the Conservatives of Young’s vision, who want to bring back the principle of heredity and pass on their wealth and status to their children, are also treated sympathetically. If Britain was best governed during the intermediate period in the mid-twentieth century when merit and heredity both played a role in allocating social position, perhaps the principles can be mixed again. This is an idea that Christopher Lasch develops; although as an American he is not imagining a society with titles or ranks, he is attracted to some of the qualities of hereditary aristocrats vis-à-vis the nouveau riche. What limits the philosophical depth of his account is that Young never fully articulates the definition of “merit” operative in the future-Britain, making it hard

to develop an alternative definition. It appears to be a very narrow vision of intelligence applied towards technically productive ends.⁶⁵ There are possible intermediate positions between Hayek and Rawls' extreme skepticism about desert and reducing the moral worth of individuals to the price their labor fetches, such as thinking that human excellence constitutes one valid criterion for distributing social goods. Humanistic education aims at cultivating an aspect of that excellence, fostering prudence to sharpen judgment. If we want to avoid Young's dystopia, educating liberally is going to be of central importance.

Lasch on Elite Narcissism

Although in American political discourse educational meritocracy has come under criticism in the intervening decades since Young's coinage of the term, the most common critiques focus on how it has been incompletely or hypocritically realized.⁶⁶ Collegiate meritocracy seemed neatly congruent with other priorities for social progress in the second half of the twentieth century, as it promised to foster integration by allowing talented young people from marginalized groups to rise into the mainstream. Nicolas Lemann frames the history of the standardized test as partly due to an effort to find an admissions standard independent of cultural background.⁶⁷ Daniel Bell's 1972 essay in response to Rawls and Young essentially reaffirmed the value of meritocracy as an American ideal, despite their critiques.⁶⁸ Christopher Lasch's long career, both as a historian and a cultural critic, spanned the generation following Young. It combines a critique of capitalism with one of progressive culture—identifying meritocracy with the vices of both. His writings frequently condemn a therapeutic

⁶⁵ Ansgar Allen makes this criticism in "Michael Young's *The Rise of the Meritocracy: A Philosophical Critique*" (2011) but the conclusion he draws from it is that Young's dystopia does not hit home in describing a society recognizable to the one we inhabit. This seems to me a bit too optimistic.

⁶⁶ An important exception is John Schar's "Equality of Opportunity, and Beyond" (1967), which highlighted the many possible meanings of equality of opportunity and what an exacting standard it really is.

⁶⁷ *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (2000).

⁶⁸ "On Meritocracy and Equality" (1972).

mode of politics, which he argues is based on a naïve reading of Freud. He nevertheless does defend a version of the city-soul analogy and points us toward Plato. For Lasch, the American regime and psyche are sick in parallel, and its elites are the sickest.⁶⁹ This point, first developed at length in *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979), appears again in his last book, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (1995). The former's central claim is that Americans increasingly substitute a subjective sense of well-being for older ambitions for political reform and personal rectitude. The idealism of the 1960s quickly dissipated, not just into getting and spending but into self-fashioning. "Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matter is psychic self-improvement" (Lasch 1979, 29). Traditional moral language becomes evacuated of any content apart from its impact on the individual's psyche, with even "love" and "meaning" reduced from describing intrinsic goods to naming mere means to the architectonic end of emotional health. This self-referential posture inevitably fosters cynicism towards what claims to be heroic or noble.

The Culture of Narcissism focuses many of his initial examples on the changing literary tastes of Americans; protagonists are no longer heroes, distinguished chiefly by their self-absorption. Even the narrators of memoirs frequently undermine their own authority to describe or interpret their experiences. He describes a "confessional mode" (Lasch 1979, 48) in which memoirists become trapped in self-consciousness of their effort for authenticity. Self-narration has become a therapeutic exercise. Confessional works claim to attempt to communicate "hard-won personal revelation" (1979, 50). But how can knowledge gleaned from the unique experience of private trauma ever be communicated? Lasch describes the memoirist's "pseudo-insight into his own condition, usually expressed in psychiatric clichés" (1979, 52) as ultimately self-serving, a parody of confession's

⁶⁹ Lasch acknowledges that his psychic analysis is indebted to Philip Rieff's *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966).

traditional meaning: disclosure of the self to be weighed and found wanting relative to an objective standard of external truth. If this dynamic is taken to its logical conclusion, any unified self-understanding can disintegrate in layers of self-conscious self-presentation, and “the record of the inner life becomes an unintentional parody of inner life” (1979, 54). The coherent author interpreting past choices into a linear story has dissolved into the victim of disjointed experiences in search of a reassuring narrative.

Lasch draws a parallel between this literary trend and what he sees as citizens’ apathetic attitude toward the politics of their republic. This contemporary narcissism represents a radicalization of what Tocqueville described as democratic individualism. Yet rather than describing a relatively simple linear dynamic of increasing isolation and independence, Lasch intends to argue, along communitarian lines, that the loss of local ties actually renders the individual more subject to outside control. The contemporary citizen may appear to neglect public life by retreating into private life, but thereby he becomes increasingly dependent on expertise he does not understand, whether it’s that of public or private institutions. “The atrophy of older traditions of self-help has eroded everyday competence, in one area after another, and has made the individual dependent on the state, the corporation, and other bureaucracies” (Lasch 1979, 37). Whereas the older “rugged individualist” viewed the world as “an empty wilderness to be shaped to his own design,” “for the narcissist, the world is a mirror” (1979, 38). This is because, for those steeped in a therapeutic vocabulary, there is no way “to encourage the subject to subordinate his needs and interests to those of others, to someone or some cause or tradition outside himself” (1979, 43). The result is a particularly pervasive form of what Tocqueville described as democratic despotism, and it stems from a portrait of the democratic soul that recalls Plato’s diagnosis: impatient of restraint, it will not subordinate its present desires to higher or external goals.

As his analysis of the therapeutic mode through the writing and reading of personal memoir implies, Lasch holds that it is ultimately the ethos of a literary elite, one with detrimental effects for less-educated and less-verbal fellow citizens. He stresses throughout the book the paradox that the university-educated, who have apparently excelled through a selective and demanding process, are often those most impatient with having difficult demands made of them. To flesh out this paradox, Lasch tells a story of the development of the American university from the time of the Civil War to the 1960s, one that recalls Babbitt's account in *Literature and the American College*. By the end of this period, the university curriculum had become an uneasy mixture of an elective system, pre-professional training, and remnants of the old idea of general culture. In a parallel to his description of the loss of citizen independence in the broader polity, Lasch laments that faculty self-governance has been eroded in favor of control by administrators who often consider the classroom the least of their priorities. "The decision to combine professional training and liberal education in the same institution, and the compromises necessary to implement it, rendered the faculty incapable of confronting larger questions of academic policy" (Lasch 1979, 254). Yet this analysis does not mean to imply that all would be well if faculty played a larger role in setting their direction of their institutions. It is the faculty themselves whom Lasch faults for worrying that to demand that all students become familiar with a common canon of texts would be elitist. Over time, this embarrassment on the part of the would-be clerisy diminishes the depth of the average level of cultural knowledge, as well as fragmenting it. As a result, ordinary Americans increasingly lack the wealth of biblical, mythological, and poetic allusions that once formed the common culture, and even elites are likely to be specialists in a narrow domain of information processing, if they have not dissipated their college years in the pursuit of self-indulgent electives. "The resulting split between general knowledge and the specialized knowledge of the experts" has reconfigured "education as a commodity" (Lasch 1979, 264). It also deepens the divide between "high" and "low" cultural registers.

In keeping with this critique of specialists, the book concludes with an unfavorable contrast between the new managerial elite, and what Lasch calls the “propertied elite” that it displaces. This older elite was most visibly different in its attitude towards childrearing; it regarded children as unformed, and it sought to form them by transmitting a sense of generational continuity and duty. The new class is transient, deriving its wealth from salaries rather than property. Throughout its frequent moves, made in the pursuit of career, it insulates its children from having to share neighborhoods with the poor even as it outsources the work of rearing them first to teachers and then to therapists. “As the new elite discards the outlook of the old bourgeoisie, it identifies itself not with the work ethic and the responsibilities of wealth but with an ethic of leisure, hedonism, and self-fulfillment” (Lasch 1979, 374). And yet, Lasch suggests, the children of this elite know not to carry self-indulgence to such a point that it would actually impede their pursuit of financial security. It is the less privileged who do not have recourse to therapeutic alternatives to traditional morality who therefore suffer the consequences of a more permissive culture: “Therapeutic morality encourages a permanent suspension of the moral sense. There is a close connection, in turn, between the erosion of moral responsibility and the waning of the capacity for self-help” (Lasch 1979, 389). *The Culture of Narcissism* proffers as its positive vision producerist democracy, which may make it possible for ordinary citizens to resist the management of their lives by bureaucratic experts (whether of the state or corporate variety): “In order to break the existing pattern of dependence and put an end to the erosion of competence, citizens will have to take the solution of their problems into their own hands. They will have to create their own ‘communities of competence’” (Lasch 1979, 396).⁷¹ This would require not simply a shift in attitude but also in governance: granting real responsibility for decision-

⁷¹ In addition to *The Revolt of the Elites*, Lasch develops these economic themes in *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (1991).

making to local politics might cultivate a non-narcissistic citizenry. Lasch seems to have little hope of cultivating a non-narcissistic elite.

Elite Malfeasance as Withdrawal

In *The Revolt of the Elites* Lasch articulates implicitly what would characterize a worthy elite. What Lasch has to say about leaders and elites is not entirely negative; we can glean from his critiques of existing elites a set of the qualities that he thinks would be desirable, which will help us think about how those qualities might be cultivated. They can be distilled into three broad categories:

- The first has to do with the essence of **leadership**. To lead in a political community, elites must be exceptionally capable by some metric. Lasch does not give much indication of what metric he would put forward, though his positive references to the “valor” and “pride” of traditional aristocracies and his disparaging remarks about Robert McNamara and the mandarins’ role in the disasters of the Vietnam War suggests that mere intelligence about technical matters does not suffice.
- Secondly, Lasch stresses the value of having a sense of **limits** upon human desire founded on being tied to a particular time and place. He suggests that the disembodied nature of much of the work of the “symbolic analysts” makes them consistently underestimate the importance of these limits. To fulfill its political role, an elite would have to feel greater loyalty to its fellow citizens than to fellow members of their class in other countries. Yet the dynamic of the global market pulls toward an internationalist perspective.
- The third is a complex set of ideas best suggested by the quaint term *noblesse oblige*. Those who are members of an elite by their birth have done nothing to earn their position and so can potentially see their privileges as a gift to be used for the sake of others. *Noblesse oblige* can foster a sense of reciprocal loyalties and duties. For Lasch this obligation to those less fortunate must be felt as a personal duty to serve others, not merely as a preference for a more

redistributive tax policy in general. The last category in particular presents a serious question. If the scandal of aristocracies of birth was the rank incompetence of many of their members, and if the scandal of aristocracies of merit is the rank egotism of many of theirs, could the advantages of both be combined, producing a generally competent elite that retains a sense of public duty?

These three desiderata might be summarized as excellence, restraint, and duty. For all of his critique of meritocracy, Lasch does not abandon the idea that there are better and worse characters and behaviors, both per se and insofar as they affect public life. Yet his educational prescriptions are for the people, not their leaders. In *Revolt of the Elites* Lasch seeks to unearth the sources of popular disaffection and to make the case for elite malfeasance through a wide-ranging reading of American intellectual history. Lasch's central contention is that James Conant-style social mobility through careers open to talent is not just insufficiently realized but actually an ill-conceived way to think about the relationship between democracy and social hierarchy. The book's animating vision is the rowdy, dynamic democracy of Jacksonian America, which could produce a public capable of following the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Lasch contends that because popular rule mattered in that epoch, the people learned to rise to the standard expected of them. Thus democracy should be defended "not as the most efficient but as the most educational form of government" (Lasch 1995, 171).

Lasch's arresting opening claim is that José Ortega y Gasset was right to fear, in his 1930 *The Revolt of the Masses*,⁷² a threat to "social order and the civilizing traditions of Western culture" (Lasch 1995, 25). Ortega took for granted that the exponential rise in the standard of living that had made it possible for vast numbers of ordinary people to enjoy comfort and even to have the leisure to

⁷² José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (1932).

participate in politics was an epochal achievement worthy of celebration.⁷³ But the danger posed by the masses' newfound power lay in their attraction to what is easy, accessible, base. Mass man resented "everything that is different, everything that is excellent, individual, qualified, and select" (Ortega y Gasset 1932, 18-19), everything that set a standard above himself and his immediate desires. Here Ortega echoed Plato and Tocqueville's warnings about the democratic soul. Lacking education, mass man was concerned about his rights, not his duties, about pleasing himself in the moment without "any comprehension of the fragility of civilization or the tragic character of history" (Lasch 1995, 26). The attitude of the mass combined "radical ingratitude" with "an unquestioned belief in limitless progress" (Lasch 1995, 40). This led to a contempt for any ideas inherited from past ages, despite the dependence of modern democracy upon centuries of fragile historical development. Having sketched out Ortega's diagnosis, Lasch promptly inverts it. *The Revolt of the Masses*, faced with the totalitarian mass movements of the 1930s, "could not have foreseen a time when it was more appropriate to speak of a revolt of the elites" (Lasch 1995, 25).⁷⁴ Once it might have made sense to assume that "the value of elites lay in their willingness to assume responsibility for standards without which civilization is

⁷³ In this he equals Tocqueville's assessment of the "less beautiful but more just" character of the democratic age.

⁷⁴ It is worth asking how accurate Lasch's drawing of the contrast is. Ortega too attacks a certain kind of elite: he names his target as the "self-satisfied" man, the product of a new and reductive education. Ortega thus "Previously, men could be divided simply into the learned and the ignorant, those more or less the one, and those more or less the other. But your specialist cannot be brought in under either of these two categories. He is not learned, for he is formally ignorant of all that does not enter into his speciality; but neither is he ignorant, because he is "a scientist," and "knows" very well his own tiny portion of the universe..."

"That state of "not listening," of not submitting to higher courts of appeal which I have repeatedly put forward as characteristic of the mass-man, reaches its height precisely in these partially qualified men. They symbolise, and to a great extent constitute, the actual dominion of the masses, and their barbarism is the most immediate cause of European demoralisation. Furthermore, they afford the clearest, most striking example of how the civilisation of the last century, abandoned to its own devices, has brought about this rebirth of primitivism and barbarism.

The most immediate result of this unbalanced specialisation has been that today, when there are more "scientists" than ever, there are much less "cultured" men than, for example, about 1750" (Ortega y Gasset 1932, 124-5).

impossible” and that “they lived in the service of demanding ideals” (Lasch 1995, 26). But now all of the spoiled, presentist attitudes, especially the belief that one’s raw, untutored sense of self is all it needs to be and that authoritative standards beyond the self are inherently oppressive, “are now more characteristic of the upper levels of society than of the middle and lower levels” (Lasch 1995, 27). In Marxian terms, Lasch suggests that the *haute-bourgeoisie* have imbibed the worst characteristics of the *lumpenproletariat*. In particular, the elites are not just narcissistic but demotic.

Lasch extends his analysis by sketching different relations to material production in order to get a more precise definition of the elite and to better articulate its characteristics. Using Robert Reich’s terms for the American economy of the 1990s, he identifies three groups: “symbolic analysts,” the top 20% of the economy, who “live in a world of abstract concepts and symbols,” who are credentialed by higher education, and who, crucially, are not tied to particular places or objects in their work. Their residential areas “lack the continuity that derives from a sense of place and from standards of conduct self-consciously cultivated and handed down from generation to generation” (Lasch 1995, 40), in an echo of *The Culture of Narcissism*’s analysis of the residential preferences of professionals. In contrast are the “routine production workers” and the “in-person servers”; the former often make the material products used by the symbolic analysts but live far away from them, and the latter live in the symbolic analysts’ cities but interact with them primarily in roles like food service and taxi driving. Though Lasch does not want to oversimplify so as to imply that the symbolic analysts always share a common worldview or political interest, he does warn that this economic arrangement introduces a dangerous degree of inequality: “The general course of recent history no longer favors the leveling of social distinctions but runs more and more in the direction of two-class society in which the favored few monopolize the advantages of money, education, and power” (Lasch 1995, 29). Writing in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union, Lasch’s worry that democracy’s gains would be in jeopardy without a healthy middle class to sustain them cut against the triumphalist assumptions of the time.

For Lasch, an important symptom and cause of middle-class erosion is what he takes to be the quite recent (twentieth-century) acceptance of “social mobility” in the United States as a sufficient criterion for a democratic society. That **some** children of the 80% find the educational opportunities to rise to become symbolic analysts might alleviate some class resentment but does little to promote a decent life for their parents or siblings. In lieu of “social mobility” as a goal, Lasch proposes “the democratization of competence.” Once America had become a mostly industrial and urban society with a capitalist economy, it faced a “troubling contradiction between egalitarian ideology and the hierarchical division of labor required by modern industry” (Lasch 1995, 52), which Conant promised to resolve through more specialized education. When Lasch searches for the language of social mobility in the self-descriptions of antebellum America, he finds instead a claim that both Democrats and Whigs cherished: that every citizen was both a laborer and a producer. Americans contrasted themselves favorably to the hierarchical societies of the Old World, but “the force of the contrast depended on the claim that most Americans owned a little property and worked for a living, not that it was easier for Americans to start from the bottom and rise to the top” (Lasch 1995, 57).⁷⁵ In this era, the American conceit was that no segment of society should suffer “exclusion from civic life, from the world of learning and culture” (Lasch 1995, 57). Everyone was expected to have a measure of independence and to have an opinion on civic life, so that there was no passive mass, whether proletarian or peasant.⁷⁶ “Citizenship appeared to have given even the humbler members of society access to the knowledge and cultivation elsewhere reserved for the privileged classes,” because the polity would suffer if its citizens did not grasp affairs of state (Lasch 1995, 59). Lincoln, in tackling the

⁷⁵ See “An Address by Abraham Lincoln Before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, September 30, 1859”: “The prudent, penniless beginner in the world, labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land, for himself; then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him.”

⁷⁶ This “producerist” ethic that Lasch praises reappears as the “contributory” ethic in Michael Sandel’s account of the common good.

Southern “Mudsill” apology for slavery head-on, had to make the case that a democratic society would enable everyone to own some measure of property and to acquire a dignified independence.⁷⁷

Lasch summarizes Young’s *Rise of the Meritocracy* as having accurately predicted that “by imperceptible degrees aristocracy of birth has given way to an aristocracy of talent” (1995, 42). The futurist Britain’s transformation into meritocracy depended largely on socialist (or social-democratic) efforts and arguments to lay the groundwork, such as “[by] encouraging large-scale production, by criticizing the family as the nursery of acquisitive individualism, and, above all, by ridiculing hereditary privilege” (1995, 42). Yet although meritocracy may despise the aristocrat’s often-absurd and irrational attachment to family, meritocracy cannot truly eliminate pride but rather gives it a new basis: pride in one’s personal achievement and productivity. Lasch writes scornfully,

Although hereditary advantages play an important part in the attainment of professional or managerial status, the new class has to maintain the fiction that its power rests on intelligence alone. Hence it has little sense of ancestral gratitude or of an obligation to live up to responsibilities inherited from the past. It thinks of itself as a self-made elite owing its privileges exclusively to its own efforts (1995, 39).

Here Lasch suggests that all elites derive their legitimacy from some mythic justification that is not entirely subject to rational argument. In the case of the landed nobility of the *ancien régime* the myth had to do with the noble deeds of one’s ancestors in prior centuries. This meant that an honest aristocrat of this type could not claim to have personally worked to climb to his high perch, no matter how personally virtuous or wise he might be. Inheritance also created certain incentives for restraint and caution, since the logic of an aristocratic family’s tie to previous generations and anticipation of future ones is to preserve and pass down the family’s goods.⁷⁸

Lasch boldly indicates that the contemporary elite’s justifications of merit and social mobility are in turn their own kind of self-serving myths. It is well-known that winners in the meritocracy often

⁷⁷ See “Lincoln’s Milwaukee Speech.”

⁷⁸ *Democracy in America* (2010, II.III.8).

benefit from inherited wealth and other childhood advantages, but this could be dismissed as a short-lived relic of an imperfectly-meritocratic past. But the phenomenon of assortative mating between meritocrats, perhaps relatively new in Lasch's time but clearly discernable a quarter-century later, poses a more fundamental challenge: it means the divide between highly intelligent and educated professionals and their fellow citizens is likely to deepen over time.⁷⁹ Yet the ideology of "social mobility does not undermine the influence of elites; if anything, it helps to solidify their influence" by rendering it invisible and apparently harmless (1995, 41). Lasch goes further to claim that "it merely strengthens the likelihood that elites will exercise power irresponsibly, because they recognize so few obligations to their predecessors or to the communities they profess to lead" (1995, 41). The dominant motif in the *bildungsroman* that constitutes the interpretative framework of these elites' lives is that of escape from the oppressive and stifling local community to a life of fulfillment and achievement in a global metropolis. Being a prominent citizen of one's humble hometown is much less attractive, but the consequence is that talented people exit whole swathes of the country, leaving old mill towns to decay. Lasch notes that "the very definition of meritocratic success" has become "escaping from the common lot" (1995, 41). Perhaps the meritocratic myth requires a benighted, parochial hometown to be left behind during the quest for better and brighter things.

Lasch summarizes his indictment of the contemporary elite by saying, "An aristocracy of talent—superficially an attractive ideal, which appears to distinguish democracies from societies based on hereditary privilege—turns out to be a contradiction in terms: **the talented retain many of the vices of aristocracy without its virtues**" (1995, 44, emphasis mine). Lasch lays out some of the bad consequences for the classes below the meritocrats. The elites "cannot be said to subscribe to a theory of noblesse oblige, which would imply a willingness to make a direct and personal contribution to the

⁷⁹ As one example in a large economic literature, see Greenwood, Nezih Guner, Georgi Kocharkov, and Cezar Santos's "Marry Your Like: Associative Mating and Income Inequality" (2014).

public good. Obligation, like everything else, has been depersonalized” (1995, 45). They do pity the poor (the poor without the means to work, who are viewed as victims, as opposed to the working poor, who are viewed as failures), but caring for the poor becomes the task of the state, and the cost falls heavily upon the working and middle classes. This arrangement, of course, prepares the tinder for a populist inflammation. For Lasch, this would constitute a predictable reaction to “the revolt of elites against the constraints of time and place” (1995, 47) by those who are painfully, continually conscious of these embodied limits because they work with their hands. Lasch returns to the central theme of *The Culture of Narcissism* by stressing the impotence of the oft-invoked therapeutic rhetoric and techniques to heal this breach. Falling out of the meritocracy, or failing to gain access to it in the first place, is experienced as a profound loss of self-worth. Therapies “seek to counter the oppressive sense of failure in those who fail to climb the educational ladder even while they leave intact the existing structure of elite recruitment—the acquisition of educational credentials” (1995, 44). Lasch argues that credentialed psychologists have become a means of social control due to their influence in primary education. This account of the bad consequences of meritocracy for the lower classes includes an observation adapted from Young’s history of the Labour Party: that “it drains talent away from the lower classes and thus deprives them of effective leadership” (Lasch 1995, 44). Ambitious young people from the working class, who might have become capable of representing their communities based on firsthand knowledge of their concerns, instead have their tastes and loyalties transformed by the educational system and align with a different set of interests. In another argument that seems to anticipate contemporary rhetoric around nationalism and cosmopolitanism, Lasch notes that “the weakening of the nation-state” (1995, 48) is the underlying factor in popular disaffection with the elites. That political form, he notes, has risen and fallen with the middle class. “Middle-class nationalism provided a common ground, common standards, a common frame of reference without which society dissolves into nothing more than contending factions” (1995, 49). Nationhood is not

the only possible scale for solidarity, but Lasch holds it to be the one most proven in the recent past.⁸⁰ *The Revolt of the Elites* might thus be called “the secession of the elites,” since Lasch’s deepest accusation is that meritocrats have come to no longer view themselves as part of the same political project with those who serve them.

Laschian Democratic Education

The Revolt of the Elites’ positive vision is a qualified endorsement of nationalist populism and an educational program for American democracy. But, even as Lasch recognizes the importance of elites, he neglects elite education. Though contending that populism represents a more serious politics than bland communitarianism, he shares much of the communitarian critique of liberalism. Liberalism he defines by two central concepts, “its commitment to progress and its belief that a liberal state could dispense with civic virtue” (1995, 93). Communitarianism is interested in “sources of social cohesion” whereas populism is “rooted in the defense of small proprietorship” (1995, 93). He thinks both are right to reject the idea of a good society without good individuals, and notes that liberalism must take for granted the pre-existing role of private associations in fostering virtue: “Even liberal individuals require the character-forming discipline of the family, the neighborhood, the school, and the church” (1995, 97). He accuses the communitarians of effectively only criticizing liberal individualism in its capitalistic form, but of not being willing to oppose the sexual ethics focused on satisfying the desires of adults at the expense of children that results in undermining families and social solidarity from a different angle. The result in practice is a politics of indulgence of vice followed by condescension towards its consequences. But ideally “civic life” in a democracy “depends not so much on compassion as on mutual respect” and on adherence to “exacting and impersonal standards impartially applied” (1995, 104). Lasch’s conclusion in favor of populism stems from his view that it represents a politics

⁸⁰ Lasch’s moderate, historically-rooted nationalism recalls the definition of a nation as a “spiritual principle” given by Ernest Renan in *Qu’est-ce qu’une Nation?* (2009).

of mutual respect and of widely dispersed competence, as opposed to one in which carers and managers assuage the wounds of victims without a stake in their own futures. He fears that America is becoming what Richard Rorty called for in “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism,” a world in which people associate in private life and in public need share only a thin agreement on the rules of the marketplace.⁸¹ For Lasch, “Urban amenities, conviviality, conversation, politics—almost everything, in short, that makes life worth living” are absent from Rorty’s vision (1995, 127). Siding instead with John Dewey’s identification of democracy with constant argumentation as citizens revise their views together, Lasch calls democracy “the most educational form of government” (1995, 171).

Could formal schooling, beyond civic experience, contribute to this populist educational vision? Lasch suggests that instilling familiarity with and reverence for great literature and for national myths is part of the answer, while he extends the attack on elite anti-elitism from *The Culture of Narcissism*. He finds the conservative critique of academia, as represented by Allan Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind* and Roger Kimball’s *Tenured Radicals*, far too shallow.⁸² For Lasch the real betrayal in higher education lies not in relativism or Marxism but in the broad consensus against investing in liberal arts education. Not only has a bachelor’s degree become prohibitively expensive for many, pushing students into pre-professional majors, but the academic gate-keepers of culture have become overly focused on promoting pluralism at the expense of transmitting a common cultural tradition. This is bewildering to their fellow citizens. For ordinary Americans, Lasch claims, “Talk of pluralism and diversity provides no comfort when young people can’t seem to learn how to read or write, when they graduate with no more than a smattering of culture, when their stock of general knowledge grows more meager every day, when they can’t recognize allusions to Shakespeare or the classics or the Bible

⁸¹ Richard Rorty, “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism” (1983).

⁸² *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) and *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Higher Education* (1990).

or to their own country's history" (Lasch 1995, 179). As throughout the book, Lasch assumes that the best of the American tradition has lain in its conviction that ordinary people are capable of things like appreciating great literature which, pre-1776, were assumed to be only in the purview of elites. But "the historic mission of American education, the democratization of liberal culture" (Lasch 1995, 177), long understood as emancipatory for downtrodden groups, is being abandoned. Lasch's greatest worry is that the new mission of the university, in effect, has become to please the immanent self, which assesses the value of an object of study in terms of its 'relatability' to its own experience. "Most of the shortcomings of our educational system can be traced, in one way or another, to the growing inability to believe in the reality either of the inner world or of the public world, either in a stable core of personal identity or in a politics that rises above the level of platitudes and propaganda" (Lasch 1995, 186). This the nightmare of Book VIII of the *Republic*, the democratic soul completely in the present moment, cut off from both history and eternity.

Lasch wants to offer a simultaneously aristocratic and democratic vision of American higher education, one that makes a deeper commitment to leavening the common vocabulary and sparking the imagination of all through references to great and difficult texts. He therefore attempts to give a sense of what a reformed (in the root sense of re-molded, formed by other means) elite might look like. Posing to himself the question of whether democracy is itself a worthy goal, he gives a qualified answer that seems, on the face of it, more aristocratic than egalitarian: "Democracy is not an end in itself. It has to be judged by its success in producing superior goods, superior works of art and learning, a superior type of character" (Lasch 1995, 86). He acknowledges that there is an apparent difficulty with this aspirational standard: democracy is impatient with, perhaps even envious of, anyone and perhaps even anything set above it.⁸³ To compensate for this weakness, he invokes Walt Whitman's

⁸³ Lasch does not elaborate here, but it seems that in principle democratic culture could distinguish between hierarchies of people and of works; if Elon Musk is set above me, my egalitarian

call in *Democratic Vistas* for an epic poetry appropriate to democracy, one that is capable of celebrating the whole people and calling upon them to achieve great and heroic deeds. Such a poetry is not uniquely American; Thucydides' Pericles sought to elicit a common love of the city in his fellow Athenians and in the nineteenth-century George Grote's *History of Greece* presented the whole people of Athens as a heroic protagonist and greatly inspired John Stuart Mill's vision of democracy.⁸⁴ Although Lasch acknowledges that it is far from literally true that all human beings have equal political capacity, Lasch echoes Dewey in suggesting that all can be raised higher by putting faith in a democracy of virtue: "It is citizenship that confers equality, not equality that creates a right to citizenship," so that "universal citizenship implies a whole world of heroes" (Lasch 1995, 88).⁸⁵ Lasch acknowledges the Rawlsian liberal worry about this perfectionist approach of "models of heroism 'common to all'" will "threaten the pluralism of ethical commitments that democracy is obliged to protect" (1995, 87). But sharing a social world together involves having common standards of good and bad ways of life, so that "the suspension of judgment" Rawls calls for "logically condemns us to solitude" (1995, 87). This sharing is the *sine qua non* of democracy, because "societies organized around a hierarchy of privilege can afford multiple standards, but a democracy cannot" (1995, 87). Lasch seems to share in large measure the Jeffersonian ideal of natural aristocracy which concluded the first chapter of this dissertation: a regime that shares values, is committed to the independence of each citizen, and also raises up and celebrates greatness wherever it arises. Such a vision of republican mimesis probably is capable of calling forth enormous efforts from the whole population in moments of crisis, as in the American armament after Pearl Harbor. But Lasch does not draw the apparent conclusion: if the

sensibilities are rightly offended, but if *Hamlet* is set next to my own scribblings, I would have to be very blinded by envy indeed not to acknowledge its superiority.

⁸⁴ Mill, "Grote's History of Greece," (1978).

⁸⁵ A popular vision of this democratic heroism is found in the 1989 film *Glory*, which portrays the 54th Massachusetts regiment in the American Civil War.

people need admirable exemplars of greatness to model themselves after, they will need specific persons to be trained to exhibit greatness.

Merit and the Common Good in Sandel

Whereas Lasch levels a broadly right-communitarian set of charges against meritocracy, the most familiar critiques since his death in 1994 approach it from the left to focus on the problem of equity. The typical claim does not deny the desirability of meritocracy in the abstract, but argues that due to historical disadvantage not all individuals are beginning from the same position, and therefore that redress of past injustices must precede the functioning of meritocracy. The Iraq War and the 2008 financial crisis have since heightened scrutiny for meritocracy. Military and economic missteps on such a scale provoke the question of whether America and Britain's elite-selection mechanisms even result in competence. The past decade has seen a burgeoning literature on the subject. William Deresciewicz's *Excellent Sheep* (2014) specifically focuses on the shortcomings of the Ivy League-educated as a leadership class, alleging that the entire process through which they acquire their elite credentials tends to produce conformism rather than creativity or vision. Fredrik DeBoer's recent *The Cult of Smart* (2020) is perhaps the most radical: it goes beyond criticizing the graduates of elite schools to claim that the existing mechanisms that rank institutions by prestige or academic rigor are essentially a means of perpetuating class-based injustice. Peter Mandler's *Crisis of the Meritocracy* (2020) gives a new history of the postwar British educational system, coming to conclusions similar to those of Michael Young's prophecy. But perhaps the most philosophically-ambitious and politically-insightful recent attack on meritocracy is Michael Sandel's *The Tyranny of Merit: Whatever Happened to the Common Good?* (2020).

As his subtitle suggests, Sandel's deepest objection to contemporary meritocracy is that it has obscured and even threatened the idea of the common good, and he seeks to retrieve this central ideal of classical republicanism. The book opens by describing the sense of elite corruption brought to the

fore by the Ivy League admissions athletic scandal and the atmosphere of social fracture revealed by a Covid-19 pandemic in which those who could work from home endured in relative comfort but which threatened the very livelihoods of those who must work in person. Thus far, his argument has much in common with Lasch's. Also like Lasch, Sandel takes the problem to be not the imperfect or inconsistent realization of the meritocratic promise but its complete triumph. Much of the book builds on Young's prophecy to describe meritocracy as cruel to winners (who become constantly anxious, habituated to view all of life as a competitive struggle for position) and to losers (who learn to feel their moral worth as compromised by their poor results). "Even in its triumph, the meritocratic faith does not deliver the self-mastery it promises. Nor does it provide a basis for solidarity. Ungenerous to the losers and oppressive to the winners, merit becomes a tyrant" (Sandel 2020, 194). The successful are absolved of a sense of responsibility to those who fail, and neither group feels that their fates are bound up with those of society as a whole. Sandel traces this sorry result to a profound dynamic of liberal philosophy: even though as we have seen neither Hayek nor Rawls meant to identify the wealthy and powerful in society with the morally good, Sandel thinks that they did in effect license an elite sense of superiority. Hayek does this by refusing to interfere with the rewards the market bestows on those whose skills or property happens to be in high demand. Rawls makes a distinction that Sandel finds spurious between "moral desert" to absolute ownership of goods, which he denies, from "claims to legitimate expectations" for an in-practice exclusive use of those goods. For Sandel, both these left- and right-liberals are prone to forget a lesson from classical philosophy expressed by their contemporary Frank Knight, that "the ethical significance of satisfying such wants [as dictate consumption in the market] depends on their moral worth" (Sandel 2020, 138). While no liberal would take their premises to the absurd conclusion that an excellent mafia hit man deserves the exorbitant bounties that accrue to his rare and highly-demanded skill, the private/public distinction that defines liberalism obscures the fact that "the allocation of honor and recognition is a political question of

central importance” (Sandel 2020, 145). On this point, Sandel sides firmly with the classical republicanism of Plato and Aristotle.

Against the egotistical, grasping logic of private merit, Sandel puts forward a principle of allocating social honor according to “contributive justice,” an idea he attributes to Hegel and Durkheim as well as to Pope John Paul II. This holds that we must all work and contribute to the common good in some way, in order to lead flourishing lives of purpose. But it matters that the common good be truly good, not merely a commonwealth of thieves, and accordingly it matters that we each develop our rational faculties in learning to deliberate about it:

“The common good is not simply about adding up preferences or maximizing consumer welfare. It is about reflecting critically on our preferences—ideally, elevating and improving them—so that we can live worthwhile and flourishing lives. This cannot be achieved through economic activity alone. It requires deliberating with our fellow citizens about how to bring about a just and good society, one that cultivates civic virtue and enables us to reason together about the purposes worthy of our political community” (Sandel 2020, 208).

However, this noble classical ideal that Sandel invokes was not egalitarian. In effect Sandel’s account departs from this ideal of “contributive justice” when it comes to the elite. He does mention the hierarchical ancient conception, in which those who do more receive more honor and influence, in order to level a charge against contemporary technocracy: “These traditional versions of political meritocracy—from the Confucian to the Platonic to the republican—share the notion that the merits relevant to governing include moral and civic virtue. This is because all agree that the common good consists, at least in part, in the moral education of citizens. Our technocratic version of meritocracy severs the link between merit and moral judgment” (Sandel 2020, 28). But apart from this acknowledgement that the history of the concept of meritocracy contained a richer definition of the excellent few, every mention of elites or elitism in the book is negative with no discussion of whether a reformed elite would be desirable. Defining the contemporary elite as a technocracy, Sandel claims that “the reign of technocratic merit has reconfigured the terms of social recognition in ways that

elevate the prestige of the credentialed, professional classes and depreciate the contributions of most workers, eroding their social standing and esteem” (2020, 29). He goes further to make one of the claims that opened this dissertation: that technocracy and populism are two sides of the same coin, and both deeply undesirable. As technocracy, by narrowing political debates to disagreements about means and rendering those means intelligible only to a narrow set of credentialed professionals, has played a key role in demoralizing and polarizing twenty-first century politics, it has provoked the rise of populist and demagogic leaders. This failing should be admitted as such by the (mostly progressive) technocratic class: “Facing up to the failures of meritocracy and technocracy is an indispensable step toward addressing that discontent and reimagining a politics of the common good” (2020, 112).

But it is at this point that Sandel should ask whether the common good requires another kind of elite, one that is humane and not simply technocratic. As he turns to an insightful discussion of the shortcomings of the narrow group of selective universities that mostly train the ruling technocrats, he discusses the phenomenology of the process from the applicant’s perspective. A future Ivy Leaguer is usually molded from a young age to acquire the AP classes and extracurricular experiences to be an attractive candidate for the meritocracy, typically acquiring a penchant for intellectual conformity and a sense of self-satisfaction which is cemented by the arrival of admissions letters. While this analysis is convincing as far as it goes, it says little about the content of the elite college curriculum and about what might be positively taught in order to form a better elite. When Sandel does mention the value of humanistic education that aims at culture and character, he suggests that it can be done just as well at a lower and more general level: “Higher education derives much of its prestige from its avowedly higher purpose: ...to prepare them to be morally reflective human beings and effective democratic citizens, capable of deliberating about the common good... But why assume that four-year colleges and universities have, or should have, a monopoly on this mission?” (Sandel 2020, 192). This deflationary move leads to a deflationary conclusion: the main reform to the status quo that he suggests

is a lottery system that would allocate places at Harvard, Stanford, and other elite colleges by random selection among all those high school seniors who pass a minimum academic qualification standard.

As a diagnosis of the failures in the current system that legitimates and selects the American elite, Sandel's book compels, but I find his prescriptions lacking in two important respects. First, he fails to consider whether the criteria of "merit" used in college admissions today actually reflect excellence. Heavy reliance on standardized testing as a way to gauge the raw intellectual ability of applicants has led to a discomfort with attempts to evaluate the character of applicants (despite the inclusion of extracurricular activities that supposedly signal altruism to the admission equation), and to discomfort with expecting any shared canon of cultural reference points before college level. This sense of an ethical vacuum provokes a backlash in the form of ideological activism. The result is that admits and even graduates of elite colleges may be endowed with remarkable intellectual gifts but remain relatively ignorant beyond their narrow field of specialization, failing to become capable of leadership roles in culture and politics.

Secondly, and more fundamentally, Sandel considers the definition of merit insofar as he follows Rawls in insisting that we must deconstruct the habit of conceiving of the inherited talents and abilities, and even of most good habits acquired in childhood, as to the moral credit of individuals. He identifies this mode of thinking as Pelagian, and observes that the Augustinian critique of Pelagius could in the past provide intellectual resources for a vision of society based on mutual dependency, with mercy a duty of the well-endowed towards the less fortunate. But he seems to think that, in our secular age, it does not matter which alternative view we substitute for the Pelagian one. Whether we believe Augustine is right that our abilities are free gifts of God, or whether we hold instead that the uneven distribution of human talent is a hardwired product of blind chance in a meaningless universe, Sandel assumes that we can get the same result: a society with a sense of solidarity in which the strong feel obliged to protect the weak. I am less confident; I fear that exploding the myth of merit without

having a replacement account of the equal dignity of all human beings despite our different gifts risks reviving social Darwinism. From the perspective of someone with exceptional endowments, to believe that those abilities stem from God's grace and that "from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded,"⁸⁶ constitutes a good reason for her to behave as a steward of her gifts, using them humbly and justly, keeping the common good and her duties to the weak in view. But between believing that she has personally earned her powers and taking them to be the result of nature's determination, it doesn't seem like either one would make a difference in terms of a felt sense of duty (though the personal-earning view might lead to a claim of rights that others in society should recognize). The likely result of carrying either view to its logical conclusion throughout society seems like the revival of an elite based on Nietzschean *libido dominandi*, one of the types of elitism surveyed at the outset of this chapter.⁸⁷

Furthering Sandel's admirable project would involve building from his own starting point, the observation that the liberal tradition is blinded by its inability to recognize the centrality of the allocation of honor to politics. It would involve honoring and cultivating true excellence (not merit), defined as the capacity to contribute to the common good, and teaching those few of superlative excellence to view their gifts as intended for the service of their fellow citizens with whom they share a common fate. This would require reopening the theological debates of the early-modern period that gave rise to liberalism in the first place. Pierre Nicole, the Jansenist theologian who influenced Pascal, offers an illustration of the political potential of the Augustinian view in his 1696 essay "Of Grandeur."

⁸⁶ Luke 12:48, NRSV.

⁸⁷ Joshua Mitchell in his recent book *American Awakening: Identity Politics and Other Afflictions of Our Time* (2020) worries that some on the political Right, frustrated with being accused of being irredeemably guilty for past evils, will dismiss the concept of guilt altogether and assert simply that the strong do what they can while the weak endure it. "I wish to save the category of transgression, in all its depth, and I fear that both identity politics and the Alt-Right will end up stripping the category of its profound Christian significance, which will deprive us of hope" ("Preface," paragraph 13).

Asking why the great are accorded deference, he replies that it is not due to their inherent moral superiority. This is good, because if greatness was perfectly correlated to merit it would destroy all social peace:

“If one became Great only by desert, the height of the great would be a continual noise in our ears, that they were prefer'd to the prejudice of others, whom we fancy more deserving than they ... But thus joyning Greatness with Birth, the pride of inferiours is allaid, and Greatness itself becomes a far less eye-sore. There is no shame to give place to another, when one may say, 'Tis his Birth I yield to. This reason convinces the mind without wounding it with spight or jealousie. ... Another advantage that accrues from this establishment is, That Princes may be had without pride, and Grandees found that are humble. For it gives no occasion of pride to continue in the rank where God's Providence has plac'd us, provided we use it to the ends he prescribes... But how hard is it to be humble when we consider that our rise is the fruit of our labours, and reward of our merits; when we have anticipated it by our desires, procured it by our address, and have some reason to believe it is our due” (Nicole 1696, 25-6).

In a move reminiscent of Young's discussion of the brilliant gardener and the dull-witted squire who employs him, Nicole specifies the twin evils characteristic of social hierarchy: “shame” on the part of the disadvantaged, and “pride” on the part of the privileged. Yet he considers hierarchy inevitable, and even desirable, in so far as it provides social order, and it is tolerable as long as a belief in divine providence is shared by both the greater and the lesser. Without such a theological lubricant, it is difficult to imagine how inequality can be prevented from chafing. Eric Nelson's analysis of Rawls as attempting to weld Pelagian (liberal) conclusions onto Augustinian premises should lead us to question whether Sandel's attempt to get the fruits of Nicole's beliefs without their roots can succeed.⁸⁸ As Nelson asks, “Can we be a ‘dignitarian’ liberal,” i.e., one who values individual autonomy and free choices, “and an anti-Pelagian,” i.e., one who holds us to be bound to unchosen duties of solidarity based on our common human condition, “at the same time?” (Nelson 2019, 70). Simone Weil answered in *The Need for Roots* (2001) that the real solution was to hold elites in higher honor but also

⁸⁸ See Nelson's *The Theology of Liberalism: Political Philosophy and the Justice of God* (2019).

to punish them more severely for any misuse of their high position—a move to thinking about justice as proportional, rather than strictly equal.

The implications for contemporary civic life of the Pelagian origins of modern meritocracy in contrast to the prior ideology of grace are profound. Pelagianism, the belief that through their own good actions human beings can merit salvation, instills pride. And pride is surely the worst vice possible in those who are to wield disproportionate influence over their fellow citizens. A system that ascribes **moral** worth, a greater sense of personal dignity or value, to those who are more highly intelligent and skilled at the verbal and mathematical puzzles of the SAT, is surely perverse. For one thing, this represents a shockingly narrow definition of excellence: the language of desert, which is drawn from the sphere of distributive justice, which is only a part of one virtue, eclipses the demanding breadth and depth of the complete ethical life. This excellence is also narrow in another dimension: it tends to produce technocracy rather than aristocracy because it promotes based on a capacity to deploy means rather than to achieve ends. Understandably, this is in part because a liberal society is reluctant to promote any particular view of our common ends given its fear of disagreement on such questions, and in part because the history of exclusion at elite institutions makes those institutions fear to use anything that seems like a judgmental criterion.

Liberal Education as Antidote to the Democratic Soul

If these three indictments of meritocracy are correct in attributing a very serious psychological deformation to it, we must ourselves whether the composite case for liberal education that Plato, Tocqueville, and Babbitt make can avoid deforming psyches in its own way. In particular, the Pelagian temptation to pride and maybe even tyrannical ambition seem particularly likely with an aristocratic education. A little philosophical learning is more likely to produce an Alexander than another Aristotle. To assess this question, it is important to revisit the psychology that our three theorists want to avoid, and that they associate with a kind of democratic education. The democratic soul as they describe it

suffers from a kind of flatness, making it unable to create a ranked hierarchy of its priorities. Plato's description is the most thorough and the most interlinked with his overall argument about the nature of politics, because the city-soul analogy as he develops it presumes that each regime has its corresponding psyche. The democratic soul is described as in constant danger of degenerating into a tyrannical one. A tyrant is dominated by his unnecessary appetites, unable to place limits on what he desires. To the extent that his reason still operates, it is only an instrument, choosing clever means to pursue ends that the appetites have set. But the democratic person is already on the verge of becoming like this. His is the life of a dabbler or a dilettante, apparently harmless, but marked by no serious commitment or discipline. "He also lives along day by day, gratifying the desire that occurs to him... And there is neither order nor necessity in his life, but calling this life sweet, free, and blessed, he follows it throughout" (Plato 2016 561c-d). Not only does he feel no shame for this, but he actually celebrates this mode of life.

The Tocquevillian analogue to the negative democratic psyche is more self-enclosed than Plato's self-satisfied character, though he similarly does not submit to the authority of any way of life or principle that is higher than himself. This self is not in danger of becoming tyrannical (though it can allow tyranny to arise) because it is so apolitical, concerned much more with the private diversions and anxieties of family and commercial life than it is with public affairs. Smallness of heart is a bigger problem than overwhelming *thumos*. Democratic man is too easily satisfied, not insatiable. This portrait may help justify Lasch's claim that elites in democracy more tend to become narcissistic than hubristic. Tocqueville suggests that this narcissism goes together with a pragmatism in the "philosophical method of the Americans" (2010, II.I.1) The American disposition is both to turn away from locating the source of Being in anything transcendent, "to seek by yourself and in yourself alone the reason for things," and also to "conclude that everything in the world is explicable, and that nothing goes beyond the limits of intelligence. Thus, [Americans] readily deny what they cannot understand" (2010, II.I.1).

This dual tendency in Tocqueville finds a parallel in Babbitt's negative depiction of the "humanitarian" spirit he believes dominates higher education. It is simultaneously derived from a Rousseauian "sentimentalist" conviction that human beings are inherently benevolent and from a Baconian "naturalist" enthusiasm for using the world to accomplish human ambitions. Thus the humanitarian, who is Babbitt's equivalent of the democratic soul, now raised to the level of a self-conscious and ideological attitude, values sympathy for others and practical efficiency as the two chief virtues. Education that aims to form humanitarians is not worthy of the name "education," for Babbitt. He calls it "training for service and power" (Babbitt 1971, 329). But the problem with accumulating power to alleviate human suffering and unleash human potential is that it has no standard for how human beings ought to live and no vision for what they ought to seek in life. To treat physical suffering as the *summum malum* is thus ultimately the defining characteristic of the democratic soul, for Babbitt.⁸⁹

As a particularly forceful and thorough defender of the democratic soul as not just an innocent phenomenon but in fact one that should be the goal of higher education in democratic society, John Dewey helps reveal how openness can decay into narcissism. The educated person according to Dewey should partake of "an expansion, not a contraction," of everyday life (Dewey 1930, 266). She should not experience labor and leisure as separate parts of life, but instead creativity rather than a dead routine should characterize them both. So Plato's democratic soul, which does not have one fixed way of life or profession, could be considered ideal for a world in which all citizens must be equal before the law, capable of ruling and being ruled in turn, never coming to identify themselves entirely with a given role in society. To be "vitaly social," life in a given community must be "vitaly shared" (Dewey 2009, 13), which militates against firm distinctions. So Dewey would certainly concede

⁸⁹ Judith Shklar's argument in "The Liberalism of Fear" (1989) that liberalism views suffering as the *summum malum* and cruelty as the greatest vice echoes Babbitt's, even if identifying this priority with liberalism versus with democracy has somewhat divergent implications.

that the meritocrats Lasch describes are not normatively desirable as the products of higher education in democracy. The deeper problem is that Dewey's educational philosophy, which makes scientific experimentation the paradigmatic case of knowledge, tends to produce specialists unmoored from the cultural tradition that could anchor them in the broader community. For science without self-knowledge becomes a powerful tool to etch one's will on the blank slate of the world. And Dewey's response to Babbitt, that a person who has received a liberal education in his sense of imbibing vicarious experience through a prescribed curriculum of great texts must become a narrow and closed mind, misunderstands the relevant sense of breadth and narrowness. A liberally-learned person fulfilling their role in society might be a journalist, then editor of a newspaper, serve on a government committee, and leave public service to teach the next generation in academia. In each of these institutions she will likely occupy different positions in the internal hierarchy. But the furniture of the mind and the coherence of character that her education instilled should remain with her throughout life, providing a unity of vision in her many different projects and permitting her to act with integrity. This is closer to Plato's philosopher than to his democratic dilettante.

Conclusion: From Merit to Excellence

Taken together, our three analysts of meritocracy agree on much that is wrong with the body politic, and even their areas of disagreement are illuminating. Young, Lasch, and Sandel are each right to indict educational meritocracy, though they do not do enough to distinguish what passes for merit from true excellence. Young and Lasch are right to stress that removing the top fraction of intelligent students to a few universities deprives rural communities and working-class neighborhoods of leaders who understand their concerns. Young and Sandel are right that eliminating the element of gift and chance from social life would have the devastating consequence of making the poor and weak despise themselves for their disadvantaged lot. Lasch and Sandel are right that the common good has come to seem an unserious ideal as common experience and common language less and less bind together

the highly- and lowly-educated. But while Young and Lasch both compare meritocratic elites unfavorably with the hereditary nobility of past ages, and while Sandel points to classical republicanism as a way out of the dilemma created by liberalism's success, none of the three directly tackle the classical question of what kind of elite is necessary and how it might be formed.

This chapter has sought to make apparent that the *de facto* prevailing categories and criteria in American academia are confused. We wish simultaneously to be selective while being inclusive; we wish to reward the deserving and yet struggle to define excellence. Yet all agree that there is in effect some relationship between intellectual prowess and influence in society. And most agree in practice that this greater respect for ability is desirable in common-sensical situations. No one would object morally if, when my mother is stricken ill, I were to seek out the best doctor I can possibly afford, with all other considerations falling by the wayside. Similarly, when the head of state is struck down by an assassin's bullet, we immediately spend public money to find the very best medical team to treat him. I think our simultaneously intuitive acceptance of meritocracy and our reflective discomfort with it reflect the fact that we have not sufficiently thought through the Platonic inheritance in academia. It was Plato, after all, who seeded the idea that wisdom should rule, and who used the knowledge of doctors as the paradigm of authoritative knowledge that deserves to be heeded. But he also made distinctions that are vital for our current predicament: for him, there was a great gulf between *techne*, the kind of skill which finds a solution to a given problem, and *phronesis*, which requires knowing not just what the right thing to do in a given situation is, but also what is worth seeking to do in the first place. What we seek in an elite is presumably not only doctors but also excellent leaders. This quality is importantly related to, but not identical with, being excellent human beings (especially because making the latter criterion runs the risk of promoting the prideful sense that one truly is more valuable than others, and thus recreating the Pelagian danger). Ideally honor and social position would accrue to those best capable of leading others toward good ends. Although Lasch and Young are correct that,

to some extent in some of its members some of the time, the hereditary aristocracies of the *ancien régime* did instill a certain sense of humility in the elite by making them aware of the un-earned nature of their position, meritocracy does seem to achieve a higher average standard of competence among members of the elite. The question is, can education continue to ensure competence and allow for that competence to rise from throughout the social body, including from those typically excluded, while instilling in the elite a dedication to greatness, noblesse oblige, and the common good?

CHAPTER 6: Pedagogy Beyond the Cave: Seeking Magnanimity in Meritocracy

“The university, like the priest, leads those who place themselves under its influence... to enter into close communion with their own souls.”¹

Introduction: Arendt on Authority and Knowledge

In 1954, Hannah Arendt claimed that authority was gone from the modern world, rendering education incoherent. Defining authority as the ability to influence another’s action without applying either force or rational persuasion, she declared that in the few places where it remained in the contemporary world, it was unintelligible and fragmentary. Neither coercion nor mere counsel, “authority implies an obedience in which men retain their freedom” (Arendt 2006, 105). To be meaningful, authority must be obeyed neither out of fear of punishment nor out of full understanding. Thus an authority can command without dominating, and one subject to an authority can follow without becoming servile. Arendt points out that the encounter with such authority is pervasive and fundamental to human experience, as each of us enters the world in utter dependence and ignorance:

Because of its simple and elementary character, this form of authority has, throughout the history of political thought, served as a model for a great variety of authoritarian forms of government, so that the fact that even this pre-political authority which ruled the relations between adults and children, teachers and pupils, is no longer secure signifies that all the old time-honored metaphors and models for authoritarian relations have lost their plausibility. Practically as well as theoretically, we are no longer in a position to know what authority really **is** (Arendt 2006, 92).

The symbols and metaphors that traditional language uses to refer to relationships of authority—preeminently those of paternity and of education—have become opaque, lacking a clear referent. The pyramid structure that made sense of sacramental kingship in medieval Europe depended upon a vision of the cosmos as an ordered hierarchy that is no longer plausible to most people. Six and a half

¹ William Rainey Harper, “The University and Democracy” (2017, 225).

decades after Arendt's 1950s, which are remembered in the cultural imaginary as a regressive and authoritarian era, what can be said of the status of authority?

Perhaps we should question how and in what sense the authority of a teacher truly is “pre-political.” Plato, to whom Arendt traces a root of the Western concern with authority, intimately interwove educational authority with political, because he makes legislation an act of the intellect dependent on access to the truth beyond the city. “When Plato began to consider the introduction of authority into the handling of public affairs in the polis, he knew he was seeking an alternative to the common Greek way of handling domestic affairs, which was persuasion (*πειθω*) as well as to the common way of handling foreign affairs, which was force and violence (*βία*)” (Arendt 2006, 93). She goes on to note that Plato's images for the relationship of ruler and ruled are never entirely convincingly political. They are drawn from the household—master and slave—or from asymmetrical relationships of expertise—helmsman and sailor, or doctor and patient—or from animal husbandry—shepherd and sheep. “What he was looking for was a relationship in which the compelling element lies in the relationship itself and is prior to the actual issuance of commands” (Arendt 2006, 109). But teacher and student is perhaps the most developed one, because truth is the ultimate criterion of Platonic authority, and therefore those who know the truth are those fit to rule. The many must trust the knowing ones who offer to teach them the truths they cannot grasp directly:

“Very early in his search he must have discovered that truth, namely, the truths we call self-evident, compels the mind, and that this coercion, though it needs no violence to be effective, is stronger than persuasion and argument. The trouble with coercion through reason, however, is that only the few are subject to it, so that the problem arises of how to assure that the many, the people who in their very multitude compose the body politic, can be submitted to the same truth” (Arendt 2006, 107).

How is the philosopher, having clambered out of the cave and gazed upon the forms, to avoid becoming a tyrant like any other, relating to the people through sheer violence in a mode not worthy of being called political? In some way he must teach others to be like him, or at least to acquire some

degree of his knowledge. But if those he teaches are all potentially his equals, his authority lacks stability; if it fulfills its role, it will undermine itself.

A religious sanction to render the polity's founding sacred is, for Arendt, the most successful recipe for stable authority. The Plato of the *Laws* sought to instill reverence for law and sketched an entire educational apparatus around this project. But the Romans actually built a city around such an understanding of authority (bequeathing the term *auctoritas* to the Western vocabulary), lending their constitution a permanently pedagogical cast. While the popular *comitia* could legislate, in practice Senatorial decrees and deliberation with the consuls exercised much greater influence. *Cum potestas in populo, auctoritas in senatus sit* was Cicero's maxim: "Politically, authority can acquire an educational character only if we presume with the Romans that under all circumstances ancestors represent the example of greatness for each successive generation, that they are the *maiores*" (Arendt 2006, 119).² In other words, the Romans adapted the teacher-student relationship to make it a much more resilient image for politics, because the relevant timeframe to acquire an education was not just a single lifetime but the entire history of the Republic. In each generation, the elders became the custodians, handing down what they had received from their forebears. "Those endowed with authority were the elders, the Senate or the *patres*, who had obtained it by descent and by transmission (tradition) from those who had laid the foundations for all things to come, the ancestors, whom the Romans therefore called the *maiores*" (Arendt 2006, 121-2). The most familiar form in which this mode of tradition as authority has a continuing presence in the modern world is that of the Roman Catholic Church; Arendt notes that the Church's self-understanding of apostolic succession and Petrine primacy is an adaptation of Roman political ideals.³

² Arendt quotes *De Legibus*, III.12.38, found in *The Republic and The Laws* (Cicero 2008).

³ But ecclesial authority contains elements of both sides of Arendt's contrast between Platonic authority based on transcendent knowledge and Roman *auctoritas* based on stewardship of a

What is really at stake in the question of authority? If Arendt is right that such an understanding has become inaccessible to us today, have we lost anything of value? It might seem that we have only gained by casting off the shackles of ancient prejudices. But for Arendt there remains the practical problem that little guarantees that the alternative to authority will be consensual deliberation; coercion can always re-assert itself as the currency of political power. A constant negotiation of the fundamental rules under which we live might produce Hobbes' state of nature sooner than Rousseau's, because an authoritative tradition builds a common world and a common language. She concludes:

To live in a political realm with neither authority nor the concomitant awareness that the source of authority transcends power and those who are in power, means to be confronted anew, without the religious trust in a sacred beginning and without the protection of traditional and therefore self-evident standards of behavior, by the elementary problems of human living-together" (Arendt 2006, 141).

A perennial dimension of the problem is rooted in an aspect of the human psyche: its need for models to imitate, for stable reference points, and for implicit norms, none of which the psyche can generate at will. These can structure thinking and action in ways that overcome human isolation, for grounding all authority on the individual's will is a quick road to solipsism. "Authority, resting on a foundation in the past as its unshaken cornerstone, gave the world the permanence and durability which human beings need precisely because they are mortals—the most unstable and futile beings we know of" (Arendt 2006, 94-5). And the most acute need for authority is felt when our own sincerely-held desires are self-destructive or morally wrong.

Arendt worries that in the contemporary reaction against authoritarian politics the very possibility of education has been called into question. It is "characteristic of our own time to want to eradicate even this extremely limited and politically irrelevant form of authority," the authority of the

tradition: The Church claims to guard a tradition of a revelation of divine Truth in the form of a historical person. See Pope Paul VI's *Dei Verbum: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (1965).

teacher (Arendt 2006, 119). Yet the interdependence of educational and political authority is mutual; to sustain the implicit authority of a political tradition requires a common civic education from an early age to revere the founding institutions of the polity.⁴ If such an education is not to be a mere inculturation or indoctrination into the prevailing *nomoi*, it must make some claim to authoritatively transmit the truth, and this puts the question back onto Platonic terrain. Despite the enormous wealth and prestige of the leading institutions of higher education in the United States, it is difficult to deny Arendt's claim that they lack confidence in the authority they wield. Perhaps they even suffer from bad conscience. Though they can shape the standards of education throughout the country and throughout the world, they struggle to justify imposing a mandatory curriculum or to argue that any discipline or mode of reasoning can be superior to any other. To prescribe an ethical perspective to students in the classroom, to hold up a particular way of life to be admired, would cause most instructors deep discomfort. Thus, I contend that Arendt's analysis applied in our time necessitates revisiting the Platonic thesis: To investigate the proper status and role of educational authority is, in a profound sense, to investigate the health of the polity and its regime. If students can learn to defer to the authority of a wisdom beyond their own, perhaps citizens may obey the law even when it conflicts with their own will.

A Synoptic Approach to Liberal Education

In America and throughout the West, liberal education has long been understood to have the civic role Arendt outlines, of instilling reverence for an authoritative tradition. This dissertation began

⁴ See Carlos Alfonso Garduño Comparán, "Arendt and Ricœur on Ideology and Authority" (2014): "Those entitled to engage in discussion as equals have already been submitted to a process of cultural homogenization from childhood. Their education has to have taught them **how the world is**. It seems to me, then, that where we ought to frame the problem identified by Arendt, is in the discussion on the relation between tradition and modernity. Political life, as presented by Arendt, must be bound to a tradition that refers in turn to the legendary time of the foundation of a community of equals that discuss freely, while respecting the plurality of perspectives, in order to achieve a consensus that defines the sense of communal life" (67, emphasis original).

by arguing that the fact that this view has become strange to us impedes our ability to think well about democracy's need for leadership even as complaints against the educated elite multiply in American public discourse. My claim on behalf of liberal education was that it addresses two key weaknesses of democracy: first, its tendency to promote short-term priorities at the expense of taking the long view for the common good, and second, its propensity to foster democratic souls who cannot rank their desires according to a coherent vision. In the work of the most perceptive critics of contemporary educational meritocracy, these deficiencies turn out to be interrelated: American universities certainly excel at producing capable and intelligent graduates, but they do less well at forming souls capable of virtues like self-sacrifice and courage. In fact, the missing element seems to be magnanimity, a quality that would benefit both future members of the elite and those they lead. All of these virtues are hard to sustain in the absence of an authoritative standard of conduct.

Because of my interest in the mixed regime is more to do with the qualities of the soul than with institutional arrangements, the argument has followed the Platonic tradition rather than the Aristotelian. Plato is in the West the originator of the claim that rule and knowledge are related, as well as the original diagnostician and physician of the democratic soul. After reading the *Republic* and the *Laws* as attempts to curb the ambition of talented young students and channel their desires in a more worthy direction, I moved to consider Alexis de Tocqueville's implicit theory of elite education. Even though modern democracy bears little direct resemblance to ancient democracy, with no one more conscious of the contrast than Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* largely seconds Plato's verdict that the dominance of the democratic soul needs to be prevented in order for democracy to endure. But Tocqueville confines himself largely to nourishing the soul's capacity to love greatness, worrying less about the truth-content of education. In the early twentieth century, John Dewey and Irving Babbitt exemplify two different ways of inheriting Plato and Tocqueville's diagnoses in the context of the modern research university. Today we can either follow Dewey's vision of the university as the

embodiment of democracy's promise of constant contestation of all truths, or we can follow Babbitt's model of the university as a source of authority and character formation capable of shaping students to critically engage with the normal definitions of success (the attainment of power, wealth, or pleasure). For Babbitt, as for Tocqueville and Plato, it is impossible to avoid some definition of what is honorable and therefore some kind of elite; but it may be possible to choose which elite will prevail. I argued that the latter view seems more plausible than Dewey's today, and more attractive in an era when universities are under intense criticism for having failed to adequately consider what kind of character they are cultivating in their students. In the decades since Dewey and Babbitt's time, we have yet to land on a satisfactory reconciliation, since we simultaneously laud the excellence achieved through higher education but also resent and fear the power accrued by the winners in the meritocracy. We would do well to reconsider how to educate the princes.

I regard the diagnoses of democracy and the educational prescriptions that this dissertation has considered as synoptic: though certainly not in agreement on all points, they provide a complementary series of lenses through which we can gain a richer view of the challenges of our regime and our time. This final chapter focuses on liberal education itself as the convergence of Plato, Tocqueville, and Babbitt's positive prescriptions. These provide possible remedies for the ills that contemporary meritocracy has unleashed on the body politic, if Young, Lasch, and Sandel are to be believed. In this framework, liberal education becomes a means of drawing the democratic soul out of itself, to dissociate democracy as a regime from the worst tendencies of democratic psychology by cultivating aristocratic souls. This final chapter aims to make more concrete the curricular implications of this vision of education. In America, it would entail at least that the liberal study of the canonical authors of the Western tradition, duly placed in conversation with those of other civilizations, could indeed foster magnanimity and judgment in the leaders that a popular regime needs and often lacks. Although this vision says much about the value of the core humanities disciplines of philosophy,

literature, and history, it is less prescriptive for the social and natural sciences. And this vision relies upon concepts that are perhaps essentially contested: first of liberal education itself, and also of the relationship between moral, intellectual, and civic virtue. Many of the key objections to this project stem from the Rousseauian tradition, which would claim that democracy's leaders require an education that is democratic in spirit. The reader may judge whether the deferential approach taken here, of setting aside contemporary opinion to consider closely the views of great texts of the past, has proven itself compelling. In America, a republic with a strong tradition of praising civic virtue, a vision of a virtuous, educated elite may become increasingly necessary in an era of profound anxiety about our governing institutions. And the American university may need some such account of its purpose, in an era of online education and escalating student debt, in order to justify the prestige of in-person, selective instruction.

Plato's Education by and for Philosophy

How does the Platonic articulation of the psychic vulnerability of democracy and its possible remedies illuminate the task of elite education today? The Socrates of the *Republic* insists that living for the sake of any good lesser than philosophy is in effect to live for death. The problem of democracy lies in its association with flatness of soul—an incapacity to recognize, much less pursue, a due hierarchy of goods. The most striking consequence of this line of reasoning is that the *Republic* suggests not only that the democratic city is vulnerable to a tyrant, but that the democratic soul is very close to degenerating into a tyrannical one. The idea is apparently that, from the disordered and chaotic situation of valuing all desires equally, one comes to value only desires; the love of the freedom to choose becomes the lust for infinite choice itself (561b). In this way the corruption of the democratic soul into tyranny parallels the corruption of the timocrat into his offspring the oligarch, who forgets to value money for what it can do and begins to love it for its own sake. The *Laws*' articulation of the same idea is to describe the spoiled descendants of Cyrus of Persia, the tyrannical heirs of a world-

spanning despotic empire, in parallel with the Athenians of the generation after Pericles who loved freedom so much that they brought the city into disorder (Plato 1980). When the Persian rulers, the heirs of Cyrus, have become corrupted by their bad education and by the lack of restraint on their will, the Athenian Stranger summarizes that “Their own rule becomes an end in itself” (Plato 1980, 697d). Yet a similar confusion of means and ends that can be fatal for the regime is present in Athens: “How greatly inferior freedom from any rule at all is to a measured degree of rule by others” (Plato 1980, 698b). In both cases the rulers (whether monarchy’s kings or democracy’s people) have been fatally mis-taught.

Thus in Plato good education seems to be what moves the good regime from the realm of potentiality (because the good city also needs to be independent, defensible, and prosperous to even have a chance of coming into being) and makes it actual. If the rulers are true philosophers, who know and love the real Good, then the city will be good. Yet it is difficult for human beings to keep their eyes consistently fixed upon the Good; there are always distractions that come our way and provoke deviations. Plato claims that the regime is already foundering when the students reject not just their own particular teachers but the very idea of being taught. But he goes on to indicate that it is not the students themselves who are the source of the corruption: they have had other teachers, who have led them astray.⁶ The historical referent in ancient Athens is probably to be understood as the sophists, so often the explicit targets of Socratic ire in other dialogues. But the larger point seems to be that

⁶ In 561c, the democratic man is described more as resisting the counsel of wise teachers than of following that of the unwise: “He doesn’t admit true speech or let it pass into the guardhouse, if someone says that there are some pleasures belonging to fine and good desires and some belonging to bad desires, and that the ones must be practiced and honored and the others checked and enslaved. Rather, he shakes his head at all this and says that all are alike and must be honored on an equal basis.” In the democratic city, the role of corrupt teachers is more explicit: “the old come down to the level of the young; imitating the young, they are overflowing with facility and charm, and that’s so that they won’t seem to be unpleasant or despotic” (Plato 1980, 563a). Corrupting influences also feature at 560b-e and 572d-e.

human beings are not simply prone to reject the Good from contempt or to flatten their souls from spite, nor are they only malformed by the background civic education of living under democratic institutions. Sometimes it is particular teachers who have the philosophical capacity to know better who malform students through neglect of their duty.

The *Laws* adds a further important criterion for understanding what tends to go wrong with democracy. All politics, for the Athenian Stranger, is founded upon an agreement upon praise- and blame-worthy conduct embodied in the laws and offices of the polity. “A city which is going to be secure, going to prosper, so far as is possible in human affairs, should—no, must—**make a correct allocation of public recognition and disgrace**” (Plato 2016a, 697a). This division forms an essential hierarchy. Even within the categories of praise- and blame-worthy there are proper hierarchies. The actions and virtues having to do with the goods of the soul come first, followed by those related to those of the body. Having material possessions, which are instrumental to the other two, should come last. In this framing, being ruled logically precedes being free and is in fact its condition of possibility. Even at the level of the individual, without a soul capable of *sophrosune*, of moderating its desires, one cannot be called free. This is even more dramatically true at the level of the city. For Plato, democracy tends to obscure this priority for a number of reasons: not only does it place the emphasis on popular freedom rather than on rule, but all value the goods of the body while few consciously place value on the goods of the soul. The worthy mixed regime of the *Laws* constantly works to remind its citizens of the noble and difficult things that would not otherwise be their daily priority. Platonic philosophical education has very high ambitions indeed: it strives to make worthy rulers (because they are knowers) out of those who might otherwise becoming domineering masters (because they are doers).

Democratic Athens' civic education already had the goal of restraining a potentially-domineering elite. But Plato went further, seeking not to instill egalitarianism but a more just hierarchy.⁷

If we do not live in a Platonic regime and are not willing to attempt liberal democracy's overthrow in order to construct one, are we obliged to learn nothing from Plato's critique of democracy? I do not believe so. First, Plato gives us not just the Kallipolis of the *Republic* but also the Magnesia of the *Laws*; this is recognizably and explicitly a mixed regime founded upon aristocratic and democratic elements, not different in kind from some of the actual regimes of the Greek world. This suggests that all regimes, no matter how imperfect, perform some allocation of honor and shame, their laws upholding some ways of life as praiseworthy and shaping their citizens accordingly. Secondly, and more importantly, Socrates himself did not live in a Platonic regime and yet worked to educate his fellow-citizens as best he could in the Athenian democracy where all types of human souls and regimes were to be found. Taken together, these considerations suggest that the attempt to educate the democratic soul is something that Plato thinks can and should be done in actually-existing democracies, and not always under ideal conditions. Yet it is worth noting that Socrates was not simply a humanitarian in Babbitt's sense, attempting to teach everything to everyone at once without any principle of selection. In the Platonic dialogues he is most often portrayed in close conversation with the scions of elite families, working to arouse their ambitions and to channel them away from tyranny or even mere timocracy and towards truly worthy objects. When he confronts Thrasymachus and Callicles, Socrates seems to truly care for these young men and recognizes a kind of potential for greatness in them, which is paradoxically the reason for his trenchant criticism. They are certainly

⁷ See Josiah Ober, "The Debate Over Civic Education in Classical Athens" (2001, 189): "Socrates' criticism of Meletus in Plato's *Apology* sets the stage. In Socrates' argument, because Athens **lacked** a formal system of public education to inculcate excellent values, that is to say a system designed and implemented by competent experts, it followed that no Athenian (except Socrates himself) took any care at all for the improvement of the youth."

concerned about the place of greatness in democratic politics, chafing at the restraints imposed upon by the masses' fear. Both the *Republic* and the *Gorgias* serve in large part as extended arguments for the choice-worthiness of justice for those who could choose otherwise. If philosophy can do this, it can change the trajectory of a soul and perhaps even of a city. There is no reason to think that in a given city there are only souls of the corresponding type, even if they predominate, so that it is eminently reasonable to think it is possible and desirable to have some aristocratic souls sprinkled into a democracy, to leaven it.

As we have seen, not all teachers are capable of seeing such a task to its conclusion, and some are more likely to corrupt than to ennoble the souls of their students. Someone like Socrates is necessary. Teaching is the unstated inciting incident in the Allegory of the Cave; the prisoner has his “bonds and folly” removed in the passive voice and in the past tense; “he is released and suddenly compelled to stand up”, presumably by one who can show him the way to the light (Plato 2016, 515d). “Someone” then tells him that all he saw before was illusion and that now he sees more correctly (515d-e). Such a teacher must seek not just to demonstrate the choice-worthiness of a just life in the abstract; he or she must strive to render it appealing to the student’s heart. Socrates concludes a dialogue consistently skeptical of the power of poetry to deceive with a poetic tale of his own, the Myth of Er. This portrait of the afterlife’s torments reserved for wicked souls is said to reveal “the whole risk for a human being” (Plato 2016, 618c). Therefore Socrates gives an account of the whole purpose of his education: “Each of us must, to the neglect of other studies, above all see to it that he is a seeker and student of that study by which he might be able to learn and find out who will give him the capacity and the knowledge to distinguish the good and the bad life, and so everywhere and always to choose the better from among those that are possible” (Plato 2016, 618c). Socrates’ concluding statement implies that the *Republic* should be read as eminently practical: “If we are persuaded by me, holding that soul is immortal and capable of bearing all evils and all goods, we shall always keep to the

upper road and practice justice with prudence in every way so that we shall be friends to ourselves and the gods” (Plato 2016, 618c).

Does any of Socrates’ high ambition for education apply beyond the contexts of Magnesia and Kallipolis to the contemporary, more modest task of forming leaders capable of counterbalancing some of democracy’s defects while recognizing and affirm its virtues?⁸ A liberal education based on the discussion of difficult and excellent texts—under the guidance of a teacher who embodies the philosophical life and can challenge the student’s assumptions, question her initial answers, and move her to mold herself into a greater and deeper seeker of truth—can indeed lead young people to desire nobler goods than wealth or pleasure. Surely the question of what is worth seeking in life is one of the most appropriate ones possible in a classroom of young people studying the classics of humane letters. Only liberal learning, which treats the student as an end and not as a means, can do this. Pre-professional education cannot pose the question of what ends are worthy of a human life, because pre-professional classes necessarily presuppose the worth of the ends for which they are cultivating the skills. One goes to an accounting class because one assumes that accounting will be useful for some further goal, but one can take a philosophy class without any further end in mind. It is there that (hopefully) the question of the ends worth living for will be posed explicitly. Thus as we have seen, though in philosophical cities like Magnesia and Kallipolis liberal education may have civic value, it is never reducible to its civic purpose, retaining a potential for critical questioning of the regime’s priorities.

Thus this Platonic analysis implies something about the goal of liberal education—to orient the student’s soul towards knowledge of what is really true. It also characterizes a truly liberal

⁸ In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates warns, “Every word, once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself” (Plato 1925, 275d-e).

teacher—as one credibly embodies wisdom and renders it attractive to her students. And it demarcates the content of liberal education—as prioritizing the study of disciplines that foster abstraction and dialectic, chief among which is philosophy. Let us dub this account the **philosophical** one and see how it compares to Tocqueville’s and Babbitt’s.

Poetry: Tocqueville’s Spiritedness

Tocqueville complements and complicates Plato’s analysis by showing that the great weakness of democracy lies less in its Thrasymachean insatiability than in its individualism, a strange kind of over-willingness to be pleased.⁹ This insidious form of individualism Tocqueville analyzes through a tripartite framework he develops from the work of Pascal, Montesquieu, and Rousseau. The fracturing of authority that the democratic age causes can remove the grounds of common belief with one’s fellow citizens. It seems at first glance to be simply another iteration of Pascal’s worry about the frailty of human reason and its ability to arrive at common conclusions.¹⁰ But the implication Tocqueville draws from his reflection on the weakness of our reason is not Pascal’s conclusion that sectarian violence like the Wars of Religion threatens. Instead, he predicts that the American’s reflexive impulse to each be his own Descartes will result in a kind of exhausted isolation, but one that is not necessarily felt as unpleasant, given the material comforts and security also characteristic of democratic regimes. This Cartesian everyman, reminiscent of the kind of “buffered self” Charles Taylor has characterized, tends to rely on public opinion—on the prejudices of millions of his peers—to be able to live tranquilly among them.¹¹ A kind of contented self-absorption accompanies this abdication of the difficult work

⁹ Put another way, the contrast with Plato seems to be that in the *Republic*’s vision of the fall of the democracy, the *demos* seems to be aware that they are raising the tyrant to power and to rejoice in that fact, whereas in Tocqueville the people do not seem fully conscious of the way their actions can contribute to the entrenchment of democratic despotism.

¹⁰ On Tocqueville’s debt to Pascal, see Peter Lawler, *The Restless Mind: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Origin and Perpetuation of Human Liberty* (1993).

¹¹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989, 38, *inter alia*).

of reflecting for oneself, leading to an acceptance of the growing “tutelary despotism” of a state that purports to secure these benefits of private life equally for all. This is a Montesquieuian insight: that the very success of moderate government and commercial society may lead to a self-absorption that undermines freedom. For under such conditions of general comfort, those neighbors who are resented are those who stand out by their conspicuous wealth, or their moral or intellectual quality.¹² Tocqueville does not restrict his analysis of democracy’s faults to practical difficulties, such as the information asymmetries voters face when choosing between national candidates, or the unstable foreign policy that frequent elections and alternations of ruling party can cause. Like Plato, he emphasizes the psychological and moral bases and long-term tendencies of the regime. As much as Tocqueville worries about the restless, striving quality of the soul under modern conditions that Pascal described, he fears the acquiescence of complacency more. It is explicitly one of the tasks of the Tocquevillian legislator to inflame the desire for greatness, to give due scope to ambition: “It is necessary that all those who are interested in the future of democratic societies unite to spread within these societies the taste for the infinite, the sentiment for the grand and the love for non-material pleasures” (Tocqueville 2010, II.2.15). For him the danger is less the reprise of the Wars of Religion than that the very idea of fighting and dying over a theological dispute should become incomprehensible. This apathy seems to stem, on his analysis, from the success of the kind of education in natural religion that Rousseau had designed in the *Emile*.

Even the wealthy and distinguished citizens in a democracy will lack greatness of soul, because their social position is constantly insecure.¹³ “You do not gradually enlarge your soul like your house”

¹² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (2010, I.II.5): “Every day, at the moment when people believe they have grasped complete equality, it escapes from their hands and flees, as Pascal says, in an eternal flight.”

¹³ “What above all diverts men of democracies from great ambition is not the smallness of their fortune, but the violent effort that they make to improve it every day. They force their soul to use all its strength in order to do mediocre things, which cannot soon fail to limit its view and to

is a stinging indictment of the bourgeois' habits of calculation and self-protection. He suggests this is a potentially fatal flaw endemic to democracy. Tocqueville does name one resource, along with the familiar ones of religious practice and the art of association, that can enlarge the soul: a sustained acquaintance with classical literature beginning at a young age: "It is important that those destined by their nature or their fortune to cultivate letters, or predisposed to appreciate them, find schools where they can perfectly master ancient literature and be thoroughly penetrated by its spirit" (Tocqueville 2010, II.I.15). Tocqueville wants elite education to be a profound habituation that will in some measure outweigh the other habits acquired from childhood and professional life. For this purpose, the value of ancient literature lies precisely in its un-democratic character, in its unabashed emphasis on the heroic, the noble, and the proud.

Yet Tocqueville's embrace of the ethos of Greece and Rome is heavily qualified; he retains a sense of horror at the ancients' reflective and principled contempt for the poor, the weak, and especially for those vanquished in war. He finds this contempt to have been just beneath the surface in ancient civic pride, even in the popular regimes of Athens and Rome. He does not seem to have Plato's confidence that liberal education can divert the potential tyranny latent in aristocratic souls toward a philosophical life founded on the true human good. Tocqueville's understanding of what the Christian dispensation changed about the ancient world grounds his inability as a modern aristocrat to endorse the aristocratic cruelty of Rome, and this may also explain his divergence from Plato. Just as, in a world shaped by the doctrine of the Incarnation it becomes impossible to justify viewing whole categories of human beings as inherently less valuable than others, so in a world shaped by the doctrine

circumscribe its power. They could be very much poorer and remain greater. The small number of opulent citizens who are found within a democracy do not make an exception to this rule. A man who rises by degrees toward wealth and power contracts, in this long effort, habits of prudence and restraint which he cannot afterward give up. You do not gradually enlarge your soul like your house" (Tocqueville 2010, II.III.19).

of original sin it becomes impossible to agree with Plato that the human problem is simply one of ignorance, and that with the right kind of education all would be well.¹⁴

Tocqueville's other great departure from Plato lies in his assumption about the default amount of desire present in the human soul. Whereas for Plato desire is always present, frequently overpowering, and what varies is its object, for Tocqueville the soul can become not just qualitatively flatter but also quantitatively shallower. A democratic soul runs the risk of running out of fuel, so to speak—of accepting lower and lower horizons and of reducing its expectations further and further. The chief value of reading the classics consists in their power to draw the student's thoughts away from herself and from the immanent experience of her own life. Hence Tocqueville breaks not just with Plato's prescriptions for education but with Rousseau's: spending one's formative years assimilating ancient literature is not the way of the *Emile*. The primary classical work Emile is assigned is Plutarch, and this is intended to make him pity the great men of the ancient world, not to admire and certainly not to imitate them.¹⁵ But for Tocqueville, *amour-propre* is not the root of all evil as it is in Rousseau, and *amour de soi-même* is not all-sufficient. The rational calculus of "self-interest well-understood" cannot be relied upon to produce the self-sacrifice and the heroism sometimes needed for the polity.¹⁶ While Tocqueville does place some of his hope in Christian charity, he is not above having recourse to the desire for honor and praise in the eyes of others.¹⁷

¹⁴ This is to take at face value the claims of Plato's *Republic*, Book VI, about the identity of knowledge and goodness. One could certainly complicate this account of Plato.

¹⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or, On Education*, (1979, 236).

¹⁶ Many readers of Tocqueville focus too much on the praise of *intérêt bien-entendu* in Volume II, Part II, Chapters IV and V where he praises the American art of association, without recognizing that it is a necessary but insufficient part of the overall picture.

¹⁷ In his response to Rousseau about the place of compassion and charity in human motives, Tocqueville is intervening in the so-called "pure love" debate sparked by François Fénelon's response to the Jansenists. Ryan Patrick Hanley's recent works on Fénelon, both a translation *Fénelon: Moral and Political Writings* (2020a) and an analysis, *The Political Philosophy of Fénelon* (2020b) trace the origins of this debate. See especially Chapter 7, pages 198-237 (2020b).

I dub this Tocquevillian case for liberal education **poetic**, because it is not founded on a philosophic knowledge of truth but on an impulse to live and act magnificently in imitation of an ideal beauty. Tocqueville suggests a kind of agnosticism about the metaphysical realm of Platonic Ideas and of the soul, but real conviction matters less than the appearance of conviction: “The only effective means that government can use to honor the dogma of the immortality of the soul is **to act each day as if they believed it themselves**” (Tocqueville 2010, II.II.15). Plato he describes as preeminent among “those books in which the great principles of the beautiful and the good, as well as the high and salutary themes of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul have penetrated the most profoundly.” The substance of the Platonic doctrines may very well be false, but it is the longing Plato conveys that we need, and this makes him worthy of such a prominent place in the canon:

“Deprive Plato, for instance, of this aspiration toward immortality and the infinite which transports him, and leave him only with his useless forms, his incomplete and often ridiculous knowledge, his eloquence that escapes us at great distance, and he falls into obscurity and becomes unreadable. But Plato addressed himself to the noblest and most persevering instinct of our nature, and he will live as long as there are men; he will carry along even those who half understand him, and he will always be an enormous figure in the world of intellects.”¹⁸

Accordingly, Tocqueville is constantly looking for “sources of poetry in democratic nations” (the title of II.I.17). His definition of poetry is much broader than a mere literary genre; it is “the search for and the portrayal of the ideal” although the goal “will not be to represent truth, but to embellish it and to offer a higher image to the mind” (Tocqueville 2010, II.I.17). Left to itself, democratic poetry tends to produce “gigantesque” celebration of great natural and historical forces. The proper matter of poetry, for Tocqueville is “grandeur,” understood as the aristocratic glory of free individuals making significant choices, as opposed to the democratic inclination to ascribe all causality to fate, to social forces, or to nature.

¹⁸ *Selected Letters on Politics and Society* (Tocqueville 1985, 130).

A poetry of grandeur can find a purchase in democratic rhetoric, Tocqueville holds, for it continues to appeal to the soul. In fact it seems that, in contrast to Plato's skeptical attitude towards rhetoricians, Tocqueville values liberal education in part for its ability to stimulate rhetoric. His account of "Parliamentary Eloquence" is relatively complimentary to both the British Parliament and the U.S. Congress' ability to be the site of grand speeches laying out the great questions of the day. The highest pinnacles of learning among American statesmen are lower than in England, but the minimum expected of all citizens is higher. If "the English orators of the last century constantly quoted Latin and even Greek at the rostrum," "their sons of America quote only Shakespeare, the democratic author par excellence" (Tocqueville 2010, I.I.21). Here we should recall Tocqueville's admiration for the high minimum level of learning attained by American citizens, and the mention of the pioneer heading West with his precious volumes of Shakespeare.¹⁹ The great parallel between Plato's and Tocqueville's schemata is that both portray democracy as on the verge of tyranny, but in Plato's account the collapse of democracy comes about because the people put their faith in a demagogue who promises them all things in accordance with their unrestrained desires, and in Tocqueville's the people submit not to a particular tyrant but to the "soft despotism" of a unitary state that promises security and equality, while stifling higher longings for beauty and grandeur.

Tocqueville's account of the value of liberal education in democracy adds to Plato's the understanding that democracy is a social state as well as a regime. While affirming the regime, he does worry about the effects of the egalitarian social state in extinguishing ambition in the soul, which would in turn have deleterious consequences for the regime. Therefore, the purpose of education is **poetic**, aiming to stir a love of greatness in students' souls. Teachers capable of transmitting such an

¹⁹ "The literary genius of Great Britain still shines its light into the depths of the forests of the New World. There is scarcely a pioneer's cabin where you do not find a few odd volumes of Shakespeare. I recall having read for the first time the feudal drama of Henry V in a log house" (Tocqueville 2010, II.I.13).

education would have to be rhetoricians themselves, in love with the beauty of words and texts, perhaps more like Gorgias than Socrates. The content of this education would be primarily literary. Tocqueville at times seems to dismiss philosophy and history in favor of literature: an array of splendid tableaux, irrespective of whether the arguments made in them are true or whether the events really took place.

What Babbitt Adds: Vicarious Experience and Practical Wisdom

To add our third, complementary perspective on the liberal arts, Irving Babbitt's view of education is based less on the discernment of philosophical truth or on the imitation of a poetic ideal and more on the inculcation of a disposition towards restraint through the assimilation of experience. In Babbitt we hear the voice of a modern college professor seeking to understand the desires and motivations of his students in order to offer them matter for a worthy life. Plato turns to philosophical education to divert human desires to nobler ends than the quest for wealth and power, and Tocqueville trusts that the poetry of the classics will inflame the flickering embers of desire found in a democratic age, but Babbitt's case is **ethical**. This self-restraint is to be derived from the reading texts drawn from millennia of reflection on human experience; dedicating one's youth to this study should instill a sense of being an heir of a tradition much older and richer than oneself. This tradition is at once national (Babbitt thinks of the United States), civilizational (the West) and universal.²⁰ The unifying concern of Babbitt's educational prescriptions across his works is that higher education must be demanding, selective, and dedicated to transcendent standards that can define what each generation must seek to become.²¹ Yet Babbitt does not have much hope that his educated elite will truly be able to reorient

²⁰ Babbitt asserts the fundamental unity of human nature and the recurrence of the essential human questions, leading him to argue for the interconnectedness of the Orient and the Occident. He especially commends the humane learning of East and South Asia as part of the curriculum.

²¹ Beyond shorter essay-length works and polemic texts, Babbitt's most sustained arguments on the nature and purposes of education are *Literature and the American College: A Defense of the Humanities* (1908) and *Democracy and Leadership* (1971).

society away from its obsession with mere celebrity or comfort; he hopes only that they may provide a sage source of criticism.

The central claims of Babbitt's case for liberal learning stem from a critique of two sets of assumptions that he regarded as dominant in the educational theory in his own day and that remain recognizable. One is a tradition he attributes to Rousseau that views natural human desires as fundamentally benevolent, and therefore education as serving only to extract those desires from the corrupting influence of custom: "Virtue is no longer to be the veto power of the personality, a bit and a bridle to be applied to one's impulses, and so imposing a difficult struggle" (Babbitt 1908, 50). These terms for what Rousseau's theory lacks—veto power, bit and bridle, and difficult struggle—are fundamental for understanding what Babbitt seeks for in education. The other damaging tradition, which seeks to empower the human intellect to gain mastery over an inert nature, he attributes to Francis Bacon. Drawing from Henri Bergson, Babbitt conceives of human life as lived in the opposition between two wills or drives, the *elan vital*—which is self-asserting—and the *frein vital*—which is self-denying. But it would be misleading to think that Babbitt conceives of morality as purely negative, since the *frein* does not always deny the desires asserted by the *elan*; it is more like a court of appeals that reviews the inclinations initially submitted to it and sometimes affirms them.²² The humanist, who embodies the product of Babbittian education, "insists that [sympathy] be disciplined and tempered by judgment" (Babbitt 1908, 8) and focuses not on man's "power to act on the world, but his power to act upon himself" (Babbitt 1908, 56). The curricular implication of this humanism is a principle of selection and discipline, as opposed to the elective or consumer principle which would

²² See Eric Adler's helpful treatment of this aspect of Babbitt's anthropology in *The Battle of the Classics: How a Nineteenth-Century Debate Can Help Save the Humanities Today* (2020, 181): "While the term 'inner check' (confusingly) suggests pure restraint, in Babbitt's view it serves more as an ethical compass or means of calibrating moral life, with both a restraining and an affirming component."

valorize the student's individual inclinations. Babbitt insists that education is a domain where to take preferences as given, after the fashion of the economist, does not suffice to determine what goods should be supplied; education inherently works on and shifts the preferences of its consumers. But in an elective system, in which students choose their entire course of study from an indifferent range of options offered to them, Babbitt holds, "the wisdom of the ages is as to be as naught compared with the inclination of a sophomore" (Babbitt 1908, 47). Teaching and learning must therefore be framed and modeled so as to convey a sense that what is being taught is indeed "the wisdom of the ages." One of Babbitt's principal worries is that flattering the student to value his or her own particular experience, as Rousseau counsels, would neglect what is universal and permanent in the human experience. Education should teach the individual man to recognize his belonging to man as such in order to mediate between the universal One and the particular Many.

Thus, like Plato and Tocqueville, Babbitt offers an account of the end of education (perceiving the universal in the particular in order to judge which of our desires need restraining) and its pedagogical mode (deferential to the wisdom of the ages). But unlike them, he treats education's content as primarily a history of experience. The unique benefit that education can bestow at the collegiate level, as opposed to the more passive receptivity of high school or the production of new research possible in graduate school, is what Babbitt calls "reflection" (1908, 100), which is a kind of drinking in of ideas and examples. Reflection is not merely theoretical; it necessarily involves the question of how and to what end to live, so that the student learns to "coordinate the scattered elements of knowledge, and relate them not only to the intellect but to the will and character" (Babbitt 1908, 101). And such a student becomes capable of such reflection by, under the guidance of a true teacher who embodies a hermeneutic of deference, being taken out of himself to enter imaginatively into the places and times of past authors. Babbitt thinks that the student who has the chance to do this will mature beyond the desire to express himself and toward the particularly difficult knowledge,

self-knowledge. Study provides “a humane standard to which he may defer... that will help him to discriminate between what is truly original and what is merely freakish and abnormal in himself and others” (Babbitt 1908, 243-4). In one sense, the disciplinary implications that Babbitt draws from this seem to resemble Tocqueville’s emphasis on the poetic: Literature is the preferred vehicle for this assimilation, even as compared to the other humane disciplines. Babbitt assumes that most students are not capable of reasoning about what is good and choice-worthy in life in the abstract terms of philosophy without the imaginative resources of examples and references that literary characters furnish. Thus, “this humane standard may be gained by a few through philosophic insight, but in most cases it will be attained, if at all, by a knowledge of good literature” (Babbitt 1908, 244). This literature is not simply the purview of a small elite, however; with Tocqueville, Babbitt assumes that literature can be a “unifying element in our national life” (Babbitt 1908, 240) because it appeals to both elites and people, and its beauty is intelligible to those without the privilege of a college education. This implies a duty on the part of the academic elite to respect and study seriously the literature that shapes the culture outside the academy’s walls. In this, too, Babbitt resembles Tocqueville’s emphasis on Shakespeare and the Bible as capable of connecting high and low culture, preventing elites from appearing to be mere technocrats incapable of communicating with their fellow-citizens.

But unlike Tocqueville, Babbitt is very modest in his hopes for the leadership role that the products of his prescribed educational system should play in political life, aligning himself more with Plato’s apparent view that democracies resent philosophers. The mimetic aspect diminishes. Whereas Tocqueville calls for those formed in the love of poetry to elevate and ennoble all of democracy by their example and by their deeds, Babbitt seems to hope for not much more than a brake or a check on democracy’s worst impulses, in parallel to his view of the individual soul as a two-story picture, with one’s initial, default desires subject to review by the higher will. This comparison, based on the *élan* and *frein vital*, frames his political argument: “What is specifically human in man and ultimately

divine is a certain quality of will, a will that is felt in its relation to his ordinary self as a will to refrain” (Babbitt 1908, 28). This sets up Babbitt’s claim that regimes should be similarly arranged. There must be a fundamentally democratic base, to allow the popular will to be the initial input into the system, but it must also be suitably restrained by a constitutional superstructure that is administered by a liberally-educated elite capable of restraining the rash tendencies of that popular will. But this is richer than a standard counter-majoritarian institutionalism. Babbitt identifies himself with the Federalist and Lincolnian tradition in American political thought, which he dubs “unionist,” against the radically voluntarist interpretation of popular sovereignty that he associates with contractarian secessionism. “Just as man has a higher self that acts restrictively on his ordinary self, so, [the unionists] hold, the state should have a higher or permanent self, appropriately embodied in institutions, that should set bounds to its ordinary self as expressed by the popular will at any particular moment” (Babbitt 1908, 273). The emphasis here is primarily negative, emphasizing the checking and restraining function of this institutional “higher self,” rather than on the possible value of vision, deliberation, or leadership that constitutional courts or upper houses of legislatures might be able to provide. But, as at the level of the individual’s moral education, his ideal is certainly not negative. Babbitt actually expects this ethos of restraint to be inculcated through a process of successive imitation of higher principles or symbols, which he calls “standards”: “A man needs to look, not down, but up to standards set so much above his ordinary self as to make him feel that he is himself spiritually the under dog. The man who thus looks up is becoming worthy to be looked up to in turn, and, to this extent, qualifying for leadership” (Babbitt 1908, 283). This model bears a real resemblance to Tocqueville’s mimesis, but Babbitt does not seem to expect that one who is worthy to be looked up to will in fact be easily found in democracy.

This humble “spiritual under-dog” leadership, Babbitt makes clear, does not necessarily consist in the holding of formal political office: Socrates the gadfly is its exemplar. The basis of its

authority is educational and its role is largely critical. The educational criterion means that the desired sense of restraint and duty to past and future generations cannot be entrusted to a hereditary aristocratic class, but to individuals from all classes of society who have personally gained a superior education (“Under existing conditions we must get our standards and our leadership along Socratic rather than traditional lines” (Babbitt 1908, 307)). Sociologically, they seem to be taste-shapers in culture and the professions, rather than politicians or businesspeople. Babbitt also calls this elite a “remnant,” in a probable allusion to the Israelites exiled in Babylon. He opines, “If we had a Socratic remnant one of its chief concerns would be to give a civilized content to the catchwords that finally govern the popular imagination. The sophist and the demagogue flourish in an atmosphere of vague and inaccurate definition. With the aid of the Socratic critic, on the other hand, Demos might have some chance of distinguishing between its friends and its flatterers” (Babbitt 1908, 307). The Socratic critic, a member of the remnant, is certainly not one of Demos’ flatterers, but neither is she part of the Demos itself. Will Demos be able to recognize the critic as a true friend, or will it resent the hard questions the critic raises? Practical discernment will be essential in democracy, for both people and elites.

Babbitt’s **ethical** justification for liberal learning as a means of acquiring second-hand experience in order to gain greater prudence offers a profound challenge to university life today. The dominant quality that a teacher in this mode must embody is humility, and the keystone discipline of the curriculum becomes history. Plato stresses abstract study to discern the universal, leading him to subordinate both history and literature to philosophy. Tocqueville, as we have seen, celebrates the poetic power of both literary figures (such as Shakespeare) and historians (especially Plutarch). Curiously, the Tocquevillian argument does not depend on the truth or accuracy of the events described, only on their power to stir a longing for greatness. He thus tends to assimilate all history into literature, which becomes the center of the curriculum. Babbitt’s move is the opposite. The study

of literature is highly valuable for him because he treats it like history, as a record of events in human consciousness which the imagination can enter into.

Curing Narcissism with Magnanimity

With these features of our three core authors in mind, we can more deeply understand Christopher Lasch's account of the "culture of narcissism," canvassed in Chapter 5.²³ Lasch distills much of what is implicit in Plato's analysis of the democratic soul and applies it to the ethos of the contemporary educated elite. His portrait owes a great deal to Tocqueville, whom he cites by name, and even more directly to Ortega y Gasset.²⁴ At one level Lasch's concern is a familiar communitarian one: that the citizen's retreat into private concerns and lack of interest in civic life creates a vacuum to be filled by the administrations of experts. "The atrophy of older traditions of self-help has eroded everyday competence, in one area after another, and has made the individual dependent on the state, the corporation, and other bureaucracies" (Lasch 1979, 37).²⁵ But Lasch takes his analysis to a deeper, psychological register by claiming that this type of citizen is fundamentally narcissistic, one who seeks to **feel better** subjectively without any concern to **become better**.²⁶ Whereas the older "rugged individualist" viewed the world as "an empty wilderness to be shaped to his own design," "for the narcissist, the world is a mirror" (Lasch 1979, 38). In such a world it becomes difficult even to understand the self, much less to explain and communicate oneself to others. The "confessional" (Lasch 1979, 48) genre of memoirs is itself hampered by self-consciousness. The resulting problem,

²³ See *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979).

²⁴ *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (1995) builds its argument from a response to Ortega.

²⁵ Alisdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (1981/2007), Chapters 3 and 8, takes three characters, the Aesthete, Therapist, and Manager, to be representative of a culture with fragmented and incoherent moral traditions, simultaneously emotivist and utilitarian. Along with Lasch, he makes the usual move to link the therapeutic and managerial, even though they seem superficially opposed. See also "Macintyre and the Manager" by Lain Mangham (1995).

²⁶ The paradoxes of a desire to **become better** are traced by Agnes Callard in *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming* (2018).

for Lasch, is that it becomes almost inconceivable “to encourage the subject to subordinate his needs and interests to those of others, to someone or some cause or tradition outside himself” (Lasch 1979, 43). As Lasch makes clear in his inversion of Ortega y Gasset’s argument, these narcissistic attitudes are more characteristic of the well-off and highly-educated, who are conversant in the language of therapeutic and memoir culture, than of the working class. These elites are deeply presentist, concerned only with history insofar as it relates to their immediate experience, while at the same time they have an exaggerated sense of human autonomy from the constraints of place and body. This culture (or anti-culture) of the elite combines “radical ingratitude” with “an unquestioned belief in limitless progress” (Lasch 1995, 40). Self-satisfaction is the pseudo-virtue that this elite models. However, an elite worthy of its role should be marked by its “comprehension of the fragility of civilization” and of “the tragic character of history” (Lasch 1995, 26). The antidote to narcissism among the educated is loyalty and gratitude to the historical tradition that has made contemporary learning possible.

Lasch’s analysis of elite narcissism is integrally related to Sandel and Nelson’s claim that meritocracy is Pelagian. The problem is that Pelagianism, the belief that through their own good actions human beings can merit grace and salvation, instills pride. Pride is a deadly vice in those who are to wield disproportionate influence over their fellow citizens. Yet a system that spends years cultivating those who are most highly intelligent and skilled at the verbal and mathematical puzzles of standardized testing tends to instill an inflated sense of **moral** worth, a greater sense of personal dignity or value, in those who succeed academically. For one thing, this represents a shockingly narrow definition of excellence: the language of earned desert eclipsing the complexity and difficult demands of the complete ethical life. This excellence is also narrow in another dimension: it tends to produce technocracy rather than aristocracy because it promotes based on a capacity to deploy means rather than to achieve ends. Understandably, this dynamic has arisen in large part because a liberal society is

reluctant to promote any particular view of our common ends given its fear of disagreement on such questions, and in part because elite institutions, out of shame for their exclusionary history, fear to appear judgmental.

To understand this paradoxical rapprochement between openness and pride, it will help to reconsider John Dewey's argument. More than just a foil for this dissertation to elaborate Babbitt's views, Dewey is a particularly forceful and thorough defender of the democratic soul as not just an innocent phenomenon but in fact one that should be the goal of higher education in democratic society. The educated person, according to Dewey, should partake of "an expansion, not a contraction," of everyday life (Dewey 1930, 266). She should not experience labor and leisure as separate parts of life, but instead creativity rather than a dead routine should characterize them both. So Plato's democratic soul, which does not have one fixed way of life or profession, could be considered ideal for a world in which all citizens must be equal before the law, capable of ruling and being ruled in turn, never coming to identify themselves entirely with a given role in society. To be "vitaly social," life in a given community must be "vitaly shared" (Dewey 2009, 13), which militates against firm distinctions. So Dewey would certainly concede that the meritocrats Lasch describes are not normatively desirable as the products of higher education in democracy. The deeper problem is that Dewey's educational philosophy, which makes scientific experimentation the paradigmatic case of knowledge, tends to produce specialists unmoored from the shared cultural tradition that could anchor them in the broader community. For science without self-knowledge becomes a powerful tool to etch one's will on the blank slate of the world. And Dewey's response to Babbitt, that a person who has received a liberal education in Babbitt's sense of imbibing vicarious experience through a prescribed curriculum of great texts must become a narrow and closed mind, misunderstands the relevant sense of breadth and narrowness. A liberally-learned person fulfilling her role in society might be a journalist, then editor of a newspaper, serve on a government committee, and leave public service

to teach the next generation in academia. In each of these institutions she will likely occupy different positions in the internal hierarchy. But the furniture of the mind and the coherence of character that her education instilled should remain with her throughout life, providing a unity of vision in her many different projects and permitting her to act with integrity. This is very different from Plato's democratic dilettante.

Outlines of a Curriculum

Is there reason to believe that liberal education can fulfill the difficult demands that Plato, Tocqueville, and Babbitt place on it, in order to address the discontents of our simultaneously populist and meritocratic present? These authors should lead us to believe that to frame liberal education rightly requires more than a specific curriculum; the goals of education and the ethos of the instructor are also essential. To prevent the hegemony of the democratic soul, the curriculum must take students out of themselves and of their own moment in time. This is the difficult work of learning to move outside of oneself towards the text, the **ethical** content of liberal learning, which requires a strong historical element to the program of study. Like many proponents of Great Books education since Robert Maynard Hutchins' pioneering work, I believe in the value of building the curriculum around the millennia-old conversation among texts rooted in ancient Greece, Rome, and Israel. The greatness of the work, its depth of insight, and its historic reception should all be criteria that play a role in what texts are chosen. Unlike Eric Adler, who also draws heavily on Irving Babbitt's defense of liberal learning as character formation, I do not believe this can be achieved appropriately by a canon that simply intersperses texts according to theme without categorizing them by civilization.²⁷ The texts themselves have been written in traditions that consist of reading and commenting on one another

²⁷ Adler (2020, 218-222): "A chief goal of the modern humanities is to determine whether there are any standards for living apart from the dictates of scientific fact. For this assessment, we need to study a variety of human civilizations, rather than privilege one concatenation of societies first lumped together as "Western" in the mid-nineteenth century."

across the centuries. To arrive at an honest understanding of the modern West, students must be introduced to the roots of the Western tradition, which instills in them a sense of a common origin and loyalty. To then build from this foundational understanding to a deeper and wider conversation with other civilizational traditions is noble.²⁸ It is also certainly part of an elite's role to be more cosmopolitan than their fellow citizens. Ideally, an educated elite would mediate between the occasionally chauvinist and parochial traditions of their compatriots without losing a sense of common destiny with those who belong to their polity—becoming neither too narrow nor too open.²⁹ Because of this essential dependence on a received past, history is indispensable in the curriculum.

Yet the study of history alone would not address the Tocquevillian or Platonic purposes of education, nor would it provide a very complete education. These texts identified by their historic importance should be approached in a spirit of reverence, but a reverence that gives birth to philosophical wonder. Babbitt insists that democracy's leaders should look up to a standard above themselves, so the student must come to the text in the expectation that she might learn something that would be an improvement on her default view. Tocqueville adds to this the realism that human beings always depend on some authority for their opinions. Thus if they approach all claims to intellectual authority in the spirit of democratic skepticism they will in practice rely on prevailing public opinion, dooming them to a kind of historicism. This hermeneutic of deference need not and should not preclude rigorous questioning of the texts' arguments, founded on the assumption that the fullness of truth overflows the capacity of any one author or work to convey. But if the **poetic** purpose is to be achieved, we must assume that the text bears a beauty and a greatness that we could not reach in any other way. It must be allowed to stir up our desires for things that are not material or utilitarian,

²⁸ My model of this kind of scholarship, both as a theorist and as a practitioner, is the sinologist William Theodore de Bary.

²⁹ This role of mediating between the universal and the particular T.S. Eliot ascribes to the 'clerisy' of intellectuals (1940, 1948).

things that would not otherwise be valued in a democratic age. This is why beautiful literature forms a central part of liberal education, though other fields such as visual art and music are also called for under this heading.

Thirdly, the character of the teacher matters throughout this curriculum, but it is probably most important when it comes to philosophy. Plato's reflections on the power of the teacher-student relationship, and the many ways that it can go wrong, should foreclose any notion that liberal instruction can be agnostic about the person doing the instruction as long as he or she is technically knowledgeable. To raise the question of the best life in a way that is compelling to the student, the teacher must himself embody the philosophical life of earnest questioning after truth and possess the intellectual virtues that he seeks to instill in his pupils.³⁰ In this understanding, the classroom becomes a kind of sacred space for the mimesis between master and disciple to take root, even if the results of that imitation only comes to flower decades later in the adult life of the student. As Arendt highlighted, it is this kind of authority as bearers of an office and as conduits of a tradition that rests in professors, yet even as this form of authority is particularly necessary in a democratic age it becomes particularly difficult to recognize. Here philosophy as a discipline becomes essential to the curriculum. No curriculum can purport to convey any wisdom regarding the good life without referring to the **philosophical** standard of whether it moves us closer to or further from the truth.

This curriculum remains incomplete in important respects; it is a perennial difficulty in liberal-arts curricula to integrate the natural sciences with the humanities, and it seems likely that the social sciences are capable of fostering moderation, magnanimity, or wisdom in those who study them attentively. The synoptic suggestions gleaned from Plato, Tocqueville, and Babbitt are only the

³⁰ In this I am inspired by Pierre Hadot's account of ancient philosophical schools in *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995).

beginnings of the account that is necessary for an American humanist curriculum in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion: The University as Character-Shaping Community

In advocating for the liberal arts, has this dissertation undermined them, reducing them to a means rather than an end in themselves? After all, the distinction between the demands of the city and the demands of philosophy, or between servile and liberal study, is as venerable as Plato and Aristotle. Many of its proponents have held that the distinction is essential to an understanding of human nature as capable of valuing intrinsic goods and therefore of being free in the highest sense. Yet my purpose in arguing that liberal education in a university setting may and should have beneficial effects on civic life has not been to reduce liberal education to its civic value. John Henry Newman explained in *The Idea of a University* that we seek bodily health for its own sake because it is simply good, but also because it enables us to do and achieve greater things. Similarly, we aim to form healthy minds in students because the health of the mind befits human nature, but also because with those minds, students will be able to accomplish much more. My argument here has been that, if an elite has a potentially beneficial role to play in democracy, we should identify the qualities that would be most desirable in such an elite based on what is lacking in the existing meritocracy. If wisdom, magnanimity, and humility are among these needed qualities, we should see what education can do to foster them. In looking to Plato, Tocqueville, and Babbitt to better understand the character-forming potential of a liberal education, I have sought to model the mode of learning I am advocating. These questions of how study shapes the soul are not alien to the texts, imposed simply because of my practical concerns. The texts themselves are profound meditations on education, on the human condition, and the implications of each for politics. Plato and Tocqueville are concerned with much more than how to form a worthy elite by redirecting the desires of the ambitious and talented towards nobler ends, and Babbitt's practical counsel on university policy is embedded within a much larger reflection on the

role of the imagination in politics. Yet though I have approached these texts in a deferential spirit with the expectation that they contain wisdom I lack, this has not precluded leveling serious critiques of these authorities and questioning their internal coherence.

Many university administrators and faculty are understandably hesitant about embracing a positive role for elitism and about defining an excellent life for their students. The vision I have proposed certainly carries with it very great risks—it could cement existing corruption, or entrench new forms of it. But attempting reform is urgent because the status quo of the American elite university is not sustainable. Laudable as its aims to form a scholarly community from all classes and all countries are, it is necessarily highly selective and un-egalitarian, offering experiences that only a tiny percentage of the population have ever tasted. It therefore needs a defense of its selectivity against critics who deride its graduates as both arrogant and mediocre. As we have seen in the literature on meritocracy, allegations of elite narcissism and incompetence can go together. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the (expensive) elite university faces another challenge: does education really need to be residential and learning in-person, when many classes can be streamed online?

But the most important impetus for reform should come from the students themselves. The intensity of American college student activism today reflects a sense that their education offers only a moral vacuum, that it is not providing them with any wisdom for how to live. Whether this moral agnosticism in the name of openness has come from John Dewey or from Allan Bloom, it has clearly proved deeply unsatisfying for students. And the alternative to the activist spirit, a conformist and consumerist ethos that acquiesces in the assumption that life contains no worthy objects, is surely more disturbing. Here Tocqueville's worry that the horizons of life may shrink in democracy, leading to an apathy emptied of desire, should resonate with what we see in the classroom and in the public square. Lastly, attention to character and the soul must necessarily be part of any education undertaken in community. The campus community itself requires virtue from its members, and the community

will inescapably stamp its members in turn, instilling a sense of honor and shame in them according to its implicit and explicit norms. Newman articulates this in his discourse “Knowledge in Relation to Learning,” arguing that the communal aspect of liberal learning is so important, all examinations and formal instruction should be dispensed with rather than render studying autonomous and impersonal. Newman first praises the effect of coming together with others to learn from them:

It is seeing the world on a small field with little trouble; for the pupils and students come from very different places, and with widely different notions, and there is much to generalize, much to adjust, much to eliminate, there are inter-relations to be defined, and conventional rules to be established, in the process, by which the whole assemblage is moulded together, and gains one tone and one character (Newman 2009, 106).

This aspect of Newman is familiar to us today; it is quite conventional to say that students educate one another by sharing their experiences and background. But his deeper point does challenge our assumptions:

That youthful community will constitute a whole, it will embody a specific idea, it will represent a doctrine, it will administer a code of conduct, and it will furnish principles of thought and action. It will give birth to a living teaching, which in course of time will take the shape of a self-perpetuating tradition, or a *genius loci*, as it is sometimes called; which haunts the home where it has been born, and which imbues and forms, more or less, and one by one, every individual who is successively brought under its shadow (Newman 2009, 106).

We as teachers would do well to think intentionally about the “principles of thought and action” that students will take in, since our teaching will have an effect on their character either through positive action or through omission. If the campus can incarnate a healthier community, this will certainly have good effects on the surrounding civic community. There is bound to be a serious dispute about the moral content that we should strive to instill, and even about what “healthiness” or “goodness” consists in. But that is the substantive debate worth having.

It is difficult to see how this reform is practicable today, given the constraints that universities face. It may be that the character is too set by college age, and that real shaping of the soul must take place in the home and in the elementary school. Yet throughout history adults have had their longings for the noble sparked by reading, as Plutarch inflamed Tocqueville’s love for greatness and Cicero

spurred Augustine to pursue wisdom.³¹ It may be that Veblen was right and the American university is now too beholden to financial interests, too caught up in the pressures of the market to try to rise above the realm of instrumental goods. Yet today's students demand that their education work for social justice precisely because the attempt at a value-neutral curriculum has been profoundly dissatisfying. This proposal has offered one way of understanding these contemporary challenges and the remedy that liberal learning could provide, framed explicitly as a way of answering democracy's difficulty in promoting excellence. It is thus an account of a kind of mixed regime, of aristocratic souls leading democracy.

³¹ Augustine records this moment in Book III.5-9 of the *Confessions* (1961).

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