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Discussion Board (1): Very Good Answers

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When Tocqueville refers to the principle of interest, he means that in the pursuit of personal interests, the countryman understood that there is some virtue understood in devoting small acts of service for the good of the State and society. When Tocqueville says that the principle of interest, rightly understood, as man's remaining defense against themselves, he presents this as a defense against egotism. According to Tocqueville, egotism is "...the passionate and exaggerated love of self, which leads a man to connect everything with his own person." (618) Egotism, as a result of the equality of conditions, acts destructively toward all personal and public life and promoting the love of one's self. Tocqueville understood the dangers of egotism and that if "if the members of a community, as they become more equal, become more ignorant and coarse, it is difficult to foresee what pitch of their stupid excesses their egotism may lead them." (646) Thus the principle of interest, rightly understood, acts to deter egotism because it leads and directs man in balancing acts of self-interest with small acts of sacrifice.

The system of the jury is one of the best examples in which the principle of self-interest rightly understood is exercised. The jury allows people to exercise their small acts of sacrifice for the State and encourages participation and involvement because since the jury is not under the authority of the State, it directs collaboration and the interaction of opinions. According to Tocqueville, "it [the jury] makes them[man] all feel the duties which they are bound to discharge towards society, and the part which they take in the Government." (331) With the jury, man thinks not only on the ramifications of his own actions, but must face the ramifications of others, bringing the same judgement he has on himself, onto others. Thus, a jury member becomes responsible in influencing and in turn is influenced through the exercise of power, judgement and thought when serving on the jury. As such, Tocqueville believes that "...the jury, which is the most energetic means of making people rule, is also the most efficacious means of teaching it to rule well." (333)

The principle of self-interest rightly understood can also be seen in how political associations are formed. "A association unites the efforts of minds which have a tendency to diverge in one single channel, and urges them vigorously towards one single end which it points out." (220) The power of association is that it brings together people for a common goal of the simplest undertaking. The connection Tocqueville makes is that since all citizens in democratic nations are independent and feeble "... they eventually all fall into a state of incapacity, if they do not learn voluntarily to help each other." (629) Thus, associations are unique because they allow the participation and promotion of individual self-interests with those who share the same opinions, furthering the balance between acts of selfish-self-interest with selfless acts of sacrifice for the group.

word count: 468

Tocqueville states, “As social conditions become more equal, the number of persons increases who... have nevertheless acquired or retained sufficient education and fortune to satisfy their own wants... they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone.” (620). This statement supports his thesis of individualism, which maintains that the tendency of citizens under equality of social conditions to withdraw into their own circles of family and friends, believing themselves to be ‘self-sufficient,’ leads directly to democratic despotism. In this way, citizens leave the civic sphere void, allowing for centralized political power to seize that space and undermine the liberty of the very people whose indifference allowed it to move in. This is what he means when he refers to the need for self-security; citizens of a society under social equality of conditions need to be protected from their own individualistic tendencies, lest they bring democratic despotism down upon themselves.

One method of securing oneself against the threat of individualism and democratic despotism is through the power of association. Of this kind of public spirit, Tocqueville acknowledges that “there is no surer guarantee of order and tranquility, and yet nothing is more difficult to create.” (74).

Association can be achieved when holders of a minority opinion seek to stand up for themselves; because the minority is “unable to surmount the obstacles which exclude them from power, they require some means of establishing themselves upon their own basis, and of opposing the moral authority of the minority to the physical power which domineers over it.” (Tocqueville 223). This “unites the efforts of minds which have a tendency to diverge in one single channel, and urges them vigorously towards one single end which it points out,” thus allowing the minority to buffer themselves against a central political power (Tocqueville 220). Association need not require minority, however. Any kind of cooperation or public consideration can serve as self-security. Of the jury, for example, Tocqueville states that “By obliging men to turn their attention to affairs which are not exclusively their own, it rubs off that individual egotism which is the rust of society.” (331). When citizens are drawn out of their private lives to associate with others, their civic resolve is strengthened, protecting them from any potential despotism brought on by individualism.

It is here that the principle of self-interest rightly understood factors in. The principle states “that man serves himself in serving his fellow-creatures, and that his private interest is to do good.” (Tocqueville 643). By choosing to step outside of their private lives and associate with one another, whether the goal be personal or political, citizens utilize the civic sphere, thus preventing centralized power to take it from them. By helping each other, they are protecting themselves.

Word Count - 457

Tocqueville firmly believes that the only way to truly combat individualism is with his political

theory of self-interest rightly understood which means to join associations to enlighten the interests of the group instead of just the self. "Men of our time" need to be secured against themselves because with individualism, comes self-interest and egotism which ultimately leads to an unproductive member of society. "The principle of interest rightly understood produces no great acts of self-sacrifice, but it suggests daily small acts of self-denial" (Democracy in America, 645). Without the enlightenment of association and group interest, a man withdraws into himself while carrying out a mundane existence. As Tocqueville writes, "it disciplines a number of citizens in habits of regularity, temperance, moderation" and the man is basically selfish for not becoming a member of society in any way. They also need to be secured from themselves because with a government that possesses a regulating force, people withhold into their own ideals and don't think about the community as a whole. "They therefore prefer depriving themselves of a powerful instrument of success to running the risks which attend the use of it" (Democracy in America, 638).

For the sake of the greater society, Tocqueville believes that men should associate with one another to seek common interests and accomplish obstacles to large for one man. Also, tyranny of the majority compels men who have different ideals to be silenced whereas through association with others who share common ideas, their voices will collectively be greater heard. "When they have hit upon some point on which private interest and public interest meet and amalgamate, they are eager to bring it into notice" (Democracy in America, 643). By collective group thought through association, individuals are working for the greater good of society such as approving new schools in a township so that everyone's lives improve. Tocqueville argues that through inclination to engage in public affairs through association such as townships or public juries, the citizens learn through political affiliation and will reject the notion of democratic despotism. "Men attend to the interests of the public, first by necessity, afterwards by choice: what was intentional becomes and instinct; and by dint of working for the good of one's fellow-citizens, the habit and the taste for serving them is at length acquired" (Democracy in America, 627). Instead of withdrawing into habits of a mundane or regular existence, Tocqueville believes that through these associations an individual can truly enlighten their existence. The principle of self-interest rightly understood can secure these individuals from themselves so that they don't slip into the crevices of individualism and egotism. Without this, beauty of virtue won't be realized along with the connections, empowerment, and collective action that come with associative activity.

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"Men of our time" need to be secured against themselves for the same reason men of any time must be secured against themselves: for their own protection, whether they realize it not. On his own, man is weak, especially in the face of government (66). However, within even a small township, man can exert influence over government (68). The atmosphere invites people to invoke change and pursue their own goals. It does not restrict man as in the case of France and England (74). However, in gaining a new found sense of freedom, man also must accept the risks

of such a thing in the face of concepts of individualism, egotism, and self-interest.

The men, and indeed groups of men, of America are much better equipped to deal with immediate problems than their European counterparts. Any blocks to the natural circulation of activities are quickly righted, without having to ever involve an imperial or executive authority (220). This course of action, though, while it benefits the community, is not a communal effort. Each man has their own reason for continuing the flow in their community, and while there is a general consensus within the society (221, 225), each man ultimately acts alone in their own self-interest. It is this course of action, I believe, that Tocqueville refers to as the principle of interest rightly understood.

To fully understand self-interest, equality and individualism must be understood in equal measure as well. Equality is a beautiful idea, but mishandled it could be detrimental to a democracy. It hides its evils so subtly almost none can see it (614), it is intoxicating on how immediate its positive effects are (615), and they present themselves as cornerstones of democracy (616). The desire for freedom is far more just, but the lengths people are willing to go to protect and uphold equality (617) can be seen as monstrous and detrimental to society. It goes hand in hand with individualism, as individualism drives man to look out for himself when he perceives all others as equal (620). Individualism plays a proper foil to the evils of equality.

Individualism often goes hand in hand with egotism, and there are more than a few similarities between the two. Unlike egotism, individualism (according to Tocqueville), has its roots in democracy, is a product of a corrupt mind, not heart, and saps the virtues of public life (618). Upon achieving freedom and equality, men often retreat to their own private affairs and circles, instead of joining a public effort (623, 625). However, this is where the principle of self-interest rightly understood plays a key part. Men (in America) can combine their efforts, and it may be for their own gain (629), but their individual goals converge to better help the community (632). Aristocracy used to proclaim selfless action for many for no reward (643), but self interest rightly understood allows for man to work simultaneously for his interest and the interests of the community in which he lives in.



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