

# Truth & Knowledge: A Catholic Philosophical Exploration of Our Restlessness and Desire to Know

## Session 2: Our Restless American Souls

- Joe Wysocki: For those of you who don't know me, my name is Joey Wysocki, I'm also an alum of Belmont Abbey. I graduated in 2004. I currently serve as the Dean of the Honors College here at the Abbey. I am really delighted to be able to talk with you for the next half an hour or so about an author that we spend some time with in the honors college, who I love very dearly, Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville, Alexis de Tocqueville, who I do love, and I'm able to teach quite often is a Catholic. He was a Catholic, he was raised a Catholic, he died a Catholic. But he's not quite a Catholic in the same way that some of the other authors that we treat in our new Honors College curriculum is a Catholic. Not like St. Augustine or St. Thomas Aquinas, who just to point to one very obvious difference, they're saints. Tocqueville is not. But we might even go further and say, Tocqueville, wasn't perhaps a particularly good Catholic.
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- [00:01:30] We might call him today for many parts of his life, a lapsed Catholic. But he's a Catholic who, as I said, he's born, he dies as a Catholic, he struggles, he doubts, but there's no doubt that his faith has a really important influence on his life and thought. So we might ask a question, or you might ask a question, why would the new Honors College with its new great books curriculum be so interested in this author? Why should we spend time with Alexis de Tocqueville? And I think the answer is pretty simple. It's that Alexis de Tocqueville cares very deeply about souls. He cares about the beauty, the goodness, the truth that might be accessible to souls. And he is worried about many of the threats that democracy poses to our souls. And so for us, as people of faith, as Catholics, as Christians reading Tocqueville can be very enlightening.
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- [00:02:30] It helps us to understand why our souls might be the way they are in the era in which we live. And it might help us to see some of the pitfalls that our souls might fall into and provide us a way out. So with that in mind, we're going to talk just a little bit about particularly this one work of Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America, and what he has to tell us about our own souls. Just to give you a little background first about this author, Alexis de Tocqueville, who was he? He was a Frenchman born in 1805 and dies in 1859. So he's born and dies after the French revolution. He's from an aristocratic family who in some ways were resistant to the revolution, but Tocqueville himself has come to accept the revolution. In 1831, he comes to the United States.
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- [00:03:30] He gets a grant from the French government to come and study prison systems in America. But Tocqueville is interested really in everything that America has to offer, in terms of democracy. And so he spends nine months in the United States in 1831, and he uses that time to write in both 1835 and 1840, the two volumes of this great work called Democracy in America. What Harvard professor, Harvey Mansfield has called, "the best book on democracy and the best book on America." And I tend to agree. So that's a bit of an introduction to his life and this book. What is the book about? Ultimately it's about democracy and its effect on our souls and Tocqueville examines that effect on our souls by comparing it very often with aristocracy. And to make it pretty simple for our understanding, what's the difference between democracy and aristocracy for Tocqueville?



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[00:04:30] To simplify, he would say democracy is a regime, a social order that is characterized by equality and a love for equality. So democracy, a regime, a social order that focuses on equality and loves equality. Aristocracy, the opposite. Inequality. Which one is better? And for Tocqueville, it seems to be a complex picture. Democracy is both better and worse than aristocracy in a number of ways. And in a number of ways that really touch on what we might call our souls, our psyches, our intellectual life, our faith life.

[00:05:00] And I want to just talk with you a bit about some of those. So what does a love for equality, living in a relatively equal regime due to our souls? And I think as Christians, as Catholics, as believers, some of these things can really help us to have better souls. To read Tocqueville can sort of help us in the pastoral care of ourselves and others. So let me talk about four things I want to talk about briefly that Tocqueville sees as maybe some threats to a healthy, truthful, beautiful soul. And those four things are Tocqueville really focuses on the materialism, the love of stuff that democratic people seem to be preoccupied with.

[00:05:30] The second, is this kind of idea we have in democratic times of an indefinite perfectibility of man, or of human beings. That is that we can always get a little bit better. And while that there might be something good about that, it can also make us a little bit crazy and depressed sometimes. So we'll talk a little bit about that.

[00:06:00] The third, is that democratic peoples, because we're always busy and trying to perfect ourselves that we're not very good at engaging in contemplation, which people of faith, most faith traditions think that some form of contemplation is very important for the right ordering of our souls. And finally, and this will sound a little bit crazy, Tocqueville points to the fact that in democratic times, we like to think for ourselves and which most people would look at that and say, "Huh, isn't that great."

[00:06:30] And Tocqueville says, there's kind of a darker side to this, and we'll talk about all of these things. So materialism, the idea of human perfectibility, the lack of contemplation and thinking for ourselves. So let's talk a little bit first about materialism. And if you'll indulge me just a little bit, I'm going to read some passages as we go through today and talk about Tocqueville. He says all of these things much more beautifully than I do, and I'll give a little bit of commentary that will not be as beautiful, but he says the following, he compares aristocratic and democratic love of stuff.

[00:07:00] What does that look like for aristocrats? And what does it look like for Democrats? And he says the following about aristocrats "When members of an aristocratic body turn exclusively in this way toward material enjoyments, they usually gather at this point alone, all the energy that the long habit of power gave them. To such men, the pursuit of wellbeing is not enough. They require a sumptuous depravity and a dazzling corruption. They worshiped the material magnificently and seem to vie with one another in their desire to excel in the art of making themselves into brutes."



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- [00:07:30] " The more aristocracy has been strong, glorious, and free, the more it will appear to praised. And whatever the splendor of its virtues may have been. I dare to predict it will always be surpassed by the brilliance of its vices." Okay. So we have this sense of aristocratic love of stuff, and it's depraved, it's big parties, it's big drunkenness, spending way too much on Versailles Palace. Think of, if any of you have read the book, The Picture of Dorian Gray, right? Dorian Gray, this corrupt aristocrat, who wants to experience all the vices of life in a very extreme way. So, that's aristocrats. Well, thank God we democrats don't deal with things like that. We're not so depraved. But Tocqueville says we have our own way of doing this, and we need to be aware of this. He says, "The taste for material enjoyments does not lead democratic peoples to such successes.
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- [00:08:30] There the love of wellbeing shows itself to be a tenacious, exclusive, universal passion, but contained. It is not a question of building vast palaces, of vanquishing or deceiving nature, of exhausting the universe in order to satisfy the passions of man. It's a matter of adding a few feet to his fields of planting an orchard, of enlarging a house, of making life easier and more comfortable each moment. Of avoiding discomfort and satisfying the slightest needs effortlessly, and almost without cost. These goals are small, but the soul becomes attached to them. It thinks about them every day and very closely. These goals finished by hiding from the soul, the rest of the world, and they sometimes come to stand between the soul and God." So we see this other picture of our materialism. It's not depraved, most of us aren't driving Ferrari's and having these big wild parties, but we think about comfort, and we think about adding something new to our house.
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- [00:10:00] I kind of joke with my students when I read this passage and I say, "I know a lot about various species of grass". and why the heck do I know about different species of grasses? There's tall fescue, and there's Bermuda grass and there's annual rye and perennial rye. It's because I go home at night and I look out on my lawn and I think, "Oh, one day. One day, this lawn is going to look really nice and I'm going to be happy." And I think about it a lot. And then I go on Amazon and I look not at depraved things, but I look at books and music. And I think about these things all the time. And in terms of Catholic theology, we might say, none of these things that I'm doing are sinful, and if they are, maybe they're just little venial sins.
- [00:10:30] But Tocqueville's point is, right these things fill up our minds so much that they can even come between us and God. It's these little things that we're constantly thinking about, our little comforts. And I think that's important to keep in mind that we democratic peoples have this materialism, this constant looking or constant distraction of our eyes to be looking at new, comfortable ways to make ourselves comfortable. And he makes this remark about Americans and their constant sort of pursuit of these small comforts.
- [00:11:00] I find it to be so penetrating. He says, "I saw in America the most free and most enlightened men placed in the happiest condition in the world. Yet it seemed to me that a kind of cloud habitually covered their features. They appeared to me grave



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- [00:11:30] and almost sad, even in their pleasures." So in terms of human happiness and flourishing in our souls, this is this thing to think about. Okay, so the second issue is this idea of indefinite perfectibility. And for Christians, we might think, "Hey, as C.S. Lewis says, "if you ever think you've kind of got holiness down, then you're not doing it right." We should always be thinking about becoming more holy, more virtuous. So why would this idea of infinite perfectibility of human beings be a bad thing? Well, let's take a look at what Tocqueville says about it.
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- [00:12:30] "Although men resembles animals in several ways, one feature has particular only to him. He perfects himself and they do not perfect themselves. The human species could not fail to discover this difference from the beginning." So the idea of perfectibility is as old as the world, equality did not give birth to it. So democracy didn't come up with this. But a quality gave it a new character and talking about as democracy emerges, "As casts disappear, as classes come closer together, as common practices, customs and laws vary because men are mixed together, as new facts arise, as new truths come to light, as old opinions disappear and others take their place, the image of an ideal and always fleeting perfection presents itself to the human mind."
- [00:13:00] "Continual changes then pass before the eyes of each man at every moment. Some changes worsen his position. He gets a demotion, he loses a job, and he understands only too well that a people or an individual, however, enlightened is not infallible. Other changes improve his lot. And he concludes that in general, he is endowed with indefinite ability to improve his failures, make him see that no one can claim to have discovered absolute good. His successes inflame him in pursuing the absolute good without respites. Therefore, always searching, falling, getting up again, often disappointed, never discouraged, he tends constantly toward this immense grandeur that he half sees vaguely at the end of a long course, that humanity must still cover.
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- [00:14:00] And finally, he compares aristocratic and democratic nations on this point of perfectibility. He says, "Aristocratic nations are naturally led to compress the limits of human perfectibility too much, and democratic nations extend them sometimes beyond measure." Okay, so what does that mean just to extend the idea of perfectibility beyond measure? It's good for human beings to constantly be thinking about how they can become more virtuous, how they can become closer to God.
- [00:14:30] But I think this idea of constantly improving, for Tocqueville is generally more tied to climbing up the social ladder, climbing up in economic class. And this will never leave us satisfied. And it leads to this constant worry all the time about falling lower or getting up higher. And this leads to an inability to rest, and it really can threaten our peace in democratic times. We're constantly in this sense of motion. And this leads to the third point that I came to.
- [00:15:00] And that is, this idea that in democratic times, we find it very difficult to engage in contemplation. In the Christian tradition and many other traditions, as Saint Thomas Aquinas puts it, "The contemplative life, the life of thinking about the highest eternal things is the highest way of life." And while Aquinas admits that we



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- [00:15:30] can't do that all the time, charity demands that we perhaps go get jobs, take care of our families, take care of our communities, engage in work. The highest good for our souls is to engage in this contemplation.
- [00:16:00] Democratic peoples have a difficult time doing this. Now in aristocratic times, the working class couldn't do it either, but aristocrats did. There was this idea for aristocrats that you had leisure time to engage in contemplation. But in democracy, we don't do it at all. And he says this in a chapter, he writes on how Americans do science. He's talking about science, different science but he has a very broad understanding of science here, where he would include things like philosophy. But he says the following; " Nothing is more necessary to the cultivation of the advanced sciences or of the higher portion of the sciences than meditation. And nothing is less appropriate to meditation than the interior of a democratic society."
- [00:16:30] So nothing is more important for achieving the highest things in the sciences. Philosophy included, theology included, than meditation. But nothing is less appropriate to a democratic society. So we don't like to do it. " There you find not as among aristocratic peoples a numerous class that remains at rest because it finds itself well off and another, that does not stir because it despairs of being better off. Each man is in motion. Some want to attain powers, other to take hold of wealth. Amid this universal tumult, there is repeated clash of contrary interests. This continual march of men toward fortune, where to find the calm necessary for profound intellectual syntheses."
- [00:17:00] Now, while Tocqueville makes this point that it's very difficult for us with our democratic souls and our democratic society to engage in meditation, it's clear that we can. This may be a tendency, but as we know from the monks here at Belmont Abbey, there are some who in democratic society engage in meditation and contemplation. And that we want our students to receive here today is that they need to carve out that time for meditation, even in the midst of all these things.
- [00:17:30] All right. Last one, and then I'll make some concluding remarks. Thinking for ourselves. Now, this sounds a bit bizarre. Isn't that the virtue of democracy? That we all have the ability, the free ability to think for ourselves and to express ourselves? Yes and no. So let's take a look At what Tocqueville says. At the beginning of this chapter, where he looks at Americans thinking for themselves, he makes this really interesting remark.
- [00:18:00] He says, "Americans are the country in the world that are most likely to live by the principles of this guy named Descartes and they're least likely to have read Descartes. So, okay. Let's unpack that just for a minute. Who's Descartes? French philosopher. What does he do? He doubts everything. Descartes' method of philosophy is to doubt everything and then build everything back up from nothing and arrive at certainty. So Americans are like this, he says. We don't trust any authority. We don't trust family, class, tradition. We want to strip that all away and think for ourselves, okay? We're not going to read Descarte because we all have jobs, we're all busy. So, okay, " we're all Descartesians." This is what he calls our
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philosophic method.

[00:19:30] And he says the following of this method, what does this look like? "Americans want to escape from the spirit of system. We're not going to accept somebody else's system of philosophy about the most important things from the yoke of habits, the maxims of family, from the opinions of class and to a certain point, from the prejudices of our nation. To take tradition only as information and present facts only as useful for studying or doing 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 principles that I would characterize the philosophic method of the Americans." And this is a great last line. He says, "If I go still further and among these various features, look for the principle one cause that I might sum up all the others, I discover that in most operations of the mind, each American appears only to the individual effort of his reason." So we appeal only to ourselves and our own reasons. Sounds good. Isn't this freedom?

[00:20:30] Well, here's the problem. Tocqueville points to the fact that if we need to think through everything on our own, that that prospect is absolutely overwhelming. Societies cannot do this. They have to have certain things that they take in common to act. If societies are going to act to pass laws, to direct people toward the good, they don't have the time to examine everything on their own. But the same is true for individuals. If every single morning, I tell students, if every single morning you had to do like what Descartes does, which is doubt everything and say, "do I exist before I brush my teeth in the morning?" You wouldn't get anything done. So we all have to accept what Tocqueville calls "dogmatic beliefs." But if we don't accept them from tradition, from family, from nation, from great books, from great authors, where do we accept our opinions? We have to accept them from somebody. Tocqueville says that "in democratic times, the place or the source of our dogmatic beliefs is public opinion." More than anywhere else, it's public opinion.

[00:21:00] And we have a stronger adherence to public opinion than any other kind of regime might've had adherence to a king or a class. Why is that? Why is it that in democratic times, we almost unthinkingly accept public opinion when it's decided on some question? And he says, "it's this idea of quality." We say, no visual is smarter than me. So I'm not going to accept that guy's opinion." But if we add them all up together, all these equal people who are relatively equally, up together, and I put them together in a big group and I call that public opinion, well, if we're all equal, then more of those equal people are who I should listen to, right? Now, this of course is very dangerous, especially for our souls.

[00:22:00] There are so many things that public opinion has maybe settled on, unquestioningly, as goods for our souls. And as believers in this world today, we need to be able to find things that we can latch onto, other sources of authority to begin with to sort of fight against this current. Because we can't do it on our own, it's overwhelming. Tocqueville is absolutely right about this. If you just say, figure it



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- [00:23:00] out what is justice. Do it by yourself? Who can do that? Not many of us. I can't, I certainly can't. But if I turn to Aristotle and Plato and Saint Augustine, what the great books program here at the Honors College is trying to do, I might have a shot. Maybe I'll have a shot at pushing back against Public opinion. Okay.
- [00:23:30] So these are kind of the four main points. These threats that we might see to our souls, that we ought to be aware of. We have this sense of materialism that's not grand and depraved, but a love of comfort. We see comfort above everything else. We have this desire for perfectibility, but maybe not perfectibility and virtue and holiness. And it kind of drives us crazy. We're constantly thinking about our 401ks and our promotions, and this is not good for our souls. It leads to the third point, which is that we don't make time for contemplation, for meditation in our lives. And this is something that we ought to do. And finally, that in thinking for ourselves, we become paralyzed in not turning to various sources of authority, of people who might be wise of tradition. We try to decide things on our own, it's overwhelming, and then we accept public opinion without any kind of questioning.
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- [00:24:30] So this is kind of a bleak picture perhaps. You have to read the rest of the book to see that Tocqueville thinks there are some things we can do. And so I just want to end with this one passage that he ends the work with. And I think it's so important in light of what we're experiencing in terms of COVID today, and some of the things I've just said. It's a beautiful passage, it makes me tear up almost every time I read it. I'm going to find it here. So, what can be done?
- [00:25:00] What can be done? Tocqueville ends Democracy in America stating the following, "I'm not unaware that several of my contemporaries have thought that here below, that is on earth, peoples are never masters of themselves. And that they obey necessarily, I do not know what insurmountable and unintelligible force that arises from previous events, from race, from soil or from climate. Those are false and cowardly doctrines that can produce only weak men and pusillanimous nations. Providence has created humanity, neither entirely independent, nor completely slave. It traces around each man, it is true, a fatal circle out of which he cannot go. But within its vast limits, man is powerful and free, so our peoples. The nations of today can not make conditions among them not to be equal, but it depends on them whether equality leads to servitude or liberty to enlightenment or barbarism to prosperity, or misery."
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- [00:26:30] And so in light of where we are as a democratic people, trying to live out the faith in these democratic times, and especially in these times of COVID where this circle around us out of which we cannot go becomes very present. I mean, quite literally we have circles of six feet around us that keep us from other people. It does seem perhaps like our freedom has been very constrained, that the troubling things we see in the world around us are absolutely determined, and that there's not much we can do except be carried away by the tide. But I think what we're trying to do here at the Honors College at Belmont Abbey is to show that while there may be some things that we cannot control, this is clear, that within this circle, we are free, that there is an opportunity for our students to come to know the true, the good



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and the beautiful, and to bring that to bear on the world around them. So thank you so much.

