

Liberty and Authority: Religious Dogma and Liberal Education in Tocqueville and Newman

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While John Stuart Mill may characterize liberty and authority as antagonists at the beginning of *On Liberty*, Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of democracy brings Mill's clear construction of opposites into doubt. For Tocqueville, a democratic social state, above all others, *presupposes* a kind of intellectual and religious authority if liberty is to be well-cultivated and well-used. American liberal education depends on a prior religious education, and specifically, on a religious authority. Authority and liberty can be antagonists, but for Tocqueville, in the best case, they can mutually reinforce one another.

A similar argument is undertaken by John Henry Newman in his *Idea of a University*. Newman's emphasis on the importance of theology sometimes baffles readers as to how he can claim to be teaching a "liberal" education at all.¹ But, I will argue, Newman has a very subtle understanding of the interplay between religious and democratic authority, an understanding that can be too easily obscured. Only through analyzing Newman's arguments in light of Tocqueville's understanding of a democratic social state can Newman be defended as no reactionary at all, but as a very astute observer of the manner in which knowledge is gained in a democratic age, and the eternal and the particular are intertwined. Both see in modernity the temptation to seek a single idea or single principle as a universal explanation of human affairs. Newman's education is elite while Tocqueville's is popular, and Newman is concerned with academic disciplines while Tocqueville with democratic individuals, but both advocate a liberal education that liberates men from the tyranny of a single idea.

Tocqueville discovers in equality the promise of an ostensible freedom that tends towards a real, if novel slavery. Democratic man, by his condition, is led towards a belief in his "own reason as the most visible and nearest source of truth" (*Democracy in America, Vol. 3, 700*). Equality of conditions means that "the man who inhabits democratic countries...sees near him only more or less similar beings" (731-

¹ J.M. Roberts, "The *Idea of a University* Revisited," Sara Castro-Klaren, "The Paradoxes of Self"; Frank Turner, "Newman's University and Ours"; even Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of a University: A Reexamination*.

732). Since these other men are not incontestably superior to him, he sees no reason not to trust his own judgment over theirs. Equality encourages individual judgment if for no other reason than that it levels what would have stood out as extraordinary, aristocratic persons who ought to have been believed.

At the same time, the promise of individual reason hardly ever results in profound and sensitive discovery, and a desire to think for oneself most often terminates in a lazy adoption of “general ideas”.² Democratic men “have a great deal of curiosity and little leisure...little time remains for them to think.” Therefore, they “love general ideas, because they exempt them from studying particular cases” (736). The “ambition...to gain great success immediately [without] great effort,” finds a useful tool in general ideas, which flatters democratic man into thinking he “portray[s] very vast matters at little cost” (736). While the emancipation of individual reason initially promises great advances, it leads almost of necessity to sloppy thinking.

The democratic passion for general ideas combines with the enthroning of individual reason in order to propel democratic men towards a narrow understanding of the world. “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.” “Having contracted the habit of general ideas in the one area of his studies that concerns him most...he transfers that habit to all the others.” Since men seem similar, it strikes his mind as plausible—or even necessary—that they all be governed by the same force. Whatever branch of study is his specialty, he attempts to universalize to explain the entire world. Thus the desire “to explain an ensemble of facts by a sole cause becomes an ardent and often blind passion to the human mind” (732). Not only are men drawn towards general explanations, they are also led to universalize their own experience or expertise in order to create a governing general idea. Men are less at risk of universally becoming Marxist materialists than lawyers are of assuming the law to be the only operative principle in the world (or political economists with self-interest, to take only two examples).

In light of this danger, Tocqueville prescribes a single remedy, albeit a “painful but always effective” (740) one. A practical struggle is the only cure for the lure of general ideas: “if there is a subject concerning which a democracy is particularly liable to commit itself blindly and extravagantly to general

² A working definition of a “general idea” is as follows: they “encompass a very great number of analogous objects within the same form in order to think about them more comfortably” (727); they “do not attest to the strength of human intelligence, but rather to its insufficiency, for there are no beings exactly the same in nature: no identical facts; no rules applicable indiscriminately and in the same way to several matters at once” (728); and they “are admirable in that they allow the human mind to make rapid judgments about a great number of matters at the same time; but, on the other hand, they never provide it with anything other than incomplete notions, and they always make it lose in exactitude what it gains in breadth” (729).

ideas, the best possible corrective is to make the citizens pay daily, practical attention to it. That will force them to go into details, and details will show them the weak point in the theory" (739). He offers the example of the Americans who, by taking "a practical part in government", "moderate the excessive taste for general political theories" (ibid). By experiencing the authority of practical examples which contradict or limit the teachings of a general theory, the excessive tendency towards general ideas can be controlled. Practical engagement in a particular science best prevents a tendency to over-generalize.

Nevertheless, at a certain point, even practical engagement exhausts itself and must take cover in received opinions. Man cannot live without some "dogmatic beliefs" (712ff.) and Tocqueville asserts the impossibility that any group³ of men can reason out their own first principles. "The inflexible laws of [man's] existence compel him" (ibid.) to accept some degree of received opinion. If even philosophers must take "a million things on the faith of others" (715), what hope is there for the average democratic man of deducing first principles? The span of human life is too short for the task, and one who attempted it would have an intelligence made "independent and weak at the same time" from the perpetual agitation involved in trying to discover all fundamental principles. Man "must make a choice and adopt many beliefs without discussing them, in order to go more deeply into a small number that he has reserved to examine for himself" (715). The only question, for Tocqueville, is whether the received opinion allows man to become free. "Somewhere and somehow authority is always bound to play a part in intellectual and moral life...the independence of the individual may be greater or less but can never be unlimited" (716-7).

The beliefs most advantageous to be received are those of religion. "When there is no authority in religion or politics, men are soon frightened by the limitless independence...with everything on the move in the realm of the mind, they want the material order at least to be firm and stable, and as they cannot accept their ancient beliefs again, they hand themselves over to a master" (745). The danger to the freedom of the mind is even greater than to political freedom. "When a people's religion is destroyed, doubt invades the highest faculties of the mind and half paralyzes the rest." Each man's mind is filled with "confused and changing notions about matters of the greatest importance." "Opinions are ill-defended or abandoned," with the result that democratic man "in despair of solving unaided the greatest problems of human destiny" "ignobly give[s] up thinking about them" (ibid). If man is asked to construct the universe himself, he will despair and withdraw. But still seeking order and stability of some sort, he will long for a political order that is secure rather than free. Individual judgment in religious matters undermines a free

³ Tocqueville hedges his bets about whether rare *individuals* are capable of such achievements

political order. Religious liberalism tends towards political despotism. On the other hand, the security of religious opinion in no small part creates the conditions for political practical engagement. Liberty depends on a higher, received authority.

The tendencies that Tocqueville identifies in the development of democratic individuals, Newman's university recognizes in the specific intellectual disciplines. On their own, the disciplines tend to refer everything to themselves and universalize their particular conclusions. The remedy for this overgeneralization is Tocqueville's remedy: practical interaction among the disciplines, just as practical, political interactions among democratic individuals curb the passion for general ideas. At the same time, the disciplines can only be forced into this productive disagreement if, at a higher level, an un-argued for authority is accepted: for Newman, theology plays the role of Tocqueville's salutary religious beliefs. If democratic men jettison authoritative religious opinion, they tend to isolate themselves; if the intellectual disciplines exclude theology, they try to universalize their own conclusions. Newman's university deals with the education of an elite, whereas Tocqueville's liberal education is widespread and popular: nevertheless, both rely on the same principled interaction between authority and liberty.

Tocqueville's popular education relies on two levels of authority: a higher one received and a lower one democratically and practically created. Newman's university recapitulates these two layers of authority, even if some critics fail to see double. Much has been made of Newman's invocation of an "imperial intellect" which is "majestically calm, because it discerns the end in every beginning" (*The Idea of a University*, 138), and ostensibly depends on the authority of theology to properly order the university. Secular scholars scoff at the notion that a "liberal education" would presuppose clerical supervision. But in their focus on the role of theology as authority,⁴ they fail to appreciate the degree to which Newman's university is not "majestically calm," but in fact the scene of practical rivalry among the disciplines. Theology and practical rivalry work together to create a "philosophical habit of mind" (51). At the same

⁴ In the critical essays included in the Yale edition of *The Idea of a University*, several of the contributors mistakenly take Newman's authoritative science to be theology (Turner, 259; Castro-Klaren, 319; Garland, 278-80). J.M. Roberts, in "The Idea of a University Revisited," makes the same mistake (206-207). As will be shown below, Newman's authoritative science is *philosophy*, not theology.

time, theology's specific role can best be seen after the extent of the practical rivalry among the disciplines is made clear.

While named the *Idea of a University*, the animating idea of Newman's discourses is more precisely a liberal education. A liberal education consists in the acquisition of liberal knowledge, a process Newman defines as "philosophy." Newman's particular definition of philosophy depends on his special understanding of knowledge. "All knowledge" for Newman, "forms one whole," that can only be separated off "portion from portion...by a mental abstraction." The individual "sciences are the results of that mental abstraction." All the sciences are "but aspects of things," with the consequence that they "at once need and subserve each other" (51). So, in theory, all sciences are complementary. But this complementarity is only theoretical—or rather, ideal.

Though the sciences "need and subserve each other," they do not themselves necessarily recognize this need. Of their own, each science tends "to the exclusion of others...scorning all principles and reported facts which do not belong to their own pursuit, and thinking to effect everything without aid from any other quarter" (50). As examples, Newman raises the substitution of chemistry for medicine or of "political economy, or intellectual enlightenment," as a cure for "vice, malevolence, and misery," which are properly ethical concerns. Newman particularly notes the tendency of political economy to claim for itself "an *ethical* quality, by extolling it[self] as the road to virtue and happiness" (89). Each science, for Newman, perfects a particular branch of knowledge while at the same time being unable to discern its own limits.

In order for a proper understanding of the whole to arise, Newman argues that it must happen that "one [science] corrects another" (49), such that each science is kept in its own bounds "by the very rivalry of other studies" (167). The recognition of these boundaries, and the proper integration of the sciences into a whole, is Newman's particular definition of philosophy:

the comprehension of the bearings of one science on another, and the use of each to each, and the location and limitation and adjustment and due appreciation of them all, one with another, this belongs, I conceive, to a sort of science distinct from them all, and in some sense a science of sciences, which is my own conception of what is meant by Philosophy, in the true sense of the word, and of a philosophical habit of mind (51)

The cultivation of this kind of philosophy is effected by a liberal education (152, 167), so much so that the terms philosophical education and liberal education end up being used synonymously by Newman.

The universal or “broadening” features of Newman’s education have often been recognized.⁵ Of course, to emphasize breadth is to risk superficiality. How, exactly, can a university teach a student, in a few years’ time, to see both the breadth of universal knowledge as well as the particular divisions between each science? Newman himself clearly recognizes the necessity to specialize: students “cannot pursue every subject which is open to them” and “in his own case he only pursues a few sciences out of the multitude” (101). To try to learn *everything* is to make the mistake that “a smattering in a dozen branches of study is not shallowness, which it really is, but enlargement, which it is not” (142). A student must specialize not only because of the limits of human life, but because the very process of specialization teaches the necessary habits or disciplines of mind required by a liberal education. But then a liberal education also presupposes a vast and encompassing view of the whole. How are these conflicting claims reconciled?

For Newman, the seat of learning is as important as the character of liberal knowledge, and it is the university itself that reconciles the apparently contradictory demands of universality and specialization inherent in a liberal education. Broad understanding—that is, philosophy—comes not through direct study, but through the process of living amongst the turmoil of the various branches of knowledge. Students “will be gainers by living among those and under those who represent the whole circle (of knowledge). This I conceive to be the advantage of a seat of universal learning” (101). When disciples of the various branches are brought together, they naturally “adjust...the claims and relations of their respective subjects of investigation.” Thus the student “profits by an intellectual tradition, which is independent of particular teachers...he apprehends the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which it rests.” By living among the branches of knowledge, “a habit of mind is formed” in the student.

Newman underscores this point later, when he contrasts various professors “in a university and out of it.” Outside of a university, giving lectures on his own, “he is in danger of being absorbed and narrowed by his pursuit” (166). But inside a university, “he is kept from extravagance by the very rivalry of other studies” and he gains “a special illumination and largeness of mind” so that “he treats his own

⁵ Much has been said by various scholars about the character of Liberal Knowledge as Newman conceives it, and much attention has rightly been paid to Newman’s opposition of Benthamite or utilitarian principles of knowledge (Kelly, *A Conservative at Heart?*, 176-180). Ian Ker has highlighted Newman’s “fundamental requirement...[to] be able to think clearly” in a manner that isn’t “narrowly specialized” (Ker, *The Achievement of John Henry Newman*, 33). G.H. Bantock has noticed the importance that a “tradition of (objective) value that will transcend the individual and social purposes of man” (Bantock, *Authority and Education*, 130). Stephen Kelly has rightly seen that since Newman conceives of a university as teaching *universal* knowledge, Newman’s liberal education necessarily “incorporated both the liberal ‘philosophical’ and the professional ‘mechanical’ educational elements of learning” (*A Conservative at Heart?*, 184).

[subject] in consequence with a philosophy and a resource, which belongs not to the study itself, but to his *liberal education* [emphasis mine]" (167). No scholar of Newman, to my knowledge, has recognized the importance of this last sentence. Newman claims that the very fact of *being in a university* provides a *professor* with a liberal education, and that this largeness of education is achieved not through peaceable contemplation, but by means of "the very rivalry of other studies." Theology is important for Newman, no doubt. But theology is no imperial master within the university. Philosophy, not theology, is the science that regulates all other studies, and it appears that philosophy is not, as it were, a discipline that can be taught so much as a habit of inquiry that develops by being present within an active and tumultuous university. In other words, no professor teaches philosophy so much as the university, by its very activity, represents philosophy almost unconsciously. Newman may talk about the harmony of universal knowledge, but that harmony is only apparent from God's point of view. For man to achieve a philosophical understanding requires an agonistic process: and this agonism is encouraged and regulated by the university.

Once we understand the work that the sciences themselves are performing in Newman's university, we can finally be clear on the place of theology. J.M. Roberts, in his criticism of Newman's understanding of theology, displays the typical secular skepticism. Roberts is subjected to "an outbreak of spontaneous hilarity" (Roberts, "The Idea of a University Revisited," 207) by two of Newman's arguments. First, that the university should actively police a particular "unity of an intellectual system" (206), wherein theology "arbitrate[s] uncertainties and...correct[s] divagation from right order" (207). And second, when Newman describes the interaction between professors as "a picture of an imaginary senate" (207).⁶ Doesn't Newman know, says Roberts, that the politics of the university are so intense because the stakes are so low?

Roberts takes Newman to task for his argument that the theology department of a university ought to enforce clear disciplinary boundaries when so much exciting research is happening "at the borders" (Roberts, 209) of the sciences. As I have hoped to show from my argument above, Roberts completely misunderstands Newman. Of course interesting work is going to happen on the fringes. That is where the quasi-political debates about boundaries will take place and where political economists and ethicists (and theologians) will be able to discover truly where they stand in relation to one another.

⁶ In Newman's own words: "professors are like the ministers of various political powers...they represent their respective sciences, and attend to the private interests of those sciences respectively; and, should dispute arise...they are the persons to talk over and arrange it" (*Idea*, 369).

Roberts misreads Newman because Roberts fails to see that it isn't an imperial theology, but the sciences themselves that will correct one another. Roberts, even though he quotes Newman on this very subject, apparently believes that Newman believes that a university should have an all-powerful theology department which disciplines each science authoritatively, preserving a kind of static order. Newman does admit theology into his university as an important science, but he includes theology so that it will be able to defend itself as a science by means of this same "rivalry." Newman never argues that theology sufficiently teaches the philosophical habit of mind characteristic of a liberal education.⁷ The study of theology does not and cannot—by itself—create or perfect liberal knowledge.

In discussing the role of theology, we have to be especially clear about the "non-religious" role that theology plays. The development of liberal knowledge depends on the interaction of the sciences with one another. The sciences, on their own, tend to isolate and universalize themselves. For Newman, only theology is capable of forcing the sciences to engage in a way that limits their isolating and universalizing tendencies.

Theology is at the center because Newman recognizes, like Tocqueville, that without certain definite and authoritative assumptions, things fall apart. I am not arguing that Newman secretly believes theology to be only an "authoritative opinion." Newman devotes a full discourse to the argument that theology is in fact a science (*Idea*, 19-42). Nevertheless, Newman's university depends on one authoritative assumption: that all branches of knowledge are parts of a universal whole and can therefore be reconciled with and be corrected by one another.⁸ Theology supports this assumption through the assertion of (or argument for) a created and knowable world. Without this keystone, Newman apparently believes, the overwhelming tendency of the individual disciplines is to universalize themselves to the exclusion of others. As we have seen above, this argument finds its companion in Tocqueville: if authoritative opinion about first principles is jettisoned, man despairs of solving such questions by his individual reason and isolates himself. Only by accepting authoritative opinion can productive political interaction occur. And without this political or practical engagement, narrow views remain unchallenged and are tempted into masquerading as general causes.

⁷ Newman himself is clear on the point that theology can just as easily degenerate into a merely "useful" study if it is undertaken not for its own sake but for the purpose of pastoral or priestly care (*Idea*, 108-109).

⁸ Compare to Newman's description of the representative of "the philosophy of an imperial intellect" who "has one cardinal maxim in his philosophy...that truth cannot be contrary to truth; if he has a second, it is, that truth often *seems* contrary to truth; and, if a third, it is the practical conclusion, that we must be patient with such appearances, and not be hasty to pronounce them to be really of a more formidable character" (*Idea*, 461).

Once a higher authority is made secure, experience and practice predominate in Newman's liberal education. Philosophy, or liberal education, only develops in a student through his being present in a university in which the various disciplines—while assuming themselves to be part of a whole—check each other by rivalry. These disciplinary boundaries can never be static, so there can never be an “authoritative” demarcation for the students to memorize. Discoveries in physics or biology challenge and are challenged by political philosophy and literature. As a student watches the professors engaged in a quasi-political debate, a kind of practical wisdom forms within the student, which can sense when a claim to truth is reasonable and when it isn't. For such an education, failures are almost as useful as successes. The evolutionary biologist who claims that, say, there is a moral obligation to abort children with Down Syndrome contributes as much to a liberal education as does the theologian who demurs to established physical laws.

As with Newman, so with Tocqueville: a liberal education comes from the experience of liberty. What Tocqueville says of statesmanship may also be true of a liberal education: “it is only in an atmosphere of freedom that the qualities of mind indispensable to true statesmanship can mature and fructify” (*Ancien Regime*, 144). But as Newman argues, the theologian and the biologist can only be forced to talk to one another in a university where theology asserts the unity of the sciences. The “atmosphere of freedom” in Newman's university requires a theological unifying principle.

A university cannot exist without theology, but in its absence, various disciplines will attempt take its place (181-182). The problem in this case is that an implicit theology will replace an explicit one. And since the greatest achievement of Newman's liberal university is a recognition of *explicit* boundaries of knowledge, the most important questions (What belongs to this world? What doesn't?) can never be asked in a competent way. The careful obscuring of questions about principle is, in the opinion of both Newman and Tocqueville, the great philosophical weakness of democratic liberalism as well as its great practical support. If ideas are not practically challenged, they will expand past their proper boundaries. Newman and Tocqueville both fear the prospect of men who, having given up *thinking* about general ideas, are unconsciously governed by one or a few of them. Liberty from what might be called an ideological tyranny is cultivated through practice, but this practice presupposes some dogmatic harmony. Freedom from all dogmatism is not a human possibility, and it is through recognizing this that a limited but real liberty can be cultivated. Tocqueville is concerned with democratic individuals, and Newman with intellectual disciplines. Nevertheless, in their two objects they see a similar tendency towards an overemphasis on general ideas, and a remedy in the cultivation of a practical and quasi-political debate.

At this point we might be forgiven for asking what relevance this can possibly have: both Tocqueville in politics and Newman in the development of ideas argue that freedom depends on authoritative religious opinion. Practical interaction can do much to create authority, but at bottom remains a dependence on a higher authority. We live in a world that has apparently jettisoned the desire to search for or to accept (or even to reject) authoritative religious opinion. Is not Newman (and even Tocqueville) made irrelevant by this circumstance? Perhaps we ought rather to wonder if our ostensible progress beyond authoritative religious opinion isn't really another means by which we disguise our reliance on unexamined beliefs. Newman argues that no matter the circumstances, authoritative opinion will inevitably re-emerge, the nature of the disciplines being what they are. The best that we might do is attempt to discover what this opinion is, and to bring it to light. A new and implicit theology, in a sense, will always be constructed on the incursions of political science and ethics and psychology into what was once theology's realm.⁹ If this new theology proves inadequate or repulsive, we would at least be in the position of recognizing the unattractiveness of a necessary opinion, and ascending from it.¹⁰ Or, to use an older analogy: we can never ascend from the cave if we never realize that we are inside of one.

⁹ See especially *Idea of a University*, Discourse 8, "Knowledge Viewed in Relation to Religious Duty," and Newman's discussion of the "Religion of Reason" (182-211).

¹⁰ Such would be Newman's response to a critic, like Roberts, who says that this kind of "political" engagement between departments and professors is impossible. Yes, Newman would say, it is impossible in *your* university, because you lack the unifying belief in a knowable world and the ultimate harmony of the intellectual disciplines. Such a belief can never be the product of argument or deduction, but must be secured *beforehand*, and religious dogma is the only means thereof. This, at least, would be Newman's response. It is left to the reader to decide its adequacy.

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