### 21.3 Alexis de Tocqueville: The New Social Morality

Alexis de Tocqueville’s (1805–1859) four volume study, *Democracy in America*, was a seminal work in political science. His goal was to identify the lessons Europeans could learn from America as they struggled to achieve liberty and equality in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. In the letter included here, Tocqueville contrasted Christian and “modern” social morality.


Your letter, monsieur, arrived the day I left for the conseil général. I found it upon my return. I want to answer you at once.

I shall ask you now to put all your books aside for a moment and to make a rapid mental survey of your recent readings and of your earlier studies, so as to answer this question in conversational form: What is there really new in the works or in the discoveries of the modern moral philosophers? By modern I mean not merely those of the last fifty years but those who immediately preceded them, those who belong to that generation which had decisively broken with the Middle Ages. Did they really see the obligations of mankind in such a new light? Did they really discover new motives for human actions? Did they really establish new foundations, or even new explanations, for human duties? Have they placed the sanctions of moral laws elsewhere? Through the darkness all I think I can recognize is this: to me it is Christianity that seems to have accomplished the revolution—you may prefer the word change—in all the ideas that concern duties and rights; ideas which, after all, are the basic matter of all moral knowledge.

Christianity did not exactly create new duties or, to put it in other terms, it did not establish entirely new virtues; but it changed their relative position. Certain rude and half-savage virtues had been on the top of the list; Christianity put them on the bottom. The milder virtues, such as neighborly love, pity, leniency, the forgetfulness even of injuries had been on the bottom of the antique list; Christianity placed them above all others. Here was the first change.

The realm of duties had been limited. Christianity broadened it. It had been limited to certain citizenries; Christianity extended it to all men. It had been restricted and confirmed and position of masters; Christianity gave it to the slaves. Thus Christianity put in grand evidence the equality, the unity, the fraternity of all men. Here was the second change.

The sanction of moral laws had existed for this world rather than for the other. Christianity put the ultimate aim of human life beyond this world; it gave thus a finer, purer, less material, less interested, and higher character to morality. Here was the last change.

All of these things had been seen, shown, and preached before it came. But Christianity alone bound them together, making this new morality into a religion, and the minds of men were absorbed therewith.

We have lived with the rule of this morality for a long chain of centuries. Have we added much to it that is essential? This is what I do not see clearly. We may have put a few shades into the colors of the picture, but I do not see that we have added really new colors. The morality of our own time—the way I see it revealed through words and through action and through the ceaseless patter of our loquacious society—our modern morality (and I am leaving aside what is being printed in fat volumes about this subject) may have reverted in some of its facets to the notions of the ancients, yet for the most part it has merely developed and expanded the consequences of Christian morality without affecting the essential principles of the latter. Our society is much more alienated from the theology than it is from the philosophy of Christianity. As our religious beliefs have become less strong and our view of the life hereafter less clear, morality has become more concerned with the legitimacy of material needs and pleasures. This is the idea that I think the followers of Saint-Simon expressed by saying that the flesh must be rehabilitated. It is probably the same tendency that, for some time now, appears in the writings and in the doctrines of our moral philosophers.

For this reason some people have now felt the urge to find the sanctions of moral laws in this life. They could no longer place them with absolute certainty in the life thereafter. From this came the doctrine of benevolent interest, about honesty paying dividends and vice leading to misery. The English Utilitarians are upholders of this new trend of ideas, ideas under unfamiliar to the Christian moralists of the past.

Christianity and consequently its morality went beyond all political powers and nationalities. Its grand achievement is to have formed a human community beyond national societies. The duties of men among themselves as well as in their capacity of citizens, the duties of citizens to their fatherland, in brief, the public virtues seem to me to have been inadequately defined and considerably neglected within the moral system of Christianity. This seems to me the only weak facet of that admirable moral system, just as this seems the only strong facet of the moral system of the antique nations. Though the Christian idea of human brotherhood may seem to dominate contemporary minds, those public virtues have also advanced in the meantime; and I am convinced that the moralists of the past hundred years are preoccupied with it far more than were their predecessors. This is due to the resurgence of political passions. They are, at the same time, causes and
effects of the great changes we are now witnessing. Thus the modern world re-established a part of antique morality and inserted it within the moral principles of Christianity.

But the most noteworthy innovation of our modern moral teaching, to me, consists in the tremendous development in the new form that is now given to two principles which Christianity had first put in grand evidence: the equal rights of every man in the goods of this world, and the duty of those who have more to help those who have less. The revolutions that displaced the old European ruling class, the general extension of wealth and education which has made individuals more and more alike have given an immense and unexpected impetus to the principle of equality, which Christianity had established in the spiritual rather than in the tangible material sphere. The idea that all men have a right to certain goods, to certain pleasures, and that our primary moral duty is to procure these for them—this idea, as I said above, has now gained immense breadth, and it now appears in an endless variety of aspects. This first innovation led to another. Christianity made charity a personal virtue. Every day now we are making a social duty, a political obligation, a public virtue out of it. And the growing number of those who must be supported, the variety of needs which we are growing accustomed to provide for, the disappearance of great personalities to whom previously one could turn with these problems of succor, now makes every eye turn to the State. Governments now are compelled to redress certain inequalities, to mollify certain hardships, to offer support to all the luckless and helpless. Thus a new kind of social and political morality is being established, a kind which the antique peoples hardly knew but which is, in reality, a combination of some of their political ideas with the moral principles of Christianity.

Here, my dear Gobineau, is all that I can now distinguish through the fog that surrounds me. You see that I speak only of what I see in the habits of people; I am unable to say whether the same signs are registered in books or whether they reappear elsewhere. These reflections of mine are not supposed to give you a foundation or a basic framework, but rather an example of what I think we should search for. We have to find whatever new concepts of morality may exist. I have tried hard, while attempting to keep close to realities. Do my propositions strike you as true? Do you have others to propose? Do these modern moral theories justify them? My own mental habit has made me look exclusively for these newer things which might directly influence the actions of our contemporaries. But I cannot afford to neglect those different moralistic innovations, the new theses, new concepts, new explications which I might be permitted to call sterile fantasies, were it not for my academic affiliation that obliges me to term them “interesting products of the human intellect.”

Only after we shall have outlined whatever there is new in the moral doctrines and tendencies of our age will we begin to follow the consequences of these primary data in some detail. We should ascertain them before all. So, my dear collaborator, put your head in your hands and think about the above. What I ask from you is no longer the work of a student but of a master, yet I am certain that this does not surpass your powers. Once we have this foundation the rest of the work will be easier and at the same time much more interesting. . . .

Farewell, monsieur. Please trust the expression of my very genuine affection.

P.S. Don’t destroy this letter, as I might wish to reread it someday when I finally get down to writing.

**Question:**
1. How does egalitarianism subvert Christian morals according to de Tocqueville? Is his argument compelling?