

# The Core as an Education for Natural Aristocrats

*Walter Berns*

**D**oes the curriculum have a core? Tocqueville helps us to understand why we ask this question today; there is something peculiarly democratic about it and he is our best guide to what is democratic: “I have no doubt that, at long intervals, an ardent, inextinguishable, love of truth is born in a few men among us which, although never completely satisfied, is the food on which their spirit is nourished.” Then, after a brief portrayal of Pascal, his model of a person moved by a pure love of the truth, Tocqueville adds: “The future will prove whether these passions, so rare and so fruitful, are born and grow as readily in democratic as in aristocratic societies. As for me, I confess that I can scarcely believe it.”<sup>1</sup> As any of his readers knows, particularly readers of the first hundred pages or so of the second volume of his *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville had grave doubts about the life of the mind under democratic auspices.

He also had reservations about aristocracy, although of a different sort, but, as in the case of democracy, there was something to be said in its favor. Aristocracies may be founded on an unjust principle, and, Tocqueville writes, they are often guilty of tyrannical and inhuman acts, but they are not contemptible or petty. It is easy for aristocrats to acquire an exaggerated notion of their own virtues, but, precisely because of their power and the greatness of their social position, they entertain, or conceive, as Tocqueville puts it, “very grand ideas of the dignity, the power, the greatness of man himself.”<sup>2</sup>

Such ideas have happy consequences. Their influence, Tocqueville writes, is felt by those who cultivate the arts and sciences, and this was important for him; their influence facilitates the natural human impulse—*élan*—to seek the truth, to conceive, as Tocqueville puts it, “a sublime and almost divine love of the truth.”<sup>3</sup> In short, their currency in society nurtures intellectual *eros*.

The foundation of all this was the family. In aristocratic societies, authority was assigned according to birth alone and, therefore, unjustly and unequally, but the consequences of this were not necessarily unjust in every respect. Authority as such is not unjust, particularly intellectual authority. In this respect all men are not created equal. On the contrary, with respect to their intellectual capacities, men are created unequal; as Tocqueville puts it, unequal intellects “come directly from God.”

The aristocratic society could not help but confirm this. By granting authority on the basis of social position—on the basis of the family and on one’s place within the family—it confirmed the idea of authority independent of social position. It provided room for it. In Pierre Manent’s words—in what I think is the best book on Tocqueville’s thought—aristocracy “opens the door to those whose authority is based on their natural talents.”<sup>4</sup> It opened the door for

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Pascal, for example. And one cannot recognize Pascal's genius without, at the same time, acknowledging at least the possibility of a world beyond the world of convention or public opinion, the natural world, or God's world, but in either case a world worthy of Pascal's extraordinary efforts to understand. A world worth studying and embellishing. A world, if you will, with a core curriculum.

In sum, aristocracy, founded in defiance of nature, prevented some human beings from developing their nature—what does a child's rank at his birth tell us about his capacities? Or, to quote Werner J. Dannhauser who, in turn, was quoting the late Herbert Storing, “that black child there may turn out to be Frederick Douglass, that white child Charles Manson”<sup>5</sup>—but, nevertheless, aristocratic society did respect the power of nature itself, or the distinctions made by nature.

Democracy, founded in accordance with nature and its laws, and, at least in principle, offering everybody an equal opportunity to develop his nature, nevertheless denies an aspect of that nature by respecting everybody equally. At its worst, Tocqueville fears, democracy will hate every manifestation of inequality, and more precisely, of superiority. It will deny superiority, intellectual as well as social. It will deny the natural right of anyone—Pascal, Tocqueville, or Thomas Jefferson—to prescribe a curriculum. It will be governed by the principle, “I'm at least as good as you are.”

What it means to be governed by this principle—“I'm at least as good as you are”—is described in loving detail by Bruce Ackerman in his recent book, *Social Justice in the Liberal State*.<sup>6</sup> It means that every way of life, or every “life plan,” is arbitrary, so all are equal, and none is to be encouraged by the liberal state. Ackerman thinks this means that all must be respected, given their due, and in no way discouraged by the liberal state. On the contrary, I think it means that none is deserving of respect, including the liberal way of life as espoused by Bruce Ackerman. He might have learned this from Nietzsche.

More to the point here, for Ackerman, authority means authoritarian, “coercive,” so he's against it, even (except during the earliest years of a child's life) the authority of parents, and, of course, the authority of teachers and school boards. “As the child gains increasing familiarity with the range of cultural models open to him in a liberal society,” Ackerman writes, “the choice of his curriculum should increasingly become his responsibility, rather than that of his educators.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, this “I'm at least as good as you are” society, which is to say, this morally neutral, nonjudgmental society, *will* not foster a curriculum because it *must* not foster a particular “life plan,” because no one can have *knowledge* about *which* “life plan” deserves to be fostered. Therefore, let a thousand flowers bloom.

But will they? Will what blooms be flowers? And will there be a thousand of them? Tocqueville, for one, doubted it. Aiming at no place in particular, this liberal society will, and will willy-nilly, get *someplace*, and, if Tocqueville's vision

was true, there is no reason whatever to be complacent about the kind of place that will be. The society that thinks pushpin as good as poetry—here I cite Clifford Orwin<sup>8</sup>—will end up with a *lot* of mediocre pushpin and a *little* mediocre poetry.

Tocqueville had some kind words to say about the aristocratic family because, although not part of its intention, it somehow encouraged poetry, so to speak, and discouraged pushpin. The question is, what will take its place in the modern democracy? Not the democratic family which, as Tocqueville points out, bears little resemblance to a family in the older sense, not the family as we know it, and not even the American family as Tocqueville described it. What will take the place of the aristocratic family? Tocqueville did not say, except implicitly; Jefferson's answer was explicit: the university. The university was to be a kind of aristocratic island in the democratic American sea, a place for the natural aristocracy that occupied so prominent a place in the Adams-Jefferson correspondence.

Thus, in our beginning as a nation this curriculum question took a different form. Not, Does it have a core? but, rather, What is its core? And Jefferson, among others, did not hesitate to define it for us; unlike Bruce Ackerman, he knew that cultural gardens have to be cultivated, and not by children. Hence, John Locke's *Second Treatise*, he said, Sidney's *Discourse on Government*, the Declaration of Independence, *The Federalist*, and history. History, Jefferson said, will apprise our youth of the past, which will enable them to judge of the future.<sup>9</sup> The best of our youth would receive a political education, and, following Aristotle's advice, that education would be in accordance with the principles of the regime, in this case democracy.

But Jefferson's was not to be exclusively or narrowly a political or civic education. It would include Greek, Latin, Hebrew, the modern languages, the *belles lettres*, mathematics, and the various sciences—in short, a liberal or humane education in the traditional sense. It would be an aristocratic education; or more precisely, an education for natural aristocrats.

Jefferson had no illusions that everybody was equally capable of mastering this curriculum. Nature distributes rights equally, but not talents. "The mass of our citizens," he wrote, "may be divided into two classes, the laboring and the learned," and only the learned were to be prepared for and admitted to the university. After a general course of studies that Jefferson described with great particularity, the learned class was itself divided into those "destined for the learned professions, as a means of livelihood"—law, medicine, architecture, music, etc.—and "the wealthy, who, possessing independent fortunes, may aspire to share in conducting the affairs of the nation, or to live with usefulness and respect in the private ranks of life."<sup>10</sup> In either case, the university would take "the best geniuses," as he puts it, and "form them to habits of reflection and correct action, rendering them examples of virtue to others, and of happiness within themselves."<sup>11</sup> *Our* intellectual life will depend on the universi-

ties. Pascal was not a professor, nor were Rousseau, Hobbes, Locke, or Jefferson; but Bruce Ackerman, John Rawls, and, say, Ronald Dworkin will—and will of democratic necessity—be professors. Outside the university, America's business is business, as Calvin Coolidge noted and Tocqueville predicted.

How long this idea of a core curriculum prevailed in our public institutions, or how long vestiges of it could or will still be found, is a question for historians; Tocqueville, again, was by no means sanguine about its future, to say the least. What concerned him was that, unlike the French aristocracy, the democracy that followed it would be characterized by a “craving for material prosperity.”<sup>12</sup> Whatever its faults, that aristocracy had produced, or had made room for, men ruled by passions of a different sort, “outstanding personalities,” as Tocqueville called them, “men of genius, proud and daring men, with an overmastering desire to make a name for themselves.” Men similar in this respect to the Americans Jefferson, Hamilton, Adams, Madison, and the others. But also men like Pascal, Montesquieu, and Rousseau, the men whom, Tocqueville said, he lived with a little bit every day when writing *Democracy in America*. Men capable of embellishing the world with their thoughts and their deeds. Men who knew the sublime pleasure “of speaking, acting, breathing without constraint, obedient only to God and the laws of the land.”<sup>13</sup> Free men, free to forsake the pursuit of material goods for riches of a greater sort. This liberty is given by God to only a few, but it “sheds a light enabling others to see and to judge the vices and virtues of men as they truly are.”<sup>14</sup> Men like Tocqueville who, without mentioning the word “university,” nevertheless prescribed its curriculum. Will his authority be recognized in a democracy?

For Tocqueville, democracy is not merely a form of government; not, at least, modern democracy. It is an opinion that governs the whole of life, that characterizes every human relation: man and woman, parent and child, master and servant, even, Tocqueville indicates, man and God. It is a condition where everyone can say, “I’m at least as good as you are.” Where authority—except that of public opinion—is distrusted. “When standards are unequal and men unlike,” Tocqueville writes, “there are some very enlightened and learned individuals whose intelligence gives them great power, while the multitude is very ignorant and blinkered. As a result, men living under an aristocracy are naturally inclined to be guided in their views by a more thoughtful man or class, and they have little inclination to suppose the masses infallible.” But, he continued, in democratic times public opinion becomes the mistress of the world: “In times of equality men, being so like each other, have no confidence in others, but this same likeness leads them to place almost unlimited confidence in the judgment of the public. For they think it not unreasonable that, all having the same means of knowledge, truth will be found on the side of the majority.”<sup>15</sup>

If Tocqueville is right, there is little reason to suppose that public opinion will not ultimately be decisive in the design of the university curriculum, that

its core will not be determined by that opinion. Hope lies in persuading the public to read Tocqueville and to understand that his book, among others, should be a prominent part of that core.

## Notes

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, part 1, ch. 10. My translation.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville et la Nature de la Démocratie* (Paris: Commentaire Julliard, 1982), 110. My translation.
5. Werner J. Dannhauser, "Some Thoughts on Liberty, Equality, and Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*," *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 2 (Autumn 1984): 152.
6. Bruce A. Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).
7. *Ibid.*, 158.
8. See Clifford Orwin's review of *Social Justice in the Liberal State* in the *New York Times*, Sunday, 19 October 1980, 14, 46.
9. Thomas Jefferson, "From the Minutes of the Board of Visitors, University of Virginia, 1822-1825," *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XIV, in *Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 479, 274.
10. Jefferson to Peter Carr, 7 September 1814, *Writings*, 1348ff.
11. Jefferson, "Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia," *Writings*, 459-60.
12. Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Regime et la Revolution*, book 2, ch. 11. My translation.
13. *Ibid.*, book 3, ch. 3.
14. *Ibid.*, Foreword, ("... et crée la lumière qui permet de voir and de juger les vices et les vertues des hommes.")
15. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1969), 443.