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Chambers of Reflection: Rousseau, Tocqueville, and Self-Government in the Digital Age

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Introduction

A New Wave of Democratic Character

Digital technology has cultivated currents of connectivity and democratization that comprise a new wave of character—one that nonetheless emerges from the winds of past ideals of social progress and political equality. The transcendence of our communicative reach now offers us the promise of emancipation from our environments. During a pandemic that entraps us in physical vulnerabilities and limitations, the crest of our culture crashes down only to regenerate through a successive surge: our reliance on the already ascending digital domain. Although I complete this paper through such modern means, this endeavor derives its inspiration from old observations.

The growth of digital technology increases our *natural freedom*: our ability to act amidst the constraints of our surroundings.[1] But proper education is necessary to promote political freedom: our capacity to self-govern. French political theorists Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Alexis de Tocqueville knew this well. Against the backdrop of advancing Enlightenment ideology, Rousseau writes of vanity as the source of contemporary misery. Yet he presents the possibility that we may shape our drive for validation into the glue that holds together democracy through recognition of our common inclinations. Following the American and French revolutions, Tocqueville writes that a rise in individualism may introduce a subtle but corrosive form of democratic despotism. Yet he argues that associations can prevent this danger and grant us greater autonomy by encouraging us to reflect on our *self-interest well understood*: the greater

[1] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "*On the Social Contract*," in *The Major Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Two Discourses & The Social Contract*, translated and edited by John T. Scott (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

perspective we gain through collaboration with others, thoughtful reflection, and reverence for truths that lie beyond the dictates of our cursory instincts.[2]

Although Rousseau and Tocqueville present divergent approaches to the project of self-governance, they both contribute to a common reservoir from which we can gain insight into the political trends of the Digital Age. Both Rousseau and Tocqueville claim that the dogmas of their day, Enlightenment ideology and democratic ideology respectively, present paths that lead us away from political freedom. Today, I extend their analyses to examine how faith in the emancipatory power of digital technology may similarly alienate us from our ability to self-govern.

The progression of my account will mirror Rousseau's model of education for political freedom. For Rousseau, the ideal process of political education is twofold. First, in natural education, one learns self-reliance through free inquiry without the socially-imposed restrictions of one's drive for recognition. Second, in civic education, one learns to direct the eventual emergence of one's drive for recognition toward a sense of duty to support the *general will*: the set of fundamental desires that belong to each of the members of a political community and uphold "the happiness and freedom of all our fellow beings."[3] Although Rousseau considered such efforts difficult in his day, the Digital Age has perhaps further problematized the education of self-governance.

Now, we are embodied in both the physical world and the digital realm. Our increased social visibility allows for the intrusion of vanity into our private existences, as we perpetually

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[2] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[3] Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 51.

appear before an audience. Meanwhile, digital distortions of reality provide escapist entertainment and factionalized news that may direct our attention away from public engagement as we withdraw into individualism. Consequently, modern technology may actualize Rousseau's depiction of the depraved products of "the education of society": "double men, always appearing to relate everything to others and never relating anything except to themselves alone."[4]

Digital society's education of democratic citizens occurs in chambers of reflection. At their worst, these chambers function as screens that present us with illusory insight into the outside world while entrapping us in our pride and bias. But at their best, our digital chambers serve as assemblies that encourage the exercise of *civil freedom*: one's capacity to orient oneself "toward a whole of which one is a part."[5] To navigate these contrary paths, we would do well to envision what the road away from political freedom looks like so that we can avoid it and instead align technological progress with the project of self-government.

In this paper, I aim to provide some such understanding. I argue that Rousseau's account of our corrupted drive for recognition and Tocqueville's investigation into the dangers of individualism apply all the more to democracy in the Digital Age. Accordingly, these character critiques can help us understand how technological progress may deviate from the promotion of political freedom.

In Chapter One, "To Hold a Mirror to Nature," I examine the purpose of Rousseau's account of the state of nature. I argue that he places us back in nature in order to reflect the pitfall of our faith in social progress—an aggravated drive for recognition that intensifies as

[4] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, introduction, translation, and notes by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 41.

[5] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "*On the Social Contract*," in *Major Political Writings*, 174.

Enlightenment ideology encourages man to aim to understand the world in his own image rather than to understand himself within the constraints of nature.

In Chapter Two, "The Actualization of Double Man," I analyze the formation of the Rousseauian double man in digital society. I argue that the increasing divide between the digital selves we appear as and the natural selves we inhabit may lead to a form of self-estrangement that encourages us to view ourselves and others as objects—instruments that support our sense of prideful self-awareness.

In Chapter Three, "Recognition through Social Surveillance," I explain how our inflamed drive for validation causes us to subject ourselves to social surveillance. Rather than predominantly perform for peers whose feedback and interests could encourage our self-interest well understood, we increasingly submit to the amorphous audience of public opinion and the data collection of Big Tech companies.

In Chapter Four, "Individualism through Personalization Technology," I show that personalization technology allows for further withdrawal into Tocquevillian individualism. Online, democratic ideology may aggravate the power of public opinion to chill free speech while algorithmic distribution of targeted news shapes our digital environments into chambers that reflect our particular biases and desires.

In my conclusion, "Digital Tribalism and the Automation of Self-Growth," I identify the potential path of digital progress that departs from political freedom. The evolution of technology threatens to produce a regression in the sociability and reflective agency that promote our capacity for self-government. But by better recognizing this danger, we may reconstruct digital dis-society into conditions more conducive to self-growth and flourishing.

Chapter One

To Hold A Mirror to Nature

> Suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own image, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. Now, this overdone, or come tardy off, though it make the unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve; the censure of the which one must in your allowance, o'erweigh a whole theatre of others.
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> —Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 3.2

Shakespeare's Prince Hamlet delivers these words to actors who will soon perform for young Hamlet's stepfather, King Claudius of Denmark. Hamlet urges the players to appear artistic rather than artificial and to act not only for the sake of entertainment but also to reveal a truth, for they are to depict a thinly veiled reenactment of the crime Hamlet suspects Claudius of having committed: the murder of Hamlet's father, the former king. The actors are to hold a "mirror up to nature" so that Claudius will be confronted by his possible past, and Hamlet can decipher whether or not Claudius is a killer.[6]

For Rousseau, the distinctive quality of humans is this very ability to hold the mirror, to reenact the past in order to better understand who we are and to attain a view of ourselves through our self-awareness. We possess the faculty of *perfectibility,* which allows us to envision an improved version of ourselves and strive to satisfy that dream.[7] Thus, when Rousseau first describes man in the state of nature, man's attention at once directs toward nature as it is and

[6] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, 1985), 80, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.bowdoin.edu/lib/bowdoin-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5445133.

[7] Rousseau, "*Discourse on Inequality*," in *Major Political Writings*.

reflects toward heaven as it could be. Rousseau presents his model human as "walking on two feet, using his hands as we do ours, directing his gaze toward the whole of nature, and surveying with his eyes the vast expanse of heaven."[8]

Like Hamlet, Rousseau displays his mirror to nature to reveal sin. Yet the wrongdoing that Rousseau wishes to expose emanates not from a single actor but rather from the propensity of social progress to make actors of us all. Rousseau might agree with another one of Shakespeare's characters that "all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players," but, for Rousseau, such social superficiality is not a predetermined feature of human interaction.[9] Instead, our prideful posturing marks a cultural distortion of our drive for recognition. We bear our self-awareness as a burden when we no longer hold a mirror to nature but rather use the reflection of our self-awareness to cast everything back to our social rank. Inequality and suffering follow from our increasing tendency to sacrifice our humanity for the sake of social roles themselves, as Claudius does when he kills his brother to rise to the position of King of Denmark. Rousseau offers an account of the state of nature not to provide a literal (or even necessarily linear) history but rather to hold a mirror to nature, to show how we become entranced by our reflection rather than realize it to be a mere means, and to reveal how we can keep from instrumentalizing ourselves for the sake of our self-image.

[8] Rousseau, "*Discourse on Inequality*," in *Major Political Writings*, 65.

[9] William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (Infomotions, Inc., 2000), 27, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.bowdoin.edu/lib/bowdoin-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3314851.

Reconstructing the State of Nature: A Source of Self-Understanding

Rousseau sets the stage for his account of human nature by examining what separates humans from other animals: our very *lack* of a fixed nature. Our most enduring trait is our ability to adapt to the new cultures and technologies that we construct and inherit. Here, Rousseau's depiction departs from those of previous social contract theorists such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. As political theorist John T. Scott notes, unlike "perhaps all of his predecessors," Rousseau holds that human nature is "shaped to a great extent by historical, environmental, and social forces instead of having a universal and unvarying form."[10] Human history results not only from the external environment of the natural world but also from our perfectibility, which receives its drive from our will to change nature, including our own. Accordingly, Rousseau writes that humans "raise themselves up to the level of the instinct of beasts, with the advantage that each species has only its own instinct, and man—perhaps having none that belongs to him—appropriates them all to himself."[11] The crucial question that concerns Rousseau is what we do with the mechanisms we appropriate, particularly as we build technologies that appear increasingly foreign from any organic existence apart from human culture.

Rousseau holds that humans are unique creatures not only because we acquire new abilities but also because we develop new desires. The ends at which our actions aim shift as our social setting shapes the manner of our self-love. On Rousseau's account, humans in their state of nature seek only to fulfill *amour de soi*, which Scott describes as "the natural form of self-love by which all beings, including human beings, seek their self-preservation and well-being."[12]

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[10] Rousseau, "Introduction," in *Major Political Writings*, xiv.

[11] Rousseau, "*Discourse on Inequality*," in *Major Political Writings*, 66.

[12] Rousseau, "Introduction," in *Major Political Writings*, xxxvi.

People with this elemental mentality exhibit relatively solitary behavior and, without acquiring superfluous wants, attend only to their needs.

Yet they can also recognize when another expresses a basic and universal will by mirroring their natural desires. For Rousseau, our empathy predates our political existence, as primordial man experiences "an innate repugnance to see his fellow human being suffer."[13] Rousseau regards this quality as the rudimentary instinct of pity and recognizes that even other animals share this capacity. He writes that "an animal does not pass by a dead animal of its own species without uneasiness."[14] Both non-human animals and humans in the state of nature wish not to see or cause needless suffering. They only employ the violence or domination that their *amour de soi* requires.

Rousseau's man in the state of nature follows no moral code beyond instinct. As sociologist Emile Durkheim explains, "man is only a moral being because he lives in society, since morality consists in solidarity with a group…. The state of nature… is if not immoral, at least *amoral*, a fact that Rousseau himself recognized."[15] But man need not abide by a moral code to act justly toward himself and others. Rousseau argues that ideology often contaminates natural pity and politicizes our sense of justice. The politics we develop in sophisticated society may do more to corrupt us than to civilize us. Thus, Rousseau claims of man in nascent society relative to man in modern society, "so much more does the ignorance of vice profit these men

[13] Rousseau, "*Discourse on Inequality*," in *Major Political Writings*, 83.

[14] Rousseau, "*Discourse on Inequality*," in *Major Political Writings*, 83.

[15] Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, introduction by Lewis Coser, translated by W.D. Halls (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 332.

than does the understanding of virtue profit those."[16] Since man in the state of nature attends only to his basic needs, he has very few passions. Passion and reason only develop together as humans enter into society, and this linkage can cause us to construct narratives that conflate pride and morality. Perhaps, as philosopher Sally J. Scholz suggests Rousseau's view, "there is no need for a 'higher philosophy'; one need only consult one's conscience to determine what is right and what is wrong."[17] Nevertheless, humans are destined to complicate the tensions between their self-interests as they enter society.

Individual humans in the state of nature eventually need to band together to promote their collective *amour de soi*. Alone, man faces obstacles such as "the height of trees, which prevented him from reaching their fruits, the competition of animals that sought to eat these fruits, [and] the ferocity of those that wanted to take his life."[18] Population growth and environmental constraints exacerbate these deficiencies and create the need for humans to socialize. Rousseau observes that "in proportion as the human race spread, difficulties multiplied together with men."[19] And many of these difficulties require collective action.

The interdependence of our *amour de soi* and common recognition of shared goals creates society and, along with it, *amour-propre*, which philosopher Frederick Neuhouser defines as the "form of self-love that drives human individuals to seek the esteem, approval, admiration, or love—in short, the recognition—of their fellow beings."[20] *Amour-propre* expands our interests

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[16] Rousseau, "*Discourse on Inequality*," in *Major Political Writings*, 82.

[17] Sally J. Scholz, "That All Children Should Be Free: Beauvoir, Rousseau, and Childhood," *Hypatia* 25, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 397, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2010.01102.x.

[18] Rousseau, "*Discourse on Inequality*," in *Major Political Writings*, 92.

[19] Rousseau, "*Discourse on Inequality*," in *Major Political Writings*, 92.

[20] Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love*, 1.

beyond survival and basic well-being. It directs our concern toward a sense of our self-worth that depends on how we imagine we appear to other members of society, or, in aggravated forms of *amour-propre*, how we seem to what Hamlet calls a "whole theatre of others."[21]

Hamlet acknowledges that concern over how we appear to this crowd can encourage us to overstep "the modesty of nature" and, through prideful self-awareness, abuse our ability to consider our worth in the eyes of others.[22] For Rousseau, such exaggeration of *amour-propre* poses the central problem of modern society. Accordingly, Neuhouser notes:

> One of Rousseau's central theses is that *amour propre* in its corrupted manifestations—pride or vanity—is the principal source of an array of evils so widespread that they can easily appear to be necessary features of the human condition: enslavement, conflict, vice, misery, and self-estrangement.[23]

Appropriately cultivated, however, *amour-propre* allows us "to hold… the mirror up to nature" and "show virtue her own image."[24] As Neuhouser claims, mitigating the dangers of corrupted *amour-propre* "depends not on suppressing or overcoming the drive for recognition but on cultivating it so that it contributes positively to the achievement of freedom, peace, virtue, happiness, and unalienated selfhood."[25] Our social tendency to be influenced by how we wish to be seen by others can, at its best, suggest a sense of duty that prompts beneficent self-assessment. Concern for our social image can function as the better angel of our nature that delivers us from the short-sightedness and errors in judgment that often render our self-governance ineffective.

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[21] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 80.

[22] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 80.

[23] Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love*, back cover.

[24] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 80.

[25] Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love*, back cover.

Rousseau emphasizes that the most profoundly positive instances of *amour-propre* sprout in intimate societies and, above all, in families. The state of nature in which humans engage in close connections rather than thin relationships based on appearances marks the highest form of sociability for Rousseau. He observes that "this period of the development of human faculties, occupying a golden mean between the indolence of the primitive state and the petulant activity of our pride, must have been the happiest and most durable epoch."[26]

Rousseau depicts the family as a fountainhead for self-governance that is at once simple and far-sighted. Our thick relationships prompt a simple sense of positive pride, as our drive for recognition therein is born from empathy and shared basic responsibilities. Yet these intimately acquired interests are also far-sighted, as familial love creates a selfless drive for self-affirmation—an imposition of the interests of others onto our own will such that our self-interest extends beyond our lives and serves as a source for seamless adherence to self-governance for the sake of our posterity. Perhaps this juxtaposition between bounded social awareness and immortality is what elicits the Christian comparison that philosopher Maurice Cranston draws between Rousseau's supreme state of nature and the paradise that God creates for humans. "'Nascent society'," Cranston writes, "is the period of human evolution which Rousseau regards as almost ideal: it is the Garden of Eden in his vision of the past."[27] Rousseau reminisces on the virtue of such times:

> The first developments of the heart were the effect of a new situation that brought together husbands and wives, fathers and children, in a common dwelling. The habit of living together gave rise to the sweetest feelings known to men: conjugal love and paternal love. Each family became a little society all the better united…. with a simple

[26] Rousseau, "*Discourse on Inequality*," in *Major Political Writings*, 97.

[27] Maurice Cranston, *Philosophers and Pamphleteers: Political Theorists of the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 72.

and solitary life, very limited needs, and the implements they had invented to provide for them.[28]

However, we ought not to interpret Rousseau's approval of this age as a call to return to our primeval naiveté. Rather, Rousseau's account of human nature encourages us to prioritize the relationships that enrich our lives, for they provide us with not only innate but also instrumental value.

The Complication of Civic Education

Consideration for others within thick relationships establishes the basis for adopting the interests of other members of society. Rousseau realizes that in large groups, it is unrealistic to expect individuals to behave as members of one cohesive and caring clan. Accordingly, he declares that "the most ancient of all societies and the only natural one is that of the family."[29] But Rousseau also highlights the role of the family as an intermediary between individuals and governments—a bond through which we practice the transition from natural to civil freedom.

In Rousseau's treatise on education, he teaches his pupil, Emile, virtue by compelling Emile to learn from his affection for his lover, Sophie, how to transition from his natural to his civic education. Rousseau demands that Emile leave Sophie temporarily so that Emile will feel what it is like for his natural freedom to be subjected to law for the sake of the one he loves. As philosopher Allan Bloom interprets, Emile's "passion for his future wife and concern for their unborn children, combined with his mature learning, make an abstract presentation of the

[28] Rousseau, "*Discourse on Inequality*," in *Major Political Writings*, 94.

[29] Rousseau, "*On the Social Contract*," in *Major Political Writings*, 164.

principles of right accessible to him…. He is, in effect, taught the *Social Contract*."[30] For Rousseau, obligations to those whose well-being is an extension of ours—to those whom we know and love—comprise our most precious social connections and symbolize the way we should try to engage with greater society.

Our personal attachments teach us political freedom by expanding our capacity to self-govern. For when we truly care for another, we willingly subject our selfish interests to the interests we share with our loved one. This is not the mark of sacrifice but rather the exercise of civil freedom: one's capacity to orient oneself "toward a whole of which one is a part."[31] The emergence of *amour-propre* can thus cultivate connection rather than promote the pursuit of status-based domination. Accordingly, the formation of a monogamous romantic relationship occupies an important place in Rousseau's account of ideal education. Neuhouser elaborates:

> The point of following Emile even after he has emerged from adolescence is that his education is not complete until he has entered into a lifelong, monogamous, heterosexual union based on his exclusive, passionate love for a particular woman, Sophie…. Beyond simply functioning as a source of esteem in general, though, sexual love responds to the specific desire to occupy 'the first position' in the eyes of others, which… Rousseau regards as a deep and persistent yearning of human beings. The peculiar achievement of romantic love is that, by taking a single person as its object, it transforms the general desire to be first for others into the specific desire to be first for *one* other person. In doing so, romantic love makes the longing to be first satisfiable in principle for everyone, and so, from the perspective of society as a whole, its power to produce misery and discord is significantly reduced, even if not eliminated altogether.[32]

Yet the negative effects of aggravated *amour-propre* cannot always be so easily quelled. Rousseau characterizes this form of self-love as a "useful but dangerous instrument" that "rarely

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[30] Rousseau, "Introduction," in *Emile*, 27.

[31] Rousseau, "*On the Social Contract*," in *Major Political Writings*, 174.

[32] Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love*, 170.

does good without evil."[33] *Amour-propre* can become destructive when our drive for recognition deviates from our consideration of loved ones whose well-being functions as an end for the sake of which we govern our actions. The approval we garner from our close family and friends is closely tied to our empathic connections with them—our adoption of their interests as our own. In this vein, our civil freedom arises from a socially conditioned sense of duty.

But the expansion of the size and technological sophistication of society encourages us to sacrifice bonds based on intimacy for relations based on status. Our relationships thin as our increased communicative capacity encourages relational breadth at the expense of relational depth. Consequently, our ties more easily untether as they increasingly fail to instill in us the adoption of the self-interests of others—the very exercise that promotes our civil freedom. This failure marks the miseducation of modern man, as he extracts the aim of social approval from the context of reciprocal consideration in which it is warranted. The contemporary character deviates from the model of political education that Rousseau sets forth for Emile:

> He [Emile] will not precisely say to himself, "I rejoice because they approve of me," but rather, "I rejoice because they approve of what I have done that is good. I rejoice that the people who honor me do themselves honor. So long as they judge so soundly, it will be a fine thing to obtain their esteem."[34]

Rousseau observes that in a society based on status and immoderate *amour-propre*, we increasingly seek approval from others without adopting their interests. We instrumentalize our peers for the sake of the attention they grant us. We value their approval not because it marks a mutual connection of interests but rather because it affirms our drive for recognition. We raise a mirror to nature only so that it might reflect well upon us. For Rousseau, the construction of

[33] Rousseau, *Emile*, 244-245.

[34] Rousseau, *Emile*, 339.

social hierarchies that aim at the end of recognition itself marks our original sin and, in so doing, provides the principal source of contemporary suffering as it renders our desires insatiable.

Herein lies Rousseau's rationalization of the Fall. Our perfectibility allows us to adapt to and manipulate our environments—to disobey the laws of nature. Yet when swept up by the temptation of perfectibility as an end in itself, aside from the well-being it secures or the relationships it promotes, we strive to become the gods we once feared. We wish to be impossibly perfect. We construct as our self-representation the "vast expanse of heaven" against which others measure themselves.[35] We place ourselves at the center of the universe. But we do so not to promote the virtuous end of heaven that encourages individuals to rise to their best selves; rather, we do so merely to attract followers. Thus, the threat of social progress is that it tempts us to make false idols of ourselves.

This reading becomes clearer when we place Rousseau's analysis in historical context. He wrote in an era of technological progress analogous to our day: an age similarly characterized by the promise of greater connectivity through the reduction of the formerly spiritual into mechanistic terms. Widespread publishing and increasing rates of literacy allowed the science, rationalism, and secularization of the Enlightenment not only to alter the course of society but also to inspire a new view of ourselves. Behind the currents of history, man began to see not God but himself. Yet just as water bends light toward the center to create an inverse reflection, the reflection of man as the ultimate creator is a backward one.

This backdrop of misguided faith in technological progress is the image of nature to which Rousseau attempts to hold his mirror. For, if we can reflect on the inverted self-image of

[35] Rousseau,"*Discourse on Inequality*," in *Major Political Writings*, 65.

ourselves as false idols, we can correct our misleading views and capture an authentic perspective of our place in nature.

Such an endeavor requires a study of the origins of our drive to chase the status-driven social roles we construct. Rousseau first presents the effects of inflamed *amour-propre* as hindrances that accompany our hubris—methods of subjugation disguised as the relishes of sophisticated society— in his *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*. Then, in his *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau argues that our aggravated drive for recognition is not inevitable but rather arises from the cultural corruption of *amour-propre*. It is possible to change our course in order to avoid this obstacle to political freedom. Accordingly, Rousseau offers us a uniquely emancipatory path for social progress. His ultimate goal will be to expose the modern means of false self-idolatry and propose the goal of becoming gods of ourselves rather than gods ourselves.

The ultimate good at which society ought to aim, Rousseau suggests, is not to invent objects but to reinvent ourselves through our capacity to self-govern. To fulfill this purpose, only democracy will do. As Scott notes, Rousseau becomes the first, and perhaps the most notable, political theorist in the Western canon to argue that democracy is the only legitimate form of government.[36] For democratic forms of government can, with proper education (as Rousseau later offers in *Emile*) and institutions (as Rousseau presents in *On the Social Contract*), cultivate civil freedom and support the general will, which is the ideal object of representation for the *social contract*.[37]

[36] Rousseau, "Introduction," in *Major Political Writings*, xiv.

[37] Rousseau, "*On the Social Contract*," in *Major Political Writings*.

Rousseau does not doubt that the advances of the Enlightenment present a potentially liberating lane for learning self-government. Indeed, he begins his first major political work with an optimistic outlook on our increased capacity for self-understanding. Rousseau writes:

> It is a grand and beautiful spectacle to see man emerging, as it were, out of nothingness through his own efforts; dissipating by the light of his reason the shadows in which nature has enveloped him; rising above himself; soaring by his mind to the celestial regions; traversing with the steps of a giant, like the sun, the vast expanse of the universe; and, what is grander and more difficult, returning into himself in order there to study man and to know his nature, his duties, and his end.[38]

Much of the rest of his writing in the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* and beyond, however, warns that we should also consider how, as we progress further away from our natural state, our intensifying obsession with appearances threatens to produce injustice and prevent self-government.

The Aggravation of *Amour-Propre*

Why, one might ask, have we not been content to cultivate our gardens in those intimate societies that Rousseau values for their tendency to fashion the drive for recognition into loving forms of civil freedom? "Why," Cranston questions, "if the simple condition of 'nascent society' was so delightful, did men ever quit it?"[39] He answers that within Rousseau's account of the state of nature, the answer may lie in "economic shortage":

> As the number of persons on earth increased, the natural abundance of provisions diminished; no longer able to feed himself and his family on the herbs he could find, the individual had to start eating meat and to unite with his neighbours in order to hunt game in groups.[40]

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[38] Rousseau, "*Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*," in *Major Political Writings*, 11.

[39] Cranston, *Philosophers and Pamphleteers*, 72.

[40] Cranston, *Philosophers and Pamphleteers*, 72.

What begins as the hunt to meet needs, however, can easily become the means to create greed. Rousseau claims that the communal acquisition of essential goods establishes a basis on which we tend to expand our desires and subject ourselves to a state of perpetual shortage. Prideful self-interests emerge as small groups expand to enjoy leisure time and develop dependencies on luxuries. The visible production and distribution of affluence creates positional goods (the value of which emanates from one's exclusive possession of them and thus feeds our *amour-propre*) in addition to use-value goods (which serve our *amour de soi*). Accordingly, as technological progress allows for the production and display of more positional goods, we are increasingly drawn to products that confer status rather than meet needs. Rousseau worries that these new inclinations of inflamed *amour-propre* increase the expense of our well-being. He writes:

> Aside from the fact that they continued to soften both body and mind, since these conveniences lost almost all of their charm through habit, and since they had at the same time degenerated into true needs, being deprived of them became much more cruel than their possession was sweet, and they were unhappy to lose them without being happy to possess them.[41]

Nevertheless, in Rousseau's theory, careless attraction to such luxuries moves many families and small societies to combine to increase their productive capacity. Once wanderers, humans now adopt a more sedentary lifestyle. The growth of material extravagance and the expansion of society produce the unhappy consequence that humans begin to instrumentalize each other. In intimate social settings, members of a collective value each other as they adopt one another's interests. But in larger groups, one values the approval of others not because of the shared interests that empathic understanding establishes but rather because their approval

[41] Rousseau, "*Discourse on Inequality*," in *Major Political Writings*, 94-95.

validates one's sense of self-worth. Accordingly, we instrumentalize others for the sake of our pride.

As the visibility of others and their valuables increases, Rousseau writes, "everyone began to look at everyone else and to wish to be looked at himself, and public esteem acquired a price."[42] As Neuhouser interprets this price, status-driven satisfaction will, on Rousseau's account, "be fleeting and insecure," and any newfound "desires become boundless in a way that is inimical to genuine happiness."[43] *Amour-propre* causes humans to become dependent on more and more goods for their psychological appeasement—goods that they can only appreciate in proportion to what others appear to possess. Consequently, a continual climb to the peak of social pride ensues. As we struggle harder to ascend according to the aim of our *amour-propre*, new clouds invariably come to shroud the summit of our satisfaction.

Rather than promote well-being, prideful progress only makes the standards for enjoyment more onerous. Such advancement may at first generate temporary ease, but additional requisites for well-being soon follow. Worse still, our perpetual desire for supplementary status goods establishes dependence on the gratuitous generation of new treasures above all else, including equitable distribution. Thus, the corruption of our drive for recognition presents the possibility "that a handful of people be glutted with superfluities while the starving multitude lacks necessities."[44]

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[42] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "*The Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*", in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, edited by Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 166.

[43] Frederick Neuhouser, "Rousseau's Critique of Inequality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 41, no. 2 (Sept. 2013): 206, https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12016.

[44] Rousseau, "*Discourse on Inequality*," in *Major Political Writings*, 117.

The development of *amour-propre* prompts Rousseau to distinguish between natural inequality, which is unavoidable and "consists of the differences in age, health, strengths of Body, and qualities of Mind, or of Soul," and political inequality, which includes the privileges to "be more wealthy, more honored, more powerful" than others.[45] Natural inequalities are facts that we must take into account in trying to promote the general will. Political inequalities, in contrast, facilitate unnecessary competition that makes our well-being dependent on the possessions and thoughts of others. Our pride creates a collective action problem: one that ensnares us in a cycle of purposeless progress, propagates unnecessary political inequalities, and makes us the cause of most of our misfortunes. As Rousseau observes:

> The extreme inequality in our way of life — excess of idleness among some, excess of labor among others; the ease with which our appetites and our sensuality are aroused and satisfied; the overly refined foods of the rich, which feed them with rich sauces and overwhelm them with indigestion; the bad food of the poor, which they are even short of most of the time and the lack of which leads them to greedily stuff their stomachs when they get the chance; late nights, excesses of every kind, immoderate outpourings of all the passions, bouts of fatigue, and exhaustion of the mind; innumerable sorrows and pains which are experienced in every social station and which perpetually gnaw away at men's souls: these are the fatal proofs that most of our ills are our own work.[46]

The project of self-government requires us to realize that these products of our inflamed drive for recognition work against our well-being. Some harmful superfluities arise from our propensity to chase positional goods; other missteps follow from the view that we are, or ought to exercise our political power to be, the creators and manipulators of our external environment.

Recognizing how our *amour-propre* escalates to self-idolatry does not come naturally, especially in a technologically advanced society. Accordingly, Rousseau dedicates what one

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[45] Rousseau, "*The Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*," in *The Discourses*, 131.

[46] Rousseau, "*Discourse on Inequality*," in *Major Political Writings*, 69.

might call his two most famous constructive works to the question of how democracy can correct for the principal product of aggravated *amour-propre*: political inequality. Through the educational model in *Emile* and the ideal institutions of *On the Social Contract*, Rousseau seeks to provide sources that can help us channel disillusionment with our constructed sense of status toward cultivation of civil freedom and support of the general will.

In the following chapters, I examine how we may be led astray from the path to political freedom that Rousseau charts toward what Neuhouser calls "unalienated selfhood."[47] Such a conception of self does not substitute superficial forms of recognition from others for intimate connections with them. Unalienated selfhood flourishes when others hold us accountable to interests and ideals that lie beyond our concern for our self-image.

The technology of modern society, however, may increasingly encourage us to construct a sense of ourselves that amounts to a mere facade that veils our self-estrangement. For developments since Rousseau's day have reinforced the relevance of his declaration that "the education of society… is fit only for making double men, always appearing to relate everything to others and never relating anything except to themselves alone."[48]

[47] Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love*, back cover.

[48] Rousseau, *Emile*, 41.

Chapter Two

The Actualization of Double Man

We are living during a technological revolution that is greatly changing how we interact with one another. In the mid-to-late twentieth century, the global economy began to not only revolve around material production but also increasingly expand through information technology. Transistors that amplified electric signals, computers on which individuals could store vast amounts of data, and the interconnected networks of the Internet marked a transition to what we may call the Digital Age. Today, the floodgates to informational abundance have burst open. Physical barriers to communication have eroded. Now, what happens beyond our daily lives and the commentary we absorb about it transmits to us directly, as currents of transitory personal displays and political narration continually guide our perception of peer activity and public affairs.

At first glance, the recent increase in communicative reach, expansion of available information, and dissemination of publishing power seem to constitute a profoundly positive development for self-government. And indeed, there are many ways in which the Digital Age has enhanced the efficiency of democratic participation and mobilization.

Far from realizing its emancipatory potential, however, our involvement in the digital realm also presents threats to the project of political freedom. Although digital mediums sow seeds for the effective democratization of political discussion, they may also produce a political climate that pollutes civic space with an air of social superficiality. Contaminated by an overflow of digital streams that subconsciously trigger dissatisfaction and division, our engagement in the

public arena may decreasingly reflect our rational and reflective agency. The foundational political issue of our time will be how our capacity for self-government evolves in this environment, for all other policy questions are rooted in the kind of interests our political system represents.

One might compare the Digital Age to the information revolution of the printing press, which began to democratize the written word in the fifteenth century and played a key role in laying the foundations of the Enlightenment ideology that Rousseau critiques. The advancements of our day—the eradication of geographic limitations to communication, the creation of digital goods that transcend the constraints of scarcity, and the diffusion of publishing power—are at least no less culturally significant. And we may only be experiencing the beginning of a new era that ushers in advancements in virtual reality and artificial intelligence that radically change the way we live our lives.

The production and transportation that characterize the Information Age are primarily informational, not physical, as Steve Jobs expresses when he describes computers as "bicycles for the mind."[49] But like the political theorists of the past, we should question what road these new technologies will ride on.

Rousseau claims that while social progress tends to exacerbate *amour-propre*—to tempt us to steer our newfound vehicles of communication toward the aggrandizement of prideful appearances—there is also no path to our primordial state of nature. For "savage man and civilized man differ so much in their inmost heart and inclinations that what constitutes the

[49] Rosabeth Moss Kanter, "Steve Jobs's Bicycles for the Mind," *Harvard Business Review*, October 6, 2011, https://hbr.org/2011/10/steve-jobss-bicycles-for-the-m.html.

supreme happiness of the one would reduce the other to despair."[50] We cannot vanquish the new needs that the technological advancements of society instill in us. As Neuhouser notes, "our conceptions of our basic needs, or of what is necessary to live a decent life, evolve in response to social and cultural developments."[51] Relevantly, internet access is now deemed by many to be a human right.

As we cannot reverse the new needs that *amour-propre* creates through mere political direction, we may only do so through reasoned reflection. Rousseau's approach to the problem of aggravated *amour-propre* is to trace its origins and function in society so that we may learn to repurpose it to better promote our self-government. To reenact such civic education, however, we must first examine its foil: the *bourgeois* education of society.

The *Bourgeois* Role-Player

Rousseau was the first influential thinker to popularize the term "*bourgeois*." He uses it to designate both the individual and the general character who is driven by superficial pursuits—who isolates the drive for surface-level recognition from its intimate and reciprocal underpinnings. By chasing pride without exercising civil freedom, the *bourgeois* seeks the approval of his audience without aiming to understand them. Thus, his *amour-propre* fails to play its part in establishing a sense of self-government that includes concern for others.

The *bourgeois* double man who, in holding a mirror to nature, sees only himself abuses the instrument of social insight. He exploits nature for the sake of his status rather than using

[50] Rousseau, "*The Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*," in *The Discourses*, 186-187.

[51] Neuhouser, "Rousseau's Critique of Inequality," 211.

society as a means to support the general will. Instead of trying to secure self-reliance and simple pleasures through the collaboration and social duties of civilization, he tries to civilize nature through technology in order to recreate his surroundings in his own image. His good is dependent on his fellow society members, as he would not have technology or status without them. Yet his good does not include the interests of his peers, as his aim is technological transcendence—the ill-fated attempt to recreate Rousseau's asocial state of nature in society, for the *bourgeois* longs to be the creator of his own world and to construct an artificial sanctuary fitted specifically to his unique preferences.

In Rousseau's theory, the desires of one who exploits rather than empathizes with others in society are insatiable because one has no attachment to "a whole of which one is a part."[52] The double man identifies himself in everything. He is, as Bloom claims, "a role-player," who sees in his interactions with others only depictions of himself.[53] Consequently, the double man is burdened by a gnawing sense of existential emptiness as he continually falls into what philosopher Albert Camus calls the absurd: a "divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting."[54] The *bourgeois* cannot, as Camus suggests, embrace the absurd. For the apprehension of the absurd is itself uncharacteristic of double men, who, "never relating anything except to themselves alone," wish to embody an environment that fully responds to

[52] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "*On the Social Contract*," in *Major Political Writings*, 174.

[53] Rousseau, "Introduction," in *Emile*, 5.

[54] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 6.

their status-driven sense of self.[55] Rousseau elaborates on the contradictions of our *bourgeois* character:

> Swept along in contrary routes by nature and by men, forced to divide ourselves between these different impulses [of, as Rousseau writes, "always appearing to relate everything to others and never relating anything except to" ourselves "alone"] we follow a composite impulse which leads us to neither one goal nor the other. Thus, in conflict and floating during the whole course of our life, we end it without having been able to put ourselves in harmony with ourselves and without having been good either for ourselves or for others.[56]

When we proceed down the path of *bourgeois* desire to construct a world in our image, we abuse our adaptability. The virtue of perfectibility, Rousseau suggests, is its promotion of self-improvement (as, for example, in the state of nature we appropriate the instincts of other animals to survive). Yet recreating our environments according to our drive for recognition suggests transcending the constraints of self-government and feeding our insatiable desire for attention. Directed toward this illusory end, double men not only distract themselves from cultivating their gardens but also detach themselves from the ground of self-government itself. Thus, they are left "in conflict and floating during the whole course" of their lives, unable to intimately connect with anything beyond themselves that might offer them the hope of resolution.[57] In the Digital Age, double men may similarly misappropriate their bicycles for the mind into cycles of purposeless progress.

Today, the conduit of *bourgeois* character is not Enlightenment ideology but digital ideology: faith in the increasing capacity of digital technology to empower us by showcasing our

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[55] Rousseau, *Emile*, 41.

[56] Rousseau, *Emile*, 41.

[57] Rousseau, *Emile*, 41.

status and liberating us from our physical environment. In "The Californian Ideology," media theorists Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron write of the pervasiveness of a new kind of dogma of digital progress: "a profound faith in the emancipatory potential of the new information technologies" that features "a contradictory mix of technological determinism and libertarian individualism."[58] As journalist Jacob Silverman observes, proponents of the Californian Ideology view "digital capitalism as the harbinger of an era of widespread prosperity" even as income inequality skyrockets.[59] Their optimism originates not only in historically deterministic views such as the inevitability of the equalization of conditions but also from the promise of economic shift. They envision a future in which the production economy already allows us to meet material needs and the new information-based consumption economy opens a frontier in which all possess equal freedom for self-expression. However, more balanced sociological consideration scrutinizes the character shifts that such innovation introduces. For technology creates mere means, which we can direct toward ends that either promote our freedom or support our servitude.

One effect of digital technology has been the actualization of the *bourgeois* double man, who is now split between the total embodiment of the physical realm and the absolute interconnectedness of the digital realm. The modern double man inherits the same tension that Bloom locates in Rousseau's *bourgeois* character, who, as Bloom writes, "is contrasted by Rousseau, on the one side, with the natural man, who is whole and simply concerned with

[58] Jacob Silverman, *Terms of Service: Social Media and the Price of Constant Connection* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 1.

[59] Silverman, *Terms of Service*, 4.

himself, and on the other, with the citizen, whose very being consists in his relation to his city, who understands his good to be identical with the common good."[60] Bloom further explains:

> The bourgeois distinguishes his own good from the common good. His good requires society and hence he exploits others while depending on them. He must define himself in relation to them. The bourgeois comes into being when men no longer believe that there is a common good, when the notion of the fatherland decays.[61]

The *bourgeois* disintegration of the common good clarifies in the contemporary instantiation of the double man. For the digital realm in which the inflammation of *amour-propre* occurs is different for everyone. As authors of the digital realm, we can personalize it through recognition of our online behavior. Yet the malleability of our online appearances may create a greater contrast with the immovable realities of the physical world.

Relationships increasingly begin and persist in a digital world that we appear in yet do not inhabit. Initially alienated from more intimate connections, we increasingly rely only on social visibility to forge our bonds. Accordingly, we lose the element of social accountability that accompanies the rich rapport developed during face-to-face interactions. Others may become instruments of our prideful self-awareness rather than ends in themselves whose well-being is intertwined with our own. We need not adopt the interests of others to garner their approval; in fact, the approval of others takes on a digital life of its own. We reduce others to mere "numbers of matches" that we obtain on dating apps or "likes" that validate our posts. In such cases, *amour-propre* functions as the driving force behind our attempted relationships—the form of self-expression that clouds our genuine efforts with social superficiality. Mutual engagement of online appearances exists independently of our lived experience and creates a layer of disconnect

[60] Rousseau, "Introduction," in *Emile*, 5.

[61] Rousseau, "Introduction," in *Emile*, 5.

between our physical and digital selves. This disconnect, which originates within the *bourgeois* character of the internally divided modern individual, emerges as a potential obstacle to our ability to meaningfully connect with others in the Digital Age. The facade of greater society remains in the endless expanse of the Internet, which, having hollowed out many thick relationships, provides conditions in which *bourgeois* character can thrive.

Others as Instruments and the Danger of Individualism

The cultivation of the general will in democracy requires that individuals adopt one another's interests to allow for civil freedom. But, in the Digital Age, we increasingly encounter the temptation to reduce others to instruments, as our peers seem to live in the audience of our performances. From the *bourgeois* perspective, others decreasingly appear as fellow members of society with inner lives; rather, they increasingly function as mere followers whose worth depends on the social approval they signal.

The basis for these claims lies not only in political theory but also in psychology. The research surrounding Dunbar's number suggests that as the size of societies expand and technology extends our view of others, we sacrifice depth for breadth in our relationships. In the 1990s, British anthropologist Robin Dunbar found a correlation between primate brain size and the size of social groups. He extrapolated that humans could calibrate their social behavior to function in societies of only around 150 individuals. More recently, psychologists and neuroscientists have supported Dunbar's assertion and found that "this rule of 150 remains true

for early hunter-gatherer societies as well as a surprising array of modern groupings…. Exceed 150, and a network is unlikely to last long or cohere well."[62]

It makes sense, then, that as modern technology expands our connective capacity far beyond Dunbar's number, we may increasingly take social shortcuts to performatively signal our allegiance rather than genuinely empathize with others. In cozy abodes, family members or close friends value each other because they want to promote one another's well-being; the interests of those in one's social circle become one's own interests and provide a source of self-government. But in larger social groupings, one comes to value the approval of others not because one has any sort of relationship with or concern for them but rather because their approval validates one's sense of self-worth. Others become means to the end of our prideful self-awareness. As Rousseau writes, when individuals interact in larger social groups, they progressively "grow accustomed to consider different objects and to make comparisons… they imperceptibly acquire ideas of merit and beauty that produce sentiments of preference."[63] It is not just Rousseau, however, who notices the increasing instrumentalization of others as technology expands the size of societies.

While Rousseau introduces the *bourgeois* double man before the American and French revolutions, Tocqueville responds to the emergence of political democracy and extends the critique of *bourgeois* character to democratic ideology. For, as political theorist Michael Locke

[62] Christine Ro, "Dunbar's number: Why we can only maintain 150 relationships," *BBC*, October 9, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20191001-dunbars-number-why-we-can-only-maintain-150-relationships.

[63] Rousseau, "*Discourse on Inequality*," in *Major Political Writings*, 95.

McLendon writes, Tocqueville "believes the passion [of *amour-propre*] to be essentially democratic rather than aristocratic."[64]

The supremacy that Tocqueville ascribes to democracy lies in its inevitable development alongside the spread of information and material progress. He goes so far as to declare that "the gradual development of equality of conditions is… a providential fact."[65] "When one runs through the pages of our history," Tocqueville claims, "one finds so to speak no great events in seven hundred years that have not turned to the profit of equality."[66] Tocqueville continues to support his assertion:

> The Crusades and the wars with the English decimate the nobles and divide their lands; the institution of townships introduces democratic freedom into the heart of the feudal monarchy; the discovery of firearms equalizes the villein and the noble on the battlefield; printing offers equal resources to their intelligence; the mail comes to deposit enlightenment on the doorstep of the poor man's hut as the portal of the palace; Protestantism asserts that all men are equally in a state to find the path to Heaven.[67]

Tocqueville lives in a time in which the inventions of the Industrial Revolution such as the telegraph and the railroad promise to provide networks that further disseminate the expanding spirit of equality—a time in which the revolutions of the United States and France have attempted to instill this spirit of equality in the political realm through the invention of modern democracy. Tocqueville argues that such democratic endeavors are commendable but warrant careful investigation to ensure that they promote self-interest well understood.

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[64] Michael Locke McLendon, *The Psychology of Inequality: Rousseau's 'Amour-Propre'* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 11.

[65] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 6.

[66] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 5.

[67] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 5-6.

For Tocqueville, the expansion of political freedom alongside the equality of conditions is not inevitable. He does not mean to suggest, as Martin Luther King Jr. later does, that "the arc of the moral universe… bends toward justice."[68] Rather than analyze abstract historical trends, Tocqueville situates his study in nineteenth-century America, where democratic government and mores have developed concurrently. While he sees that the spread of information and material progress brings the benefit of a greater "equality of conditions" that lead to success, Tocqueville also worries that these democratic developments may come at the expense of the democratic individual's ability to govern himself.[69]

Tocqueville observes that democratic ideology can promote a pervasive sense of individualism that threatens to wither one's exercise of civil freedom. He describes *individualism* as characteristic "of democratic origin"—"a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him."[70] Individualism contrasts with the tendencies of aristocrats in previous centuries to be "almost always bound in a tight manner to something that is placed outside of them" such that "they are often disposed to forget themselves."[71] Tocqueville worries that the loss of this sense of self-transcendence will hamper our ability to exercise our political freedom through self-government.

But his critique can also be integrated within Rousseau's presentation of *bourgeois* character. For the interactions of the *bourgeois* with others serve as mere reflections of the

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[68] Martin Luther King Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," *Speech given at the National Cathedral,* March 31, 1968, *Smithsonian Institution*, https://www.si.edu/spotlight/mlk?page=4&iframe=true.

[69] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 6.

[70] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 482.

[71] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 483.

double man's view of himself as an idol—validations of his individualism. Associations, on Tocqueville's account, expand our self-interest beyond individualism in much the same way that civil freedom, in Rousseau's theory, allows us to adopt the interests of a whole that transcends our fixation on our personal *amour-propre*. The traits of aggravated *amour-propre* and individualism, although Rousseau and Tocqueville attribute them to Enlightenment ideology and democratic ideology respectively, both function as foils to the political freedom of self-government.

Our inflamed drive for recognition and withdrawal into individualism may encourage *bourgeois* characters to act as "double men, always appearing to relate everything to others and never relating anything except to themselves alone."[72] Combining the character critiques of Rousseau and Tocqueville will be especially useful in understanding the actualization of double man in digital society. Tocqueville, like Rousseau, notes the increasing sacrifice of depth for breadth in our relationships. Yet he interprets this shift as the symptom of democratic individualism. He writes that as our exposure to others increases "in democratic centuries… the bond of human affections is extended and loosened."[73]

As technological progress and social visibility have increased, others have noticed the tension between our individualism and drive for recognition that has allowed for greater social superficiality. Sociologist David Riesman, in his 1950 book *The Lonely Crowd*, observes an extension of the trend toward *bourgeois* character and the excessive drive for recognition that Rousseau writes of. Riesman hypothesizes that our social mode of conformity changes in

[72] Rousseau, *Emile*, 41.

[73] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 483.

different stages of population growth. The ongoing transition, especially salient in Western urban centers, is from "inner-directed" to "other-directed" society. Inner-directed character arises when "the society of transitional population growth develops in its typical members a social character whose conformity is insured by their tendency to acquire early in life an internalized set of goals."[74] Other-directed character, in contrast, develops when "the society of incipient population decline develops in its typical members a social character whose conformity is insured by their tendency to be sensitized to the expectations and preferences of others."[75] While the "increased personal mobility" of inner-directed character fits eras of expanding "production of goods and people," Riesman observes that now "fewer and fewer people work on the land or in the extractive industries or even manufacturing."[76] Instead, modern technology has produced "material abundance," which other-directed people manage "by finding themselves in a centralized and bureaucratized society and a world shrunken and agitated by the contact of races, nations, and cultures."[77] In this setting, "*other people* are the problem, not the material environment."[78]

Riesman further explains how other-directed character tempts us to transcend the bonds of thick relationships at the expense of our ability to intimately connect with others:

> The other-directed person learns to respond to signals from a far wider circle than is constituted by his parents. The family is no longer a closely knit unit to which he belongs but merely part of a wider social environment to which he early becomes attentive… the

[74] David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 8.

[75] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 8.

[76] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 18.

[77] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 18.

[78] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 18.

> other-directed person is, in a sense, at home everywhere and nowhere, capable of a rapid if sometimes superficial intimacy with and response to everyone.[79]

The internalized goals of the inner-directed character are thus largely replaced by the single goal that characterizes other-directed society: attaining the attention of others. Yet, for Rousseau, the drive for recognition does not itself provide a source for self-government. Our common sense also supports this conclusion, as we say "he will do *anything* for attention." But Rousseau's model student, Emile, will not. Recall Rousseau's wish that Emile "will not precisely say to himself, 'I rejoice because they approve of me,' but rather, 'I rejoice because they approve of what I have done that is good.'"[80]

In the Digital Age, the superficial chase for approval allows individuals to achieve a sense of prideful self-awareness in the digital realm not through merit but merely by captivating attention through "likes" that one can generate largely independent of what occurs in the physical realm. The possibility of such misplaced approval not only increases sensationalism and misinformation in news but also risks compromising our civil freedom.

To exercise Emile's selective *amour-propre*—to appreciate recognition, but only insofar as one earns it by taking the interests of others into account—requires an inner-directed education. Yet the self-reliance that such an upbringing demands is increasingly hard to maintain, as, in the Digital Age, we are constantly invited to perform for others.

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[79] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 25.

[80] Rousseau, *Emile*, 339.

In the Theater of Self: Escapism or Insight?

In his 1978 book *The Culture of Narcissism*, sociologist Christopher Lasch writes that our greater social visibility "encourages a theatrical approach to existence, a kind of absurdist theater of self."[81] We enter the digital theater for the same reason we go to movies or shows: to escape reality. Rousseau recognizes the appeal of such escapism but warns of the dangers that result when we rely on appeasing our *amour-propre* as a distraction from our need for the intimate connections that promote our well-being and civil freedom. He observes that "when home is only a sad solitude, one must surely go elsewhere for gaiety."[82] Yet often we compensate for our lack of intimate connections by attempting to feed *amour-propre*, which tends to provide only cursory satisfaction and ultimately works against our self-interest.

Silverman argues that digital tools not only fill the void of fulfillment that a lack of close relationships leaves but also exacerbate our need for attention. He writes:

> Social surveillance allows us to feel as if we have an audience at any time, waiting to be summoned. The individuals we imagine as seeing our updates may not actually be there; they may not be online at all, but the amorphousness of our public is part of its appeal. It's potentially infinite, if only we can satisfy them, causing them to spread our words through the network.
>
> Social surveillance fulfills our hunger to see and be seen. It offers a finishing school for the self, in which our public performances complete and complement our private identity construction.[83]

Unfortunately, the school of digital society that Silverman describes is at odds with the advice on political education that both Rousseau and Tocqueville offer. In *Emile*, Rousseau

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[81] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1978), 90.

[82] Rousseau, *Emile*, 46.

[83] Silverman, *Terms of Service*, 145.

prescribes engagement with the natural world to limit the superfluous desires that stem from excessive *amour-propre*. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville praises associations as schools of democracy wherein people with common interests come together. Associations, alongside practices such as jury duty and town meetings, allow citizens to practice political engagement. Contrastingly, digital society may cultivate a sense of self whose *bourgeois* character merely masks a deeper sense of Tocquevillian individualism.

Accordingly, Silverman worries that digital identity construction can function as a misguided form of escapism. When "we invite people to be voyeurs and… to take some vicarious pleasure in our lives," he writes, "the documentary impulse is its own reward, so we submit, or demand, to be documented."[84] *Amour-propre* becomes the overpowering end to which we act. Yet Silverman considers that "maybe there's something we're missing in the moment—beyond the fact that filming, staring into that small screen rather than at the thing itself, can make us feel like we're not *in* the moment."[85]

Perhaps this "something" resides in the very inescapability of our escapism. In a world in which our perception is increasingly mediated by a detached digital lens, we begin to lose a sense of realism, intimate attachment to others, and the value of truth. Actual achievements, events, and relationships become mere means that serve the end of escaping ourselves through a digitally achieved sense of prideful self-awareness that need not correspond to reality. As Riesman notes, when our relationships with others cast them as members of the audience of our performances, "people and friendships are viewed as the greatest of all consumables."[86] Through

[84] Silverman, *Terms of Service*, 142.

[85] Silverman, *Terms of Service*, 143.

[86] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 81.

this shift, we may sacrifice the sense of self-security that civil freedom affords, as "the tremendous competitive energies which the inner-directed person had available for the sphere of production… seem now to flow into competition for the much more amorphous security of the peer-group's approval."[87]

The outcomes of this movement can be both dehumanizing and disheartening. Tocqueville notes the reduction of individuality to the impersonal power of opinion, as "individuals appear smaller and society seems greater, or rather, each citizen, having become like all the others, is lost in the crowd, and one no longer perceives [anything] but the vast and magnificent image of the people itself."[88] For Tocqueville, the democratic dogma of the power of public opinion compromises our individuality and dehumanizes us into a mere mass of observers.

For Rousseau, our escapism into the approval of others gives us reason to be disheartened, as it hampers the hope that civil freedom can encourage self-government. He examines our psychological vulnerability to the coercive effects of general opinion and suggests that *bourgeois* character makes us uniquely susceptible to the whims of the amorphous audience that comprises our conception of "popular." When our *amour-propre* encourages us to view others as mere audience members continually ready to render judgment on our performances, we search in vain for meaningful connection because we instrumentalize others for the sake of our vanity.

[87] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 81.

[88] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 641.

Amour-propre should not be the sole end that we seek in our social life. Rousseau worries that if it is, democracy will suffer, as our civil freedom fractures into individual cases of double men, perpetually "in conflict and floating" away from their potential for self-government.[89]

Riesman, however, writes that liberating insight is not impossible for the other-directed character:

> If the other-directed people should discover how much needless work they do, discover that their own thoughts and their own lives are quite as interesting as other people's, that, indeed, they no more assuage their loneliness in a crowd of peers than one can assuage one's thirst by drinking sea water, then we might expect them to become more attentive to their own feelings and aspirations.[90]

To escape the insatiable pursuits of other-directed character, we must recognize that when our communication with others relies on their approval of our performances rather than our adoption of their interests, we slip into a kind of superficiality that damages the foundations of not only self-government but also well-being. Aggravated *amour-propre* causes our relationships—those connections that Rousseau suggests provide the principal source of both our formation and our fulfillment—to ring hollow, for, as Lasch notes, "personal relations founded on reflected glory, on the need to admire and be admired, prove fleeting and insubstantial."[91]

The question that concerns us today, then, is how to counter the adverse effects—most notably the instrumentalization of others—of corrupted *amour-propre*. For this vice hampers the very civil freedom on which self-government depends. The technology of the Digital Age tempts us to use our screens as chambers of reflection that feed our drive for recognition.

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[89] Rousseau, *Emile*, 41.

[90] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 307.

[91] Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 23.

As we will see, we are continually encouraged *by design* to perform for others, sometimes without our even realizing it. For while humans are not the creators of the natural world, they are the makers of the digital realm. Consequently, the inflammation of *amour-propre* may increase according not only to the forces of historical progress but also to the pressures manufactured by the technology companies that manage the mediums of our communication.

If the modern actualization of double man presents greater obstacles to political freedom, it also grants Rousseau's account of education in *Emile* renewed relevance. For Rousseau offers a model to promote the very unalienated selfhood that excessive *amour-propre* divides. As Neuhouser notes, Rousseau presents instruction in two sequential yet interrelated areas: natural education and civic education.

The first order of Emile's education is to allow him, unencumbered by his *amour-propre*, the freedom to engage with the natural world and follow his intellectual pursuits. His subjection to the laws of nature and his inner-directed interests rather than to his drive for recognition will help him prioritize needs that support the general will above desires that fuel an insatiable sense of pride. Emile's natural education inculcates in him a sense of self-reliance, for, as Neuhouser writes, "once Emile has taken up his place in society, he will need certain internal resources—the strengths of a self-reliant character—in order to confront the moral dangers posed by his dependence on others in love, in work, and in citizenship."[92]

Because Emile cannot return to the state of nature and is not destined to live his life isolated from society, he must also have a civic education. As his social life will inevitably

[92] Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love*, 260.

increase his *amour-propre*, this self-love ought to be directed toward civil freedom rather than status-based domination. It is in this vein that Emile is to learn from his connection with his lover, Sophie, how to shift from his natural to his civic education. The purpose of Emile's temporary departure from Sophie is for him to learn to exercise self-government as an expansion of rather than a sacrifice of his self-interest, as Emile's interests align with something greater than himself—the interests of his future family.

Neuhouser emphasizes the importance of cultivating *amour-propre* within civic education. He writes that the drive for recognition need not be negative and is, in fact, an essential component of political freedom for most people:

> *Amour-propre* is psychologically indispensable because the 'higher' (more sublimated) desire to be merely *worthy* of honor is generally too weak, and too difficult to acquire and maintain, to be relied on alone to sustain moral agency over time in the face of powerful, competing motivations.[93]

Due to this difficulty, as Neuhouser explains, for the most part, "humans acquire the capacity to 'honor themselves' for their rational conduct only by internalizing the evaluative perspective of an originally external authority whose approval or esteem they long to secure."[94]

Yet increasingly, in the Digital Age, this external authority is dehumanized and hollowed out into the amorphous audience that Tocqueville calls the "phantom of a public opinion."[95] Its influence seeps into our private lives as our transcendent connective capacity escalates our social visibility and drive for recognition beyond our ability to apprehend the interests of those with whom we engage. Consequently, the intrusion of aggravated *amour-propre* into our private lives

[93] Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love*, 261.

[94] Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love*, 261.

[95] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 616.

may obstruct our natural education. And the divisiveness of the individualism that the technological personalization of the digital realm encourages may disrupt our civic education. In short, the contemporary increase of democratic envy and decrease of empathic association around common interests may corrupt our *amour-propre* and constrain our capacity to self-govern.

In the next two chapters, I examine the digital extensions of our drive for recognition and our recession into individualism, so that we may better understand how the educational advice of Rousseau and Tocqueville applies to our current situation.

Chapter Three

Recognition through Social Surveillance

The corrupted *amour-propre* of the double man may permeate the culture of the Digital Age more completely than it did the societies of the Enlightenment. For today, the digital domain offers us an effectively unlimited supply of thin relationships that we may exploit for the sake of inflamed *amour-propre* through personal and political performance. Our digital selves are constantly visible to peers—and, more completely, to large technology companies—on platforms such Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. If we accept political theorist Pierre Manent's characterization of Rousseau's assessment that "comparing oneself to others is the misfortune and original sin of men in our societies," then we must conclude that we face a reality in which such trespassing is increasingly integrated into everyday life.[96]

In the Digital Age, we often willingly subject ourselves to social surveillance for the sense of validation. We progressively construct our own enclosures in a kind of digital zoo in which we live to be seen. Whether one participates in social media or not, one risks losing a degree of agency in this environment. For the many distractions of the digital realm involve the particular allure of worlds that mirror our sense of self rather than reflect the natural world of which we are merely a part.

[96] Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, translated by Rebecca Balinski (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 66.

The Drive for Data and New Needs

Many of today's most profitable companies depend on mass consumption of technological goods such as television, the Internet, and social media. Increasingly, the relationship of consumer to product is not that of owner to object but rather that of user to service. We expect to be able to use services such as Google and Facebook for free, but in return we renounce ownership of our personal data, which Big Tech companies accrue to nudge user behavior toward profitable market bases for advertisers.[97] The result for users is an increasingly personalized consumptive experience. While often convenient and captivating, the outcomes of this business model for consumers may also turn our portals to the outside world into reflections of our bias and insecurity.

While we watch our screens, Big Tech companies watch us so that they can profit off of our particular self-conceptions and status-based pursuits. Our drive for recognition is constantly recognized and encouraged yet never fully fulfilled. For Big Tech profits when their algorithms aim to inflame our *amour-propre* in order to manufacture new needs. As philosopher Edward Skidelsky and economist Robert Skidelsky write, "advertising is the 'organized creation of dissatisfaction.'" [98]

[97] The most influential Big Tech companies that employ this business model are Facebook, Google, Amazon, and Microsoft. Although small in number, these companies exert tremendous influence over our economic agency and political discourse, as Facebook nears 2.5 billion monthly active users while also owning other services such as Instagram, and Google handles 92 percent of all new search queries while also owning other platforms such as YouTube (J. Clement, "Number of monthly active Facebook users worldwide as of 4th quarter 2019," *Statista*, January 30, 2020, https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide. ; Statcounter, "Search Engine Market Share Worldwide," *Statcounter*, March 2020, https://gs.statcounter.com/search-engine-market-share.). A notable exception to this business model is Apple, which has recently run ad campaigns on the importance it attaches to user privacy.

[98] Edward and Robert Skidelsky, *How Much is Enough?: Money and the Good Life*, (New York: Other Press, 2012), 40.

The economic success of companies such as Google and Facebook is largely predicated on their ability to extract from us a valuable form of economic property—our data—and feed us back information, including political news, that is polarized according to our personal desires. Consequently, the economic status of Big Tech companies tends to rise in inverse proportion to the economic power most people derive from their data. Historian Yuval Noah Harari predicts that "in the 21st century, data will eclipse both land and machinery as the most important asset, so politics will be a struggle to control data's flow."[99] But two decades into the twenty-first century, the transfer of data from ordinary people to a few dominant companies has occurred more through surrender than struggle.

Lack of data privacy exacerbates economic inequality in ways that remain poorly understood due to informational asymmetry between users and Big Tech companies. But for the purposes of this paper, the more pertinent problem lies in what users receive in return for their data. While personalized consumptive experience provides convenience for those shopping on Amazon or listening to music on Spotify, it has dangerous implications for our political discourse, especially given the superficial social environment of the Internet. Since the dominant digital news model depends on our consumption of whatever information will captivate our attention for as long as possible, our civic space increasingly encourages continual exaggeration and polarization of the political views that most immediately attract or outrage us. In this environment, online harassment, virtue signaling, and cancel culture often disrupt thoughtful debate about issues such as data privacy and economic inequality.

[99] Yuval Noah Harari, "Why Technology Favors Tyranny," *The Atlantic*, October 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/yuval-noah-harari-technology-tyranny/568330.

Tocqueville claims that "in the constitution of all peoples… there is a point at which the legislator is obliged to rely on the good sense and virtue of citizens."[100] Democracies especially depend on the capacity of the people to check centralized power and recognize social ills. But the polarizing and superficial nature of news and political discussion in the Digital Age threatens to distract us from the very technological shifts that exacerbate our *amour-propre*.

The divisive character of digital political news ricochets out to aggravate the general political discourse outside of the digital realm. Even those who try to disconnect from the more obvious theaters of self in the digital world such as social media face increasing incentives to submit to a drive for recognition that seeks approval from others rather than understanding of others. Big Tech business models profit from the advertising opportunities that the insatiable desires of inflamed *amour-propre* create. Targeted digital news appeals to the particular sense of status we ascribe to our political in-groups. And, above all, the acquisition of the most valuable good in the digital world—data—depends on the sole goal of capturing the attention of users. Aggravated *amour-propre* is thus not only an aspect of *bourgeois* character in the Digital Age but also the central driving force of the digital economy.

The assumption of *amour-propre* as our ultimate drive is not inevitable. Rather, it is, as it was when Rousseau wrote, a feature of our faith in technology that we ascribe the role of transcendence to chambers of reflection that present us with environments that confirm our supreme status—worlds made in our image. But like many forms of faith, such belief requires a degree of blindness, for this dream of deliverance has its downsides.

[100] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 115.

We often perform for others without even realizing it, as we want not only our expressions but also our tastes to be recognized. Our self-interest increasingly resides in things being just so rather than in "a whole of which one is a part."[101] One's digital surroundings are staged according to what validates one's sense of status, so one may increasingly aim for the same in the physical domain. This creates a zero-sum game, the end of which is the superfluous sense of self-awareness that accompanies ascent to the top of the social rank. But such satisfaction is illusory, for, in the words of Epicurus, "nothing is enough for the man to whom enough is too little."[102]

In Rousseau's view, the technology of social progress makes the use-value goods that *amour de soi* aims at satisfiable. Governments, too, can respond to the common interests that social bodies cultivate through their exercise of civil freedom. For bonds between families, friends, and other members of small groups establish collective interests that encourage self-government and thus keep the excessive desires of our personal pride in check. But, as Neuhouser writes, when motivated by *amour-propre*, "desires become boundless in a way that is inimical to genuine happiness."[103]

Self-Consciousness as Suppression

The aggravation of *amour-propre* fosters a focus on appearances that alienates us from the more fulfilling interests that civil freedom affords, substitutes the allure of visibility for the

[101] Rousseau, "*On the Social Contract*," in *Major Political Writings*, 174.

[102] Skidelsky, *How Much is Enough?*, epigraph.

[103] Neuhouser, "Rousseau's Critique of Inequality," 206.

value of intimacy, and fashions the function of other members of society into viewers in an amorphous audience. Digital social visibility may multiply the corruption of self-awareness that Rousseau associates with the emergence of developed society, when "to be and to appear became two entirely different things" and inspired "ostentatious display, deceitful cunning, and all the vices that follow in their wake."[104] Rousseau claims that this divergence between being and appearing reflects not a fixed form of social liberation but rather our evolving requirements for social success, for as groups increase in size, we increasingly rely on social shortcuts to assess others. Rousseau writes that as such other-directed society emerged, "for one's advantage, it was necessary to appear to be different from what one in fact was."[105]

Accordingly, in the Digital Age, our obsession with appearances not only generates insatiable desires but also establishes social constraints on authentic self-expression that grow increasingly stringent as the distinction between being and appearing grows more complete. If the excessive self-awareness of Rousseau's developed society represents a first Edenic Fall, then the digital development of a second mode of existence in which everything is performed and presented symbolizes a second Fall into our own chambers of reflection. Lasch writes on the repressive effects of such artificial acceleration of self-awareness:

> Awareness commenting on awareness creates an escalating cycle of self-consciousness that inhibits spontaneity. It intensifies the feeling of inauthenticity that rises in the first place out of resentment against the meaningless roles prescribed by modern industry. Self-created roles become as constraining as the social roles from which they are meant to provide ironic detachment. We long for the suspension of self-consciousness, of the pseudoanalytic attitude that has become second nature.[106]

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[104] Rousseau, "*Discourse on Inequality*," in *Major Political Writings*, 100.

[105] Rousseau, "*Discourse on Inequality*," 100.

[106] Silverman, *Terms of Service*, 345.

Entranced by their own self-image, individuals in the Digital Age perhaps become estranged from the selves they inhabit. They may subconsciously wish to break free from their chambers of reflection and, in Tocqueville's words, be "bound in a tight manner to something that is placed outside of them" such that "they are often disposed to forget themselves."[107] Yet they cannot forget the very self-awareness that characterizes their Fall into the superficial society of the *bourgeois*, for they are conditioned by democratic dogma to employ the amorphous audience of public opinion as a mirror that reflects their self-worth.

Here we reach Tocqueville's particular worry about democracy: that the expansion of equality may generate misguided faith in approval from a dehumanized "phantom of a public opinion" as the ultimate arbiter of self-worth.[108] Unlike Rousseau, whose declaration of the exclusive legitimacy of democracy was revolutionary, Tocqueville takes the growth of democracy and political equality for granted. What concerns Tocqueville, then, is not self-government as the ability to officially create the laws to which one is subject. Rather, Tocqueville worries that democracy may undermine itself through the very empowerment it inspires. He claims that democratic mores risk reducing our internal propensity to acquire the interests that associations with others, conceptions of greatness, and belief in religion confer. Consequently, democratic developments may tempt us away from our tendency to self-govern our own behavior in accordance with our sense of self-interest well understood.

One may suggest a sort of tension between the theories of Rousseau and Tocqueville here. Tocqueville critiques our adherence to public opinion and general ideas as a cheapening of

[107] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 482.

[108] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* 616.

our sense of pride, which could otherwise be directed toward self-interest well understood. Might he be suggesting that Rousseau's support of the general will—the set of fundamental desires that belong to each of the members of a political community—likewise undermines self-government?

It is quite possible that Tocqueville took himself to be, in part, correcting Rousseau's account. Rousseau's social contract theory influenced the French Revolution, which Tocqueville praised for its goal of political freedom but lamented for the continual tumult into which its mob-like majoritarianism threw the country before and during Tocqueville's lifetime. Additionally, Tocqueville tends to locate the source of self-government in ideas (around which associations form, conceptions of greatness motivate, and religions guide behavior), while Rousseau sees our ability to adopt the interests of others as the principal force governing our selfish interests. Perhaps Tocqueville doubted that the mere combination of self-interests—without the inspiration of bettering the soul through belief—could promote self-interest well understood. In any case, Rousseau's conception of the general will differs from Tocqueville's presentation of the power of public opinion.

The general will is deeply personal. To will it, one must exercise the civil freedom of understanding others and adopting their fundamental interests as particular expressions of the universal human condition. Man supports the general will when he socially codifies his innate tendency to feel empathy and pity—when he sees his interests through the eyes of others and proceeds to substitute "justice for instinct in his conduct… by giving his actions the morality they previously lacked."[109] The general will, as Neuhouser explains, "is not, then, the aggregate

[109] Rousseau, "*On the Social Contract*," in *Major Political Writings*, 175.

'happiness' of some group with which the general will is concerned but rather the good—more specifically, the fundamental interests—of each individual member."[110]

In contrast, Tocqueville's concepts of "general ideas" and the "public opinion" function as forces disembodied from the members of society. They need not include consideration of a particular individual's interests. Rather, they may overpower the free thought of the individual or alter the interests that it is socially acceptable for one to express.

Public opinion can thus constrain the emancipatory potential for self-improvement that a more complete form of political freedom might tap. Our theaters of self appear to express themselves freely, but the dominant power of social surveillance pressures us to display ourselves rather than to know and improve ourselves by means besides the popularity of performance. In so far as people's audience is composed of family, friends, or fellow members of association, performative self-expression may prompt helpful feedback that directs actors toward a motivating idea that is "bound in a tight manner to something that is placed outside of them."[111]

But when the dominant formative force of our self-interest is only popularity and the drive for recognition, we submit to a type of tyranny that Tocqueville calls the "despotism democratic nations have to fear."[112] We slide into a passive sort of reliance on the "phantom of a public opinion," which, with the self-interest well understood of its members hollowed out, restricts our freedom of expression.[113] This danger is applicable in America, where democratic

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[110] Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love*, 197.

[111] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 482.

[112] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 661.

[113] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 616.

government and mores have developed concurrently. Accordingly, Tocqeville writes that he does "not know any country where, in general, less independence of mind and genuine freedom of discussion reign than in America," for "in America the majority draws a formidable circle around thought."[114] The pervasiveness of immaterial despotism is greater, and perhaps more dangerous, than traditional forms of tyranny, Tocqueville warns:

> Thought is an invisible and almost intangible power that makes sport of all tyrannies. In our day the most absolute sovereigns of Europe cannot prevent certain thoughts hostile to their authority from mutely circulating in their states and even in the heart of their courts. It is not the same in America: as long as the majority is doubtful, one speaks; but when it has irrevocably pronounced, everyone becomes silent and friends and enemies alike then seem to hitch themselves together to its wagon.[115]

Similarly, in the Digital Age, the interest of journalists in encouraging thoughtful reflection on topics of political importance and building consensus increasingly must submit to the pressure of social surveillance. Today, however, such chilling of free speech tends to reflect the will of agitated political factions rather than the interests of the majority. In "The Enemies of Writing," George Packer, a staff writer for *The Atlantic*, describes the control that ideological groups exercise over the deeper purpose of writing to promote understanding—a development that leads him to conclude that "the greatest enemy of writing today might be despair":

> Writers are now expected to *identify* with a community and to write as its representatives. In a way, this is the opposite of writing to reach other people. When we open a book or click on an article, the first thing we want to know is which group the writer belongs to. The group might be a political faction, an ethnicity or a sexuality, a literary clique. The answer makes reading a lot simpler. It tells us what to expect from the writer's work, and even what to think of it. Groups save us a lot of trouble by doing our thinking for us.
>
> Politicians and activists are representatives. Writers are individuals whose job is to find language that can cross the unfathomable gap separating us from one another. They don't write *as* anyone beyond themselves. But today, writers have every incentive to do their

[114] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 244.

[115] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 243.

> work as easily identifiable, fully paid-up members of a community. Belonging is numerically codified by social media, with its likes, retweets, friends, and followers. Writers learn to avoid expressing thoughts or associating with undesirables that might be controversial with the group and hurt their numbers. In the most successful cases, the cultivation of followers becomes an end in itself and takes the place of actual writing.[116]

When the end of writing becomes the maintenance of superficial appearances, writers fall to double man's function, according to Bloom, as "a role-player."[117] The writer as a *bourgeois* role-player must weigh in on matters of the common good yet do so only to maintain the legitimacy of his personal appearance in relation to other writers. Accordingly, the importance of signaling to factions or captivating attention through click-bait headlines overwhelms the writer's role as a facilitator of informed and unbiased discussion about the common good. The drive for recognition that characterizes inflamed *amour-propre* becomes the writer's end not because he chooses it but rather because public opinion imposes it.

Resistance against the subtle yet coercive control that prideful self-awareness exercises over political discourse must overcome a barrage of self-imposed barriers that the "orthodoxy enforced by social pressure" has conditioned us to consider.[118] For, as Packer points out, writers increasingly perform their role with "the fear of moral judgment, public shaming, social ridicule, and ostracism."[119]

This trend marks but one example of the continued applicability of Tocqueville's observation that in "democratic republics, tyranny … leaves the body and goes straight for the

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[116] George Packer, "The Enemies of Writing," *The Atlantic*, January 23, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/packer-hitchens/605365/.

[117] Rousseau, "Introduction," in *Emile*, 5.

[118] Packer, "The Enemies of Writing."

[119] Packer, "The Enemies of Writing."

soul."[120] Especially in the Digital Age, passivity of thought due to the dominance of public opinion can push us to a form of despotism in which people are bound by their drive for recognition and enveloped in short-term attractions. Such an environment is not conducive to our ascent to self-interest well understood. As Tocqueville describes *democratic despotism*:

> It is absolute, detailed, regular, far-seeing, and mild. It would resemble paternal power if, like that, it had for its object to prepare men for manhood; but on the contrary, it seeks only to keep them fixed irrevocably in childhood; it likes citizens to enjoy themselves provided that they think only of enjoying themselves. It willingly works for their happiness; but it wants to be the unique agent and sole arbiter of that; it provides for their security, foresees and secures their needs, facilitates their pleasures, conducts their principal affairs… can it not take away from them entirely the trouble of thinking and the pain of living?[121]

Although Tocqueville claims that democratic despotism goes straight to the soul, today the coercive impact of public opinion and our drive for recognition also affects us through the algorithms of digital mediums. For the business models of Big Tech companies such as Google and Facebook incentivize the aggravation of *amour-propre* in our civic space. In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Harvard Business School professor Shoshana Zuboff provides a detailed analysis of the rise of "a new species of power" that she calls "instrumentarianism."[122] "Instrumentarian power knows and shapes human behavior toward others' ends," Zuboff writes, as "digital connection is now a means to others' commercial ends."[123]

This trend presents the threat of a new kind of democratic despotism that compromises the freedom of individuals in order to "instrumentalize and control human experience to

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[120] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 244.

[121] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 663.

[122] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 8.

[123] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 8-9.

systematically and predictably shape behavior toward others' profitable ends."[124] The others in this case are companies like Google and Facebook, who brand themselves as promoters of democracy and sociability—hence, the term "social media"—yet whose financial incentive is to collect personal data and guide user behavior toward market bases in which Big Tech can most effectively target consumers with ads. This model, when applied to the consumption of news, may promote an individualistic entrenchment of our biases.

Such entrenchment, in turn, makes us more susceptible to the power of opinion. Distracted by our drive for recognition, we fail to notice how the contours of our discourse are contained within the ideological echo-chambers that Big Tech companies nudge us toward. Zuboff elaborates on the inconspicuous encroachment, designed to fly under our radar, of surveillance capitalism on our political freedom:

> It is the nature of instrumentarian power to operate remotely and move in stealth. It does not grow through terror, murder, the suspension of democratic institutions, massacre, or expulsion. Instead, it grows through declaration, self-authorization, rhetorical misdirection, euphemism, and the quiet, audacious backstage moves specifically crafted to elude awareness as it replaces individual freedom with others' knowledge and replaces society with certainty. It does not confront democracy but rather erodes it from within, eating away at the human capabilities and self-understanding required to sustain a democratic life.[125]

Recall that, as the data and profit of Big Tech companies depend on how much time we spend on their platforms, they incentivize our *amour-propre*. Fittingly, our platforms prompt "status updates." The more that every online action of ours fulfills our drive for recognition, the more easily companies can surveil our activity, recognize us, and target us with ads. While the ads themselves are often minor distractions or can include helpful information, the means

[124] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 38.

[125] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 381.

through which digital mediums manipulate users to most effectively deploy ads may promote superficiality through social surveillance.

As the drive for data incentivizes the acquisition of our attention above all else, the dominant form of messaging online is scaled down to easily digestible simple and superficial bits that overload our senses and trigger our passions rather than promote reasoned reflection and greater understanding of fellow members of society. Digital news is made, above all, to vie for our time to keep us on the platform longer so that it can extract more data from us. Accordingly, sucked in by our attraction to news that requires minimal capacity for understanding from us in our role as consumers, we may become mindlessly entranced by our news feeds. In such cases, the democratization of political news reaches a level of emotional superficiality that, in turn, precludes the exercise of reflection on which both civil freedom and self-interest well understood depend.

The triggers of digital technology direct our theaters of self to our emotional reactions rather than our rational conclusions. This danger may develop due to the impact that the shift from inner-directed to other-directed society introduces to our news intake. Consider how Riesman describes how emerging forms of entertainment in the mid-twentieth century impact our self-awareness:

> The other-directed girl who goes in company to the movies need not talk to the others during the picture but is sometimes faced with the problem: should she cry at the sad places or not? What is the proper reaction… it is sometimes apparent that people feel they ought to react, but how?
>
> In contrast to this, the inner-directed person, reading a book alone, is less aware of the others looking on; moreover, he has time to return at his own pace from being transported by his reading…. His successor, dreading loneliness, tries to assuage it not only in his crowd but in those fantasies that, like a mirror, only return his own concerns to him.[126]

[126] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 158.

Today's dominant news mediums place us in a political theater similar to the movie theater that Riesman's other-directed girl enters. However, we need not physically travel to this news theater; the theater comes to us. In it, the emotional reactions we present in response to political information help shape our news feeds. Signaling emotional reactions becomes more important than inhabiting them, as the relationship between audience and performance becomes interchangeable. Digital features such as Facebook's emoji reactions on our news feeds allow us to signal emotions that help dictate what we see on our screens. But our reactions also influence the shows that reach others. Accordingly, we may alienate ourselves from the authenticity of our emotions. The divide between being and appearing allows us to signal an expression of how we feel we ought to react that often differs from our actual reaction, as when Facebook users react with the laughter emoji to delegitimize messages that they disagree with.

The gap between being and appearing in civic space creates what Lasch calls "an escalating cycle of self-consciousness—a sense of the self as a performer."[127] As our performances need not cohere with physical reality, our self-consciousness promotes a lack of accountability and weakens many of the social penalties for bad behavior. Meanwhile, social pressure invades our news intake, as the inner-directed idea of reading a newspaper or book for the purpose of political reflection recedes into the past. How we digest the news that digital mediums and other people present becomes an exercise in how we present ourselves. In such circumstances, the principles of Tocquevillian positive pride often yield to the divisive effects of Rousseau's prideful self-awareness shaped by social pressure. Accordingly, we may become like

[127] Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 90.

Riesman's other-directed character, who, "dreading loneliness, tries to assuage it not only in his crowd but in those fantasies that, like a mirror, only return his own concerns to him."[128]

Lasch argues that societies that promote more social visibility relative to intimate connection, more other-directedness relative to inner-directedness, and the sense of the self as a perpetual performer create a culture of narcissism. Political commentator David Brooks traces the continuation of this trend, as he notes a rise in narcissism as measured by psychologists. He reports that "the median narcissism score has risen 30 percent in the last two decades," and that "ninety-three percent of young people score higher than the middle score just twenty years ago." [129] According to Brooks, this rise is part of "a broad shift from a culture of humility to the culture of what you might call the Big Me, from a culture that encouraged people to think humbly of themselves to a culture that encouraged people to see themselves as the center of the universe."[130] Such direction of social progress toward the drive for recognition for its own sake is just what Rousseau and Tocqueville feared might inhibit political freedom.

Democratic Envy and the Fear of Irrelevance

When our chambers of reflection cause our digital technology to function as mirrors that reflect the importance of self-image rather than the possibility of civil freedom, our connection to others becomes a mere mode of activating envy. As our interests are not expanded through intimate engagement with others or reflection on religion and other conceptions of higher virtues,

[128] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 158.

[129] David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), 7.

[130] Brooks, *The Road to Character*, 6.

our potential for greatness and perfectibility is distilled to the intensification of *amour-propre* and the display of wealth as a symbol of social status. Our increased social visibility then incentivizes surface-level comparison rather than the intimate connections and spiritual sense that might allow us to self-govern according to our self-interest well understood.

Attaining the political education that unlocks internal political freedom is no easy task, for, as philosopher Alexander Jech writes, on Tocqueville's account, "our self-interest naturally subverts itself, and its true achievement requires considerable enlightenment and virtue."[131] Jech continues:

> This need for education presupposes something analogous to the doctrine of original sin… men naturally seek repose in material well-being, but this natural desire undermines the growth of our most human capacities, including the capacity for self-government that is required for political liberty.[132]

If love of material well-being as an illusory sense of self-worth marks our original sin, then the democratic envy that our increased connective capacity encourages marks a reenactment of our original infringement, repeatedly leading us farther away from the path to self-government.

Tocqueville already observes that the superficial pursuit of money is greater in democracies because of the intermingling of different classes. The sense of greatness that in aristocratic times derives from many different honorable pursuits reduces in democracies to exclusive pride in monetary power. Accordingly, Tocqueville claims that "men who live in democratic times have many passions; but most of their passions end in love of wealth or issue

[131] Alexander Jech, "'Man Simply': Excavating Tocqueville's Conception of Human Nature," *Perspectives on Political Science* 42, no. 2 (Apr. 2013): 87, https://doi.org/10.1080/10457097.2012.720901.

[132] Jech, "Man Simply," 87-88.

from it."[133] In aristocracies, concern about money among the upper class is considered crude. But in democratic societies where money is the dominant expression of status and greatness, *bourgeois* character thrives.

Since money is a positional good rather than a use-value good, the love of money that comprises the *bourgeois* character of Americans may support a class system based less on utility derived from culture than on status derived from cash. The shared visibility of different classes makes inequities increasingly apparent and encourages us to establish a positional sense of self-worth. As Lasch observes, "in a society in which the dream of success has been drained of any meaning beyond itself, men have nothing against which to measure their achievements except the achievements of others."[134] Even one of the most famous figures of capitalism, Adam Smith, regards the pursuit of money as an appeal for approval that inflames our sense of envy: "It is vanity, not the ease or pleasure, which interests us, " he writes, as "the rich man glories in his riches, because he feels that they naturally draw upon him the attention of the work."[135]

The Digital Age encourages the exercise of such vanity, which increases an insatiable desire for superfluous goods in democracy. Fittingly, Tocqueville recognizes that democracies are especially prone to wasteful luxuries, as they distill virtue to materialistic measures. He writes that "there is hypocrisy of virtue in all times," but "that of luxury belongs more particularly to democratic centuries."[136]

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[133] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 587.

[134] Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 59.

[135] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, edited by D.D. Rafael and A.L. Mackie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 5.

[136] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 441.

The effects of the superficial presentation of our digital selves have largely further inflamed our *amour-propre* and produced more feelings, as McLendon writes, of "vanity, arrogance, and contempt" in the winners and "shame, envy, and spite" in the losers of status-good acquisition and presentation.[137] This development arises, in part, because, as political theorist Sam Arnold explains, digital society has shifted "people's 'consumption reference groups'":

> Prior to roughly 1970, people compared themselves mainly to those in their immediate social environment—e.g., neighbors, friends, relatives, and coworkers. Economic disparities within such groups being relatively limited, this way of constructing one's consumption reference group tended to establish feasible consumption norms; keeping up with the Joneses isn't impossible when the Joneses have roughly the same income as you. Keeping up with the Kardashians, on the other hand, is a different matter entirely—and yet this is precisely what most of us now try to do.[138]

Unrealistic desires based on the broad social comparisons that digital technology allows have "upscaled" our consumptive norms and increased the costliness of our *amour-propre*.[139] Yet such habits have also shifted in response to an illusion that digital society is uniquely likely to promote. The digital selves that we display through avatars on online platforms and the data profiles that companies collect can function almost entirely independent of our physical selves. Accordingly, the persona people portray online is often quite different from the character they embody in the rest of their lives.

Transparency and social consequences diminish in our digital theater of selves. Our expectations and desires further conflict with our private circumstances, as our chase for

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[137] McLendon, *The Psychology of Inequality*, 102.

[138] Sam Arnold, "Contesting the Work-Spend Cycle: The Liberal Egalitarian Case Against Consumerism," forthcoming in *Whither Work? The Politics and Ethics of Contemporary Work* (2020): 3.

[139] Arnold, "Contesting the Work-Spend Cycle," 3.

positional goods renders the circumstances in which we live perpetually inadequate. The democratization of social visibility can thus lead to greater inequality. For the *amour-propre* of mere appearances, detached from the intimate adoption of the interests of those with whom we engage, may produce an insatiable attraction to status—an escalating yearning to raise one's social rank not for the material security it brings but for the sake of our self-image itself.

Perhaps part of the problem is that our increased social surveillance has spread our relationships too thin to cultivate democratic virtues that may only flourish in intimate societies. Rousseau worries that when *bourgeois* character invades civic space, vanity replaces virtue and democratic dysfunction ensues. He would likely look at contemporary political discourse and conclude that democracy is in great danger. Consider that the requisite conditions he lists for a functioning social contract—"a very small state… great simplicity of morals… great equality of ranks and fortunes… [and] little to no luxury"—are all on the decline in the Digital Age.[140] Together, they comprise the basis for democratic virtue, which Rousseau notes is the "principle of a republic," according to Montesquieu.[141] The capacity for democratic citizens to combine and deliberate upon their perspectives to attain civil freedom and practice self-government constitutes democratic virtue. Yet such virtue may dissipate as digital *amour-propre* encourages the presentation of status-driven appearances in our relationships with others.

Against the backdrop of this increase in other-directed character, journalist David Goodhart frames a contemporary character struggle between *anywheres*, who aim to eschew any particular social or geographical grounding for the sake of personal freedom and success, and

[140] Rousseau, "*On the Social Contract*," in *Major Political Writings*, 214.

[141] Rousseau, "*On the Social Contract*," in *Major Political Writings*, 214.

somewheres, who wish to maintain strong attachments to geographical identity, family, and rural customs.[142] He interprets recent populist surges in support of Brexit and Trump as expressions of a reactionary desire to remain rooted in a sense of place that the *bourgeois* double man tries to transcend. Recent populist movements indicate a backlash against the anywheres, whom the somewheres perceive as establishment globalist elites whose pandering and condescension stem from their *bourgeois* character, "always appearing to relate everything to others and never relating anything except to themselves alone."[143]

Riesman realizes that political tension between somewheres and anywheres is a part of the transition to an increasingly other-directed society. Nevertheless, he predicts that other-directed character will eventually subsume the struggle between somewheres and anywheres. While Riesman notes that "there are millions of inner-directed Americans who reject… the values that emanate from the growing dominance of other-directed types," such inner-directed somewheres "do not feel secure—the weight of the urban world outside is against them—and their resentment hardens until these residual inner-directed persons are scarcely more than caricatures…"[144]

Harari analyzes the insecurity of the somewheres from yet another angle. He notes that the politics of the twenty-first century arise in a social environment where "the masses fear irrelevance."[145] "In 1938," Harari writes, "the common man's condition in the Soviet Union,

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[142] Andrew Marr, "Anywheres vs Somewheres: The split that made Brexit inevitable," *New Statesman America*, March 17, 2017, https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/03/anywheres-vs-somewheres-split-made-brexit-inevitable.

[143] Rousseau, *Emile*, 41.

[144] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 34.

[145] Harari, "Why Technology Favors Tyranny."

Germany, or the United States may have been grim, but he was constantly told that he was the most important thing in the world."[146] In contrast, today "lots of mysterious terms are bandied about excitedly in TED Talks, at government think tanks, and at high-tech conferences—*globalization*, *blockchain*, *genetic engineering*, *AI*, *machine learning*—and common people, both men and women, may well suspect that none of these terms is about them."[147]

These accounts converge on the central political tension that the corruption of *amour-propre* has brought to the surface in the Digital Age. An increase in social visibility relative to intimate connection has caused our drive for recognition to escalate in a digital form of social surveillance that is both symbolized by the "phantom of a public opinion" and devised by Big Tech companies.[148] Simultaneously, the fear of irrelevance grows for democratic individuals. Amidst the temptation to reflect everything to their self-image, they may fail to exercise civil freedom to direct their interests "toward a whole of which one is a part" in order to be "bound in a tight manner to something that is placed outside of them."[149] While the greater breadth of our social performances precipitates more outlets for status obsession and narcissism, our connective capacity renders larger the social whole of which we do not feel we are a part.

Although they advocate attachment to a sense of place, family, and traditional values, somewheres increasingly operate through digital mediums that are profoundly other-directed.

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[146] Harari, "Why Technology Favors Tyranny."

[147] Harari, "Why Technology Favors Tyranny."

[148] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 616.

[149] Rousseau, "*On the Social Contract*," in *Major Political Writings*, 174; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 483.

The unique promise of the digital realm in which we appear yet do not inhabit is that anyone can be an anywhere. Thus, the same *bourgeois* character that somewheres resist, that divorces being from appearing, and that prioritizes prideful self-awareness above collective well-being may come to cloud the very civic space in which somewheres and anywheres can engage in political discourse.

I have now examined the increased drive for recognition that double men may chase in the Digital Age. In the following chapter, I turn to the current circumstances under which *bourgeois* individuals may, as Rousseau writes, fail to "relate anything except to themselves alone."[150]

[150] Rousseau, *Emile*, 41.

Chapter Four

Individualism through Personalization

Tocqueville presents individualism as the danger that may bring *bourgeois* character to democracy and continue to impede the realization of political freedom. Tocqueville claims that "individualism is of democratic origin."[151] Its emergence is especially likely when, "in democratic centuries… the bond of human affections is extended and loosened,"[152] yet disruption of familial and religious traditions has encouraged short-term interests such that "you easily forget those who have preceded you, and you have no idea of those who will follow you."[153] Individualism erodes our sense of social solidarity, as it "at first dries up only the source of public virtues; but in the long term it attacks and destroys all the others and will finally be absorbed in selfishness."[154]

The final point of selfishness at which the adverse effects of individualism fully seep into democratic mores mirrors Rousseau's conception of the *bourgeois* character that aggravated *amour-propre* creates. Tocqueville describes selfishness as "a passionate and exaggerated love of self that brings man to relate everything to himself alone."[155]

In its initial stages, however, individualism appears as a harmless product of political empowerment. The promise of political equality emboldens individuals to search internally for

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[151] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 483.

[152] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 483.

[153] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 483.

[154] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 483.

[155] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 482.

their political opinions, as conventional hierarchies and institutions lose their political authority. In the absence of self-interest well understood, this internal search for opinions never utilizes meritocratic order outside the self and fashions equality into individualism.[156] Accordingly, in the wake of rapid democratization, as we see in the current state of digital political news and publishing power, Tocqueville predicts "an innumerable crowd of like and equal men who revolve on themselves without repose, procuring the small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls."[157]

In this context, individualism begins as at least a convenience and at most a luxury. Individualism represents freedom and self-sufficiency. Thus, it is "a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him."[158] But in the long run, such withdrawal decreases our capacity to attain the civil freedom and self-interest well understood that comprise the project of self-government.

In the Digital Age, individualism misleadingly adopts the benign name of personalization. Personalization technology not only responds to our personal preferences but can also corrode personal connections built on common culture. The personalization economy arises as a consequence of ubiquitous surveillance and data collection. As companies target us with particular information and advertisements based on our personal data, our digital education increasingly occurs in individual chambers of reflection that mirror our preconceived biases and

[156] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 482.

[157] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 663.

[158] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 482.

online social segregation. The resultant media fragmentation and political polarization may thus weaken the associative potential of digital media.

As Silverman writes, "a key element of the new digital ideology is that everything can be personalized and made social."[159] Yet in practice, these two aims are often contradictory. Their tension is particularly evident when we consider the personalization of political news. In the Digital Age, the distribution of hyper-targeted and passion-driven news often overwhelms informative appeals to the general public. Consequently, our political discourse can divide into factions that, through digital self-selection and Big Tech's sorting of users into narrow ad market bases, function as ideological echo-chambers. Filter bubbles through which people Google the same things yet get different results, particularized news feeds that trigger users based on previously collected data, and increased ideological social segregation may fracture the common understanding that supports the general will.

News Targeting and the Rise of the Attention Economy

As philosopher Lee McIntyre argues, the decline of broadly trusted sources of news bears partial responsibility for such division. Until the end of the twentieth century, McIntyre notes, "news divisions… were not expected to make any money."[160] This also helped early TV news cultivate a trustworthy image because, as journalist Ted Koppel explains, "network executives were afraid that a failure to work in the 'public interest, convenience and necessity,' as set forth in the Radio Act of 1927, might cause the Federal Communications Commission to suspend or

[159] Silverman, *Terms of Service*, 7.

[160] Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 64-65.

even revoke their licenses."[161] When television news was limited to a mere half-hour nationwide broadcast, McIntyre recalls, "Walter Cronkite sat at the big desk at CBS from 1962 to 1981 and was often cited as 'the most trusted man in America.'"[162]

In 1968, *60 Minutes* became "the first news show in history to turn a profit."[163] Later, in 1980, CNN began the twenty-four hour news cycle, and in 1996, deliberately partisan TV news took off with Fox News and MSNBC.[164] Today, the trend continues as different news outlets cater to particular political persuasions by targeting increasingly ideologically narrow bases. Such sources can make more money by responding to the specific desires of niche readerships than by appealing to broad audiences. But the personalization of news may then push us closer to a kind of Tocquevillian individualism in which "each man seeks his beliefs in himself," or at least in a news environment designed to be an extension of himself.[165]

Amidst an informational upheaval in which we are swept up into silos of spin that we may not even realize we are in or may not want to get out of, our trust in news has declined. As McIntyre notes, "Americans' trust in the mass media has now sunk to a new low: from a high of 72 percent in 1976 in the immediate aftermath of the Watergate crisis and Vietnam, it has now dropped to 32 percent."[166] Whether connected by causation or correlation, the dual trends of

[161] McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 65.

[162] McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 64.

[163] McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 65

[164] McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 66-69.

[165] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 482.

[166] McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 86.

news personalization and declining trust in common sources of news have at least exacerbated individualism and damaged political discourse as a "source of public virtues."[167]

Furthermore, the insular news environment of the Digital Age may compromise the virtue of journalism itself. George Orwell writes that "journalism is printing what someone else does not want printed: everything else is public relations."[168] On this account, personalization technology has undermined journalism, as digital media outlets aim at the attention of particular political bases. Accordingly, much of the solidification of our ideological echo-chambers occurs subconsciously through psychological triggers in the digital news environment that prioritize immediate attraction over reasoned reflection.

Tocqueville argues that the gratification of individuals' short-term desires at the expense of their aspiration to be "bound in a tight manner to something that is placed outside of them" reduces their capacity for political freedom. Correspondingly, Tocqueville declares that "the habit of inattention ought to be considered the greatest vice of the democratic mind."[169] Yet it is exactly this habit that the attention economy (which treats attention as a scarce commodity) encourages in the Digital Age.

Tocqueville considers more specifically the kind of information that democrats will seek in the future. He warns that the intellectual exercise of attempting to understand different and challenging views will become less attractive. The humility of individuals in deference to traditional institutions that foster self-interest well understood may evaporate. Tocqueville claims

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[167] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 483.

[168] McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 63.

[169] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 584.

that American individuals, "as they see that they manage to resolve unaided all the little difficulties that practical life presents," may "easily conclude that everything in the world is explicable and that nothing exceeds the bounds of intelligence."[170]Accordingly, they may increasingly look to general ideas and submit to the pressures of public opinion for their views.

The Digital Age perhaps instills a greater hubris in individuals who believe, or news outlets who write, that they can distill sophisticated issues to catchy headlines. The rapid creation and short-lived relevance of different stories that cross our news feed due to our constant state of digital connection may reduce our propensity to reflect and doubt further, as old information is continually submerged by a constant stream of breaking news. The result is a potential aggravation of the debilitating effects of the press that Tocqueville traces in his visit to America.

Tocqueville observes that in an informational environment without trusted hierarchies, doubt can inflame instinctual attachment to the news that we want to believe. He writes that "when freedom of press finds men in the first state [of doubt], for a long time it still leaves them in the habit of believing firmly without reflecting; it only changes the object of their unreflective beliefs daily."[171] Tocqueville observes that the decentralization of the American press encourages individuals to assent to information that reflects their own biases and instincts rather than a higher sense of truth and fairness. Because appearances are easier to market than empathic understanding is, news, particularly in today's attention economy, made to appeal to specific ideological groups often spews stories that promote democratic envy and prideful self-awareness.

[170] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 404.

[171] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 179.

For Tocqueville, democratic journalism takes on its own character. He writes, "the periodical press appears to me to have its own instincts and passions independent of the circumstances amidst which it acts."[172] "The spirit of the journalist," political philosopher Harvey Mansfield claims of Tocqueville's view, "in America by contrast to France, where he has more power, is one of coarse attack, appeal to passion, avoidance of principle, and scandalous revelations."[173]

Tocqueville notes the "dividing strength of the press" in the United States—a condition in which journalists "hardly have an elevated position."[174] As a result, journalists' "education is only sketchy, and the turn of their ideas is often vulgar."[175] Their journalistic spirit prompts them to "attack coarsely, without preparation and without art, the passions of those whom it addresses, to set aside principles in order to grab men," and "to follow them into their private lives."[176] Such superficial and incendiary news, Tocqueville declares, amounts to "an abuse of thought."[177]

The shifts in American political news after Tocqueville's death further sharpen his critique, as the few redeeming qualities he did attribute to journalism in America apply less to political news in the Digital Age. Despite his critique of journalistic spirit in America, Tocqueville maintains that the value of newspapers and associations as safeguards against individualism is intertwined, as he identifies "a necessary relation between associations and

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[172] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 174.

[173] Harvey C. Mansfield, *Tocqueville: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 39.

[174] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 177.

[175] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 177.

[176] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 177.

[177] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 177.

newspapers: newspapers make associations, and associations make newspapers."[178] But news today reaches people in a far more decentralized and targeted way that accords with the personal data rather than the common values of consumers. Correspondingly, the tendency of associations to make an impression on the majority, and the ability of newspapers to facilitate unity among disparate individuals, has diminished. One may well wonder how effectively newspapers can now play the role that Tocqueville assigns them:

> It often happens in democratic countries… that many men who have the desire or the need to associate cannot do it…. Up comes a newspaper that exposes to their view the sentiment or the idea that had been presented to each of them simultaneously but separately. All are immediately directed toward that light, and those wandering spirits who had long sought each other in the shadows finally meet each other and unite.[179]

Tocqueville claims that "the newspaper represents the association" because "one can say it [the newspaper] speaks to each of its readers in the name of all the others."[180] But the same relationship between news outlets and their readerships does not hold in the Digital Age. Digitally mediated news sources speak to their particular ideological bases. And even sources that attempt to provide unbiased news for broad audiences largely reach readers according to algorithms of mediums like Google and Facebook that match news with users based on what their particular data determines they will be most immediately attracted to. Accordingly, our digital civic space may increasingly appeal to passion and incentivize ideological echo-chambers.

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[178] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 494.

[179] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 493.

[180] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 495.

Even if the value that Tocqueville locates in journalism in America has dissipated, his diagnosis of the deficiencies of our democratized media environment rings all the more true today. The floodgates to informational abundance have opened, washing over us a constant change in unreflective beliefs. Silverman observes that in the Digital Age "we can read practically any newspaper in the world online, and that is a wonderful thing... while we can read far more broadly than ever before, though, we don't engage as deeply: 55 percent of Web users spend less than fifteen seconds on a page."[181] With so much information available and delivered to us according to our personal data, stories serve as "small and vulgar pleasures" that accommodate our most basic instinctual attachments. As Silverman notes, "with so much choice, publishers find themselves cultivating audiences that might never have to hear a political opinion with which they don't agree."[182] The accumulation of these factors encourages the creation and distribution of what Silverman calls "churnalism—cheap, disposable content repurposed from press releases, news reports, viral media, social networks, and elsewhere, all of it practically out-of-date and irrelevant as soon as someone clicks Publish," creating "a page view fueled horse race."[183]

The tendency of publishers to pump out content that appeases our most superficial and individualistic instincts clouds civic space and democratic discussion with noxious divisiveness rather than conciliatory civil freedom and rational understanding. The drive to be first on a story, to expose a political foe, or to cancel a public figure often outweighs journalists' consideration of

[181] Silverman, *Terms of Service*, 103.

[182] Silverman, *Terms of Service*, 103.

[183] Silverman, *Terms of Service*, 103, 326.

those who think differently than they do. Silverman quotes journalist Alice Gregory, who comments on the incentives of modern writers to construct chambers of reflection rather than windows of insight into opposing views:

> "We adore being targeted by art. We love getting nailed. Among those who write for a living, 'nailing it' is one of the most succinct and meaningful compliments. Implicit in the idiom is conclusiveness: nailing it *shut*. The phrase also usually implies a gimlet eye, the ability to articulate the ineffably obvious. As readers, we've grown addicted to it." Gregory was commenting on art that flatters certain specific, often culturally influential demographics…. The problem with "thisness," or being targeted, is that "it's intellectually disingenuous to allow that recognition to masquerade as some higher order of feeling. Owing to the rise in niche media, specificity—of language, of dress, of eating habits—is taking the place of narrative empathy. People love thinking about themselves, and getting someone to like something—or to 'like' something—seldom requires much more than giving them the chance to celebrate their own personal history."[184]

The culture of "nailing it" and the minimization of the length, sophistication, and narrative empathy of news in the Digital Age may have wide-ranging effects that leave us dissatisfied and disconnected. And even if one tunes out of social media and the Internet, one is not immune from the secondary cultural effects of this new media landscape. Regardless of individuals' voluntary engagement on Big Tech platforms, their personal data is likely to be collected and used to personalize their news according to psychological triggers that appeal to their particular passions. The pervasiveness of Big Tech's extractive mechanisms—most notably, the platforms of Google, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft—makes political news ad targeting nearly impossible to avoid.

The problem is systemic. As journalist David Roberts remarks, "as soon as you're ad-based, attention is your currency," and as a result, "you're not trying to improve your customers' lives."[185] Furthermore, as Silverman extrapolates, "this model recurs throughout the

[184] Silverman, *Terms of Service*, 119.

[185] Silverman, *Terms of Service*, 346.

history of mass media, from radio to TV to the Internet," but "now it's woven into the very fabric of our informational economy and our identities to boot."[186]

Such cultural absorption encourages self-inflicted informational ills. Individuals are empowered yet seem to exercise their power in ways that increasingly appeal to superficial desires and produce incendiary reactions. Information that we transmit through digital means most often manifests itself in images, brief videos, and short comments that trigger impulses of strong approval or disapproval rather than sophisticated reflection. Personalized data feeds appeal to pride, as news filters to what is most likely to elicit strong immediate reactions rather than the thought-provoking content that might not incite our attention as quickly. Digital discourse thus often adopts a tone of outrage and insecurity. Although harmful to our well-being, these emotions are helpful for the generation of profits for Big Tech companies such as Google and Facebook. Outrage and insecurity capture our attention and generate views, but they are less likely to promote self-government by encouraging civil freedom or directing us toward self-interest well understood.

The entrancing effect of our dysfunctional digital political discourse perhaps produces a situation in which the other-directed individual is, as Riesman writes, "unable to know what he wants while being preoccupied with what he likes."[187] Riesman explains that "just as glamor in sex substitutes for both love and… family ties… and just as glamor in packaging and advertising of products substitutes for price competition, so glamor in politics… as the hopped-up treatment

[186] Silverman, *Terms of Service*, 346.

[187] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 190.

of events by the mass media, substitutes for the types of self-interest that governed the inner-directed."[188]

Surface-level attraction to news substitutes for our deeper understanding and utilization of it to establish connections and values that encourage self-government. Awestruck by the glamor of status-signaling and personalization technology, we risk withdrawing into subjects of Tocquevillian democratic despotism, whose passivity is most often disturbed by the instinctual reaction of anger when those with opposing views distract us from our self-image.

To avoid such subconsciously instigated division, we ought to heed Riesman's warning that "wherever we see glamor in the object of attention, we must suspect a basic apathy in the spectator."[189] Otherwise we risk falling into Tocquevillian democratic despotism, as "subjection in small affairs manifests itself every day and makes itself felt without distinction by all citizens," and "does not make them desperate; but it constantly thwarts them and brings them to renounce the use of their wills."[190]

Today, the democratized state of political news has created an individualistic, atomized, and emotionally charged digital news environment in which Tocqueville's declaration that "a false idea, but one clear and precise, will always have more power in the world than a true, but complex, idea," holds especially true.[191] The *bourgeois* character of the literalized double man and rise of individualism in the Digital Age have increased appeals to passion in our news that

[188] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 191.

[189] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 191.

[190] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 665.

[191] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 155.

risk dividing and debilitating our democracy despite the enormous transcendent potential of modern technology.

From Personalization to Political Polarization

When our understanding of the outside world is determined by news filtered according to our personal data and self-selection of material we already agree with, political polarization may increase. For our perception of truth quite literally polarizes, as we see the world through different narrative lenses depending on our online activity. And unlike in the natural world, in the digital world we can simply filter out those with whom we disagree. As McIntyre explains, "these days we have the luxury of choosing our own selective interactions"; "whatever our political persuasion, we can live in a 'news silo' if we care to."[192]And more often than not, "we just feel more comfortable when our views are in step with those of our compatriots."[193]

The convenience that the attention economy's combination of inflamed *amour-propre* and individualism generates may align with the self-interest of many individuals. The attention economy works well to keep us in comfortable information bubbles, satisfy our short-term desires, and promote the profits of Big Tech companies. Additionally, the superficiality and individualism of the Internet present opportunities for those willing to take advantage of the all-the-more-truism: "the media loves controversy more than truth."[194] As Silverman notes,

[192] McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 60.

[193] McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 60.

[194] McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 82.

"celebrities know that even an unplanned, perhaps regrettable Twitter outburst will lead to useful media coverage."[195]

Despite the allure of attention and comfort of ideological affirmation, we have reason to consider Koppel's statement that while he "can appreciate the financial logic of drowning… viewers in a flood of opinions designed to confirm their own biases, the trend is not good for the republic."[196] Amidst all of our attention-seeking and individualistic polarization, we risk absorbing ourselves in distraction from the democratic role of individuals to exercise our civil freedom and hold those in power accountable to the general will. Tocqueville warns that "if each citizen, as he becomes individually weaker and consequently more incapable in isolation of preserving his freedom, does not learn the art of uniting with those like him to defend it, tyranny will necessarily grow with equality."[197] For, as the division of labor becomes more stark and we become more dependent on each other to perform basic functions, our interpersonal detachment grows more costly. If "in centuries of equality, each man seeks his beliefs in himself" alone, then individuals will prevent themselves from realizing self-interest well understood.[198]

Democracies in the Digital Age may be uniquely susceptible to the kind of democratic despotism Tocqueville warns of. The transition from commonly trusted sources of news to the democratization of publishing power and personalization of information has generated conditions conducive to a surge in individualism that threatens to consume the civic space in which open-minded deliberation and civil freedom can flourish. Such circumstances render timely

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[195] Silverman, *Terms of Service*, 148.

[196] McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 71.

[197] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 489.

[198] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 482

Tocqueville's warning that "a despot readily pardons the governed for not loving him, provided that they do not love each other."[199]

But the threat of the Tocquevillian immaterial despotism of public opinion may be a more fundamental danger to self-government than is the rise of a particular despot. For the former creates the conditions in which the latter may flourish. And the "phantom of a public opinion" also exerts its own method of coercion.[200] As Riesman writes, in other-directed society one "must have acceptable opinions, and where he engages in politics he must do so in acceptable ways."[201] The social requirements that the Digital Age dictates mirror Tocqueville's warning of the particular pervasiveness of immaterial despotism in democratic republics. "A king," he writes, "has only a material power that acts on actions and cannot reach wills; but the majority is vested with a force, at once material and moral, that acts on the will as much as on actions, and which at the same time prevents the deed and the desire to do it."[202]

The Decline of Informational Authority and Social Cohesion

The Digital Age has actualized the force of this democratic despotism in the algorithms that now guide our digital deeds and desires. The coercive pressure of group-think and social restrictions of cancel culture not only affect writers who, as Packer observes, "are now expected to *identify* with a community and to write as its representatives," but also extend to sway the

[199] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 485.

[200] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 616.

[201] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 184.

[202] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 243.

political expression and social circles of all kinds of individuals in digital society.[203] Political opinions increasingly function as a form of group conformity, as, in digital society, they determine our social environment rather than vice versa. Accordingly, our digital social settings do little to expose us to intellectual authorities who provide one with more than insular entrenchment in one's biases.

Tocqueville warns that, in democracy, a rise of individualism may prevent individuals from expanding their views beyond themselves. Self-interest well understood is under threat in such circumstances, as, according to Manent, "it is this idea, the very matrix of the influence that one man has over another—whether it be that of 'reason or virtue'—that is here destroyed."[204] Individuals rely on their inner judgment rather than on the competence of traditional institutions. And their parochial views leave room for only a cursory consideration of the general ideas with which the impersonal "phantom of a public opinion" pressures them.[205]

The digital media environment presents individuals with news that caters to their narrow perspectives. The power of opinion that we fall under is thus less majority opinion than it is the overwhelming opinions of particular factions. This deviation from Tocqueville's diagnosis further fractures our capacity to understand each other and exercise wide-ranging civil freedom, as digital political news decreasingly highlights our shared values and increasingly reinforces our

[203] Packer, "The Enemies of Writing."

[204] Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, translated by John Waggoner (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996), 39.

[205] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 616.

disparate biases. Consequently, it becomes harder to accomplish Rousseau's goal of, as Manent writes, "identifying each individual with the polity itself."[206]

The potential deficiencies of the digital news media environment may not have surprised Tocqueville, for, as Manent interprets Tocqueville's view, "free associations themselves, with time, tend to be unfaithful to their democratic foundation."[207] Tocqueville encourages us to maintain our awareness of the threats to political freedom that exist deeply embedded in democratic ideology, waiting to undermine their maker through its historical enactment. Today, we recognize the danger that personalization technology may shape the passion for equality into the individualistic polarization of our media environment.

In the Digital Age, the decline in institutional trust and social understanding that accompanies aggravated *amour-propre* and individualism threatens to throw democracy into digital disorder. Perhaps this movement is merely a continuation of a tension that Tocqueville locates between those who, swept up by democratic dogmas, view forms, institutions, and traditions as obstacles to equality, and those who, like Tocqueville, regard such instruments as necessary for the promotion of virtue. "Democratic peoples," Mansfield writes, "disdain forms because they want to go directly to the object of their desires, preferring action to dignity, sincerity to politeness, result to correctness; in sum, substance to form."[208] Tocqueville, in contrast, argues that institutions are necessary to "place obstacles between men and their desires" and construct some sort of hierarchy of competence that encourages the better angels of our

[206] Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, 74.

[207] Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, 27.

[208] Mansfield, *Tocqueville*, 27.

nature.[209] Such hierarchies need not always favor the few at the expense of the many, but rather, when applied to issues such as the reliability of news, can work in service of the self-interest of all.

But distrust in traditional institutions has now extended to forms of mass media that previously provided hierarchies of competence upholding common principles. At its height, trust in journalistic institutions served as a countervailing force to check the corruption of government, but today, many people perceive neither government nor the media as a reliable source for truth. In addition to the aforementioned declining trust in mass media, trust in government and our fellow citizens appears to be diminishing. Pew Research Center finds that 75% of Americans believe that trust in the federal government has been shrinking.[210] And *Our World in Data* finds that interpersonal trust among Americans is at 30 percent, down from 50 percent in 1985.[211] As Zuboff notes, "social trust is highly correlated with peaceful collective decision making and civic engagement."[212] "In its absence," she continues, "the authority of shared values and mutual obligations slips away."[213] Regardless of the extent to which one can attribute decline in trust to the technological developments of the Digital Age, such decrease in assurance renders us more vulnerable to a tide of alienation from political freedom.

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[209] Mansfield, *Tocqueville*, 27.

[210] Andrew Perrin and Lee Rainie, "Key findings about Americans' declining trust in government and each other," *Pew Research Center*, July 22, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/22/key-findings-about-americans-declining-trust-in-government-and-each-other/.

[211] Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser, "Trust," *Our World in Data*, August 3, 2017, https://ourworldindata.org/trust.

[212] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 384.

[213] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 384.

The danger of such distrust is at once public detachment and political rebellion. Many citizens grow disgusted with the superficiality of political news and sever themselves from the political process. They reject the *bourgeois* character of political posturing. As Lasch writes, "the 'flight from politics,' as it appears to the managerial and political elite, may signify the citizen's growing unwillingness to take part in the political system as a consumer of prefabricated spectacles."[214]

While Lasch notes that the "pervasive distrust of those in power" underlying the modern individual's skepticism of institutions "has made society increasingly difficult to govern," it also changes the mode of governing.[215] For individualism, as Tocqueville claims, "at first dries up only the source of public virtues; but in the long term it attacks and destroys all the others [all the other virtues] and will finally be absorbed in selfishness."[216] The increasing individualism and factionalization of the public not only produces apathy but also prompts inflammatory political character. Those who feel they are politically alienated will lash out, as Lasch predicts when he suggests that the "flight from politics" may be "not a retreat from politics at all but the beginnings of a general political revolt."[217] His message mirrors the writings of Riesman, who predicts that "if at any time the indignants can make a junction with the indifferents, the former can become very powerful," as "indignation can draw on great lower-class reserves of

[214] Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, xv.

[215] Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, xiv-xv.

[216] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 483.

[217] Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, xv.

nationalism and xenophobia."[218] One need only observe our current political situation to see this frustration uncovered.

As we have investigated how Rousseau's account of the corruption of self-love and Tocqueville's description of withdrawal into individualism apply to our present state, we may now characterize the particular threat to political freedom that the Digital Age presents.

[218] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 204.

Conclusion

Digital Tribalism and the Automation of Self-Growth

The application of the theories of Rousseau and Tocqueville to current technological trends reveals the danger to political freedom as an advanced state of nature that nevertheless leaves its members underdeveloped. Relationships in Rousseau's ideal state of nature are intimate yet few as individuals embrace both political freedom and environmental constraints. The digital state of nature, in contrast, encourages us to instrumentalize others and removes us from the forces for self-growth in the natural world. It encourages prideful recession into particularized digital environments that increase individualism rather than allow us to gain greater understanding of others and exercise our civil freedom. This development produces an extension of Manent's depiction of the central threat that Tocqueville identifies: a "radical severing of the social links that democracy introduces" that "opens us to the image of democracy as a 'dis-society.'"[219] In the Digital Age, this dis-society constitutes a condition of digital tribalism.

Digital tribalism may arise from the combination of the corruption of self-love and exacerbation of individualism. Recall the particular social superficiality of the Rousseauian man: the *bourgeois* character appears to relate everything to others while in fact relating everything to himself. In digital dis-society, Rousseau's double man tends to display his individualism as a form of prideful self-awareness of and self-indulgence in his particular views. Consequently, we see the rise of cancel culture, virtue signaling, de-platforming, absolutism, and misrepresentative

[219] Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, 12.

sound bites, videos, and tweets. These maneuvers serve as efforts to reshape the political landscape in one's own image. Such action signals one's bias or sensitivity as a source of pride that must be honored by others rather than inducing a well of reasoned reflection that connects us to the interests of others. Increasingly, our technology may produce prideful displays of the political opinions that arise from individualism instead of attempts to fulfill one's capacity to orient oneself "toward a whole of which one is a part" and become "bound in a tight manner to something that is placed outside of" oneself.[220] This pivot marks a shift away from the exercise of civil freedom and the apprehension of self-interest well understood that mark true political freedom.

In digital society, individuals exert their natural freedom through their ability to access and publish information without having to answer to a master. Yet such technological liberation can surreptitiously—as Rousseau writes of Enlightenment developments—"spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which men are burdened."[221] Citizens face subliminal disenfranchisement from civil freedom through the influence of *bourgeois* character and individualism—character shifts which spread more deliberately due to the incentives of Big Tech companies that compete in the attention economy. Our propensity for self-government may thus dissolve as our capacity for association and self-interest well understood diminishes.

Social superficiality and political polarization may divide our common interests and depoliticize the democratic individual. Here, democracy risks reaching a point of contradiction, for, as Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, fellow editor of *Democracy in America*, explain:

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[220] Rousseau, "*On the Social Contract*," in *Major Political Writings*, 174; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 483.

[221] Rousseau, "*Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*," in *Major Political Writings*, 12.

> One might even say that the democratic social state seems to dissociate men so that they pass quickly from subjects to citizens to individuals. The social state in its completion is really an asocial state of sovereign individuals, each of them capable, according to the democratic dogma, of running his own life—while in truth, as one in a mass, powerless to do so.[222]

Tocqueville foresees that the progression of democracy may eventually untie the bonds of the social contract. The dogma of the sovereignty of the people, in its excess, decomposes hierarchies and associations into individuals who, in their chambers of reflection, look out their windows (or at their screens) only to feel the power of opinion—the amorphous audience of society at large —reflect back to them their own prideful self-awareness. The aim of self-sufficiency and equal political representation can, then, rob us of our capacity for self-government, which can only be cultivated through the intimate relations with others and engagement with reasoned reflection that encourage our self-interest well understood. Tocqueville's vision of democratic collapse is through a progress of equality that debases us, as we simultaneously advance and return to an antisocial state of nature—a condition that, in digital society, is exemplified by digital tribalism.

We see forms of such digital debasement when, while technology evolves, the prerequisites to political freedom recede. Consider, for example, the regression of intimate connection and reasoned reflection in political discourse from the fireside chats of nearly a century ago to the tweets of today. The informational overload and digital format of today's news encourage the spreading of ever smaller bits of information that merely signal allegiance rather than engage others—that aim to insult others rather than promote understanding. For the sake of our transcendent reach and efficient communication, it may be more politically

[222] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, xlv.

advantageous to sacrifice depth for breadth in our communications and leave untapped the technological potential to engage beyond the status-driven instrumentation of others.

But this development may be a mere symptom of the deeper, underlying affront on our political freedom: the increase of informational asymmetry between ordinary individuals whose social education shapes their capacity for self-government and those who govern digital society itself. Our modern dependence on digital technology and those few companies that establish the terms for our discourse on it presents the possibility of a decline in the political freedom of democratic individuals. Tocqueville writes that "it is easy to foresee that the time is approaching when a man by himself alone will be less and less in a state to produce the things that are the most common and the most necessary to his life."[223] Today, through our declining ability to understand the technological forces that govern our lives, we have progressed quite far along the lines of Tocqueville's prediction. Consider the role of the digital technology user as analogous to that of the modern consumer, who, as philosopher Julien Freund writes, "buys any number of products in the grocery without knowing what substances they are made of… by contrast, 'primitive' man in the bush knows infinitely more about the conditions under which he lives."[224]

In the digital news landscape, individuals have particular stores in which they can feed their informational appetite for free. Each store has different products specifically tailored to each individual's tastes—or distastes, as in the news world (unlike, for the most part, in the realm of food) we may be drawn to pick up and ridicule those pieces that we find most revolting. Occasionally we choose to change aisles, but we seldom switch stores and see how someone

[223] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 491.

[224] Julien Freund, *The Sociology of Max Weber* (New York: Vintage, 1969), 20.

with different tastes shops. Most remain entranced by the infinite flow of goods pumping into their feeds. Our need for sustenance, as well as our cravings for those items that may be worst for us, keeps us coming back to our personalized digital marketplaces. In so doing, the exercise of our freedom merely amounts to our willingness to be filled by those who we assume know more about our preferences than we do.

At the heart of our dependence on digital news media lies an asymmetry of information, yet because of either inconvenience or absent-mindedness, we rarely question this imbalance. As Zuboff notes, "surveillance capitalists know everything *about us*, whereas their operations are designed to be unknowable *to us*."[225] But many hardly notice. The data extraction model of Big Tech and its effects on our discourse are so vast—so integrated into everyday life—that their existence seems inevitable. Zuboff addresses the problem further:

> Consider that the internet has become essential for social participation, that the internet is now saturated with commerce, and that commerce is now subordinated to surveillance capitalism. Our dependency is at the heart of the commercial surveillance project, in which our felt needs for effective life vie against the inclination to resist its bold incursions. This conflict produces a psychic numbing that inures us to the realities of being tracked, parsed, mined and modified.[226]

The final form of this integration is the automation of our actions, which stands opposite our rational agency to self-correct, self-govern, and fulfill our deeply natural purpose to strive to become more than we are today—to grow and flourish. In the 1991 article "The Computer for the 21st Century," computer scientist Mark Weisner writes that "the most profound technologies are those that disappear," as "they weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they

[225] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 11.

[226] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 11.

are indistinguishable from it."[227] We are living through the increasing realization of his prediction as the ubiquity of digital technology in our modern lives grows more "natural". While some may be wary of this shift, others view this development as the future we ought to aspire to. As Zuboff recalls:

> Eric Schmidt [former CEO of Google and current chairman of the US Department of Defense's Defense Innovation Advisory Board] provoked uproar in 2015 when in response to a question on the future of the web, he said, "The internet will disappear." What he really meant was that "The internet will disappear into Big Other."... In an instrumentarian utopia, Big Other simulates the vortex of stimuli, transforming "natural selection" into the "unnatural selection" of variation and reinforcement authored by market players and the competition for surveillance revenues.[228]

Promotion of social superficiality and individualism lie at the core of the Big Other's control, for as Zuboff details, for surveillance capitalists, "friction is the only evil."[229] She elaborates:

> Instrumentarian power, like Goethe's Faust, is morally agnostic. The only moral imperative here is distilled from the point of view of a thin utopian gruel. If there is a sin, it is the sin of autonomy: the audacity to reject the flows that herd us all toward predictability… The norm is submission to the supposed iron laws of technological inevitability that brook no impediment. It is deemed only rational to surrender and rejoice in new conveniences and harmonies, to wrap ourselves in the first text and embrace a violent ignorance of its shadow.[230]

What Zuboff reveals here is hardly a secret; Silicon Valley leaders themselves suggest similar conclusions. Mark Zuckerberg often refers to "frictionless sharing"—his "term for sharing that is swift, simple, and automatic."[231] As writer Adrian Short claims, this phrase "is

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[227] Mark Weiser, "The Computer for the 21st Century," *Scientific American*, September 1991, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-computer-for-the-21st-century.

[228] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 378.

[229] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism,* 381.

[230] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism,* 381.

[231] Silverman, *Terms of Service*, 12.

better understood as a 'euphemism for silent total surveillance.'"[232] Furthermore, Silverman relays "Zuckerberg's dream for Facebook," which, Zuckerberg states, is "to make us all cells in a single organism, communicating automatically in spite of ourselves, perhaps without the need for intention or speech."[233]

The danger of digital development toward this goal is that it may disintegrate the project of self-government that gives our lives so much meaning. For no dominant force can automate the importance of reflective agency and political freedom. Tocqueville writes:

> A central power, however enlightened, however learned one imagines it, cannot gather to itself alone all the details of the life of a great people. It cannot do it because such a work exceeds human strength. When it wants by its care alone to create so many diverse springs and make them function, it contents itself with a very incomplete result or exhausts itself in useless efforts.[234]

The springs of our self-government do not emanate from a central source. Rather, they flow through the intimate relationships we form with others, the conceptions of greatness we strive toward, and the universal spiritual drive of individuals to be "bound in a tight manner to something that is placed outside of them" such that they "forget themselves."[235]

The particular legitimacy and beauty of democracy is that it permits us to retain our natural fluidity. It allows us to enact the very internal self-government that encourages us to flourish on a communal level. Manent claims that democracy's saving consideration is its regenerative capacity to correct for its mistakes. Although "the democratic process contains

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[232] Silverman, *Terms of Service*, 12.

[233] Silverman, *Terms of Service*, 12.

[234] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 86.

[235] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 482.

within it the threat of a state of nature increasingly less civilized," Manent writes, "real democracy never ceases establishing the state of nature in order to continually abandon it."[236] For "to establish a state in which truly independent men would be in a position to associate while at the same time preserving their liberties is its task—always unfinished."[237] Thus, democratic progress oscillates between dis-society and the improvement of society.

Our understanding of how technology alters our nature is integral to the promotion of this shift and protection of political freedom in digital society. For gaining insight into how the corrupted self-love of the double man and the illusory independence of individualism may create an environment of digital tribalism is the first step to awakening the civil freedom needed to potentially reknit "the social fabric."[238]

The seeds for such growth are sown in the ground of our nature and the constraints it imposes on us. We need tension between our interests and their satisfiability to be able to assent through our common struggle to the better angels of our nature and grow through self-government. Perhaps this is why, as Bloom interprets, "Rousseau recognized that without necessity the realm of freedom can have no meaning."[239]

Today, this lesson is easy to forget. Faith in the emancipatory potential of technology may tempt us to construct digital chambers of reflection and aim, in vain, to contain all our insatiable desires in them. We may ineffectually attempt to digitally manufacture our own

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[236] Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, 27.

[237] Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, 27.

[238] Manent , *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, 25.

[239] Rousseau, "Introduction," in *Emile*, 12.

artificial and personal Edenic paradise. Or, we may use our chambers of reflection to hold mirrors to our nature that allow us to understand and enlighten our interests. We may use our technology to cultivate our garden.

I have extended the political theories of Rousseau and Tocqueville to the present day in order to investigate the possibility of alienation from political freedom in the Digital Age. The principal danger of digital society and our faith in technological progress, I have argued, is that they may unravel our sociability into a state of digital tribalism. In such a state, one depends on others for approval, yet one grows increasingly alienated from one's capacity to intimately connect with them and exercise civil freedom by orienting oneself "toward a whole of which one is a part."[240] Personalization technology promotes a kind of individualism that casts our views of the outside world back to our opinions and biases. Chambers of reflection comprise our civic space and distract us from scrutinizing the very sources of democratic despotism.

But by redirecting our chambers of reflection from our own aggrandizement to the process through which digital technology alters our nature and dissolves democracy into dis-society, we can awaken our sense of self-government and exercise political freedom. We can affirm our natural flourishing in digital society by reknitting the social fabric that helps us navigate our self-interest and strive toward self-growth. For this purpose we may do well to learn from the thinkers whose legacies persist to ensure that political freedom endures amidst the challenges that the future holds.

[240] Rousseau, "*On the Social Contract*," in *Major Political Writings*, 174.

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