The Rift in the Modern Mind: Tocqueville and Percy on the Rise of the Cartesian Self

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Abstract: Alexis de Tocqueville and Walker Percy are two of the most insightful commentators on the conditions of modernity. Placed in dialogue with one another, their work betrays startlingly parallel modes of thought and a complementary diagnosis of modernity's ills. In essence, they claim that the rise of Cartesian doubt robs men of their ability to cope with the world. They argue that by undermining the capacities for both authentic, face-to-face communication with each other and sincere religious faith, modernity exacerbates our alienation while depriving men of the capacity to see their difficulties clearly. This article argues that both Percy's and Tocqueville's understanding of modern life centers on their evocation of what might be called the "Cartesian self," and that while each develops a quite different analysis of the dimensions of this problem, both conclude that only an indirect approach to the intellectual and spiritual crisis of modernity provides any hope of ameliorating man's ills.

Keywords: democratic man, Alexis de Tocqueville, language, modernity, Walker Percy, semiotics

Alexis de Tocqueville and Walker Percy are two of the most insightful commentators on the modern condition. In different ways, each writer is known for his searching criticisms of the political, intellectual, and spiritual crises of contemporary life. Both writers betray startlingly parallel modes of thought and a complementary diagnosis of modernity's ills. In essence, they claim that the rise of Cartesian doubt robs men of their abilities to cope with the world. They argue that by undermining the capacities for both authentic face-to-face communication and sincere religious faith, modernity exacerbates our alienation while depriving us of the capacity to see our condition clearly. Yet, despite their similar and quite striking evocation of these themes, scholars have written little about this intriguing convergence of thought.[1] In this essay we argue that both Percy's and Tocqueville's understanding of modern life centers on their evocation of what might be called the Cartesian self, and that while each develops a quite different analysis of the dimensions of this problem, both conclude that only an indirect approach to the intellectual and spiritual crisis of modernity provides any hope of ameliorating man's ills.

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STRANGERS TO OURSELVES: SOURCES OF THE ABSTRACT SELF

We begin with the claim that both Tocqueville and Percy saw the democratic or modern age as defined, in part, by the paradox of widespread discontent in the midst of prosperity, of our feeling bad while having it so good.[2] This theme runs through both their writings and finds at least partial explanation in each case with the rise of the Cartesian self. Tocqueville and Percy recognize, in their own ways, that the Cartesian method of placing epistemology *prior* to ontology abstracts the self from the world into which it was thrown. This act deprives modern man of a decent self-understanding. Both hold that man is a wayfarer whose self-understanding is always tenuous at best, yet they also claim that Cartesian doubt undermines the resources that make even this minimal grasp of the self's condition possible. Thus, an inability to cope with the world is the defining characteristic of the Cartesian self. The incoherence of this modern self-understanding exacerbates the profound material and spiritual restlessness that Tocqueville and Percy describe.

In this section, we explore the nature and dimensions of this incoherence and the precise way it relates to the Carte-

sian self. Tocqueville links man's intellectual incoherence to the rise of egalitarian thinking; Percy completes this story by exploring the gap between man's self-understanding and reality.[3] We begin with the former. Tocqueville observes that in America, he had seen "the freest and best educated of men in circumstances the happiest to be found in the world; yet . . . they seemed serious and almost sad even in their pleasures" (1969, 536).[4] Many Americans of the early nineteenth century found themselves in enviable material conditions, free and prosperous, yet they often still experienced an underlying despair. Such individuals felt "restless in the midst of abundance," and a "strange melancholy" often haunted them despite their "calm and easy circumstances" (*DA*, 536–38). A similar insight drove Percy to ask the following questions: "Why does man feel so sad in the twentieth century? Why does man feel so bad in the very age when, more than in any other age, he has succeeded in satisfying his needs and making over the world for his own use?" (1975, 3). Through their exploration of modernity's simultaneous prosperity and unease, both direct us to a strikingly intellectual, and, indeed, *spiritual* cause for this strange discontent.

Although Tocqueville and Percy identify many of the same problems, their deepest similarities exist in the ways they *think* about the requirements for a stable, meaningful life. As we will discuss more fully in the next section, Tocqueville argues that equality is the driving force of the modern age (*DA*, 12). By fostering the "taste for physical pleasures" that encourages democracy's secret restlessness, materialism grows more and more pervasive. The desire for material goods is a constant one; the rise of equality renders it frantic and dangerous, making it a *pervasive* aspect of modern life (*DA*, 536). Percy's analysis complements this by focusing on the cognitive and existential consequences of the society Tocqueville describes. Each thinker connects these developments to the rise of the Cartesian self.

Both link Descartes's method of doubt to the spread of equality and recognize that when man conceives of himself as an autonomous individual equal to all others, he starts from himself and works outward, just as Descartes did.[5] This transforms man's self-understanding and how he experiences the world, often in profoundly unsettling ways. Those in the democratic age are "brought back to their own judgment as the most apparent and accessible test of truth . . . each man is narrowly shut up in himself, and from that basis makes the pretension to judge the world" (*DA*, 430). This mode of thinking eliminates the barriers between "cosmic infinity and the individual," those things that give man some sense of his place in the world (Bloom 1988, 85). The logic of equality only begins with the death of aristocracy; it attempts to efface all forms of religious, cultural, and intellectual authority. Once he is shorn of those elements that once restrained his possibilities but also provided him with meaning, in the democratic age, man risks becoming an abstract self.

Tocqueville knew that "the same equality which allows each man to entertain vast hopes makes each man by himself weak" (*DA*, 537). Each man sees himself as similar in power and capacity to achieve his greatest ambitions, yet the loss of traditional supports for the individual betrays his limitations and frustrates his hopes. With his desires thwarted, democratic man turns to material goods for satisfaction, only to find himself forever comparing his goods with those of his neighbor, forever wanting more. This is because total equality is chimerical, an asymptotic chase that never ends—in Tocqueville's words, "all the conditions of life can never be perfectly equal" (*DA*, 537–38). Tocqueville's central insight here is that as conditions grow more equal, small differences grow more irksome—"the more equal men are, the more insatiable will be their longing for equality" (*DA*, 537–38).[6]

The difficulty is that the rise of the Cartesian self allows democratic man to *think* what in *practice* is unachievable; it divorces man's implicit philosophical method of understanding the world from the possibility of actually comprehending reality. It is at this point that the link between Tocqueville and Percy emerges. For Percy, one of the striking features of the Cartesian self is that it deprives men of the resources for self-understanding. Just as Tocqueville saw how the Cartesian method of the Americans left them in the untenable position of frantically pursuing the impossible, Percy observes that "man's theory about himself doesn't work any more" (1975, 19). Modernity is "broken, sundered, busted down the middle," marked by the "self ripped from self and man pasted back together as mythical monster, half angel, half beast, but no man" (Percy 1971, 382–83). By tearing mind from body and thus dividing the unity that the Christian understanding of man provided, Descartes set man on the path to forgetting that he is always a problem to himself—that his science and philosophy will never fully explain the mystery life presents us.

The separation of body and mind allows men "to understand themselves as organisms somehow endowed with mind and self and freedom and worth" (Percy 1975, 21). So understood, man becomes merely a ghost in a machine, an organism among other organisms that for reasons not yet fully known evolved a superior intellect—a higher animal with the "higher" part left largely unexplained. With its spectacular success in comprehending and transforming the natural world, modern science tries to explain man using the same methods it applies to other fields. Percy thought the dominance of science characterizes the present age, a world exemplified by the philosophical method of Descartes and "dressed up in the attic finery of a Judeo-Christianity in which fewer and fewer people believe . . ." (1975, 21). Without a realistic understanding of man like that traditionally provided by sincere religious faith that can restrain science within proper bounds, scientists turn their eyes to every aspect of human life.

Percy understood this attempted synthesis between rational, desacralized morality and science to be radically untenable. When modern man asserts the power of human rights, yet finds his skeptical epistemology undermining every attempt to support such rights, moral boundaries continually erode. No longer grounded by his relationship to nature, man takes his own dignity less and less seriously. Without moral limits based in a vision capable of insisting on human dignity, science can act to "improve" human life without limits. For Percy, the logical conclusion is that

although we speak of rights and dignity more than ever, "no one is even surprised at mid-century when more than fifty million people have been killed in Europe alone" (1975, 22). After all, machines inhabited by ghosts do not demand respect. In Tocqueville's apt phrase, these fading remains of Christian ethics are like "the broken chains still occasionally dangling from the ceiling of an old building but carrying nothing" (*DA*, 32).

Percy confesses that he understands a "secret about the scientific method which every scientist knows and takes as a matter of course, but which the layman does not know." Informed as the age is by the triumph of science, this secret takes on the utmost importance. Percy's secret is this: "Science cannot utter a single word about an individual molecule, thing, or creature in so far as it is an individual but only in so far as it is like other individuals" (1975, 22). Science classifies natural phenomena; it groups things together based on similarities and can only tell a man how he resembles another man, but it cannot say a word to him as an individual. Charmed by a false understanding of science, modern man tends to seek knowledge only through methods that cannot tell him anything about what it *means* to be a human person. Consequently, the abstract or general categories of science submerge the one into the many.

The modern democratic-scientific age deprives men of meaning in multiple ways. For Tocqueville, the Cartesian self is abstracted from place and tradition and faces a sort of bad infinity. With Percy, the self is incapable of understanding what it means to be fully human. The theories of the age fail to correspond adequately to lived experience, and no intellectual discipline seems able to answer man's urgent spiritual needs. How we know stands in conflict with who we are. By embracing the terms of science as the only legitimate mode of discourse, man loses the language of meaning and becomes a stranger to himself. Percy wrote that in such times, man "finds himself in the strangest of predicaments: he lives in a cocoon of dead silence, in which no one can speak to him nor can he reply" (1975, 22). This is a primary source of the melancholy, madness, and manic tendencies both Tocqueville and Percy confront. In the next two sections, we more fully develop what this means for each author.

DIMINISHING THE UNDERSTANDING AND CLOSING THE HEART

Throughout *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville grounds his insights in a fundamentally Augustinian vision of human nature. He reminds us man is a flawed creature, one continually departing from a steady course of conduct, "unable to hold firmly to what is true and just" and "generally reduced to choosing between two excesses" (*DA*, 43). Rarely remaining within a virtuous mean, left unchecked, man usually tests or exceeds established boundaries or limits (Mitchell 1995, 40–43). For Tocqueville, the central moral problem of modernity is that absent the boundaries by provided by sincere faith and aristocratic social order, our tendency toward manic behavior grows.

No longer bound by the stable social conventions that give way in the democratic age, man's natural tendency to oscillate between extremes of behavior recurs in a number of different ways, but particularly in relation to personal identity. Unmoored from the old manners and mores that once held them firmly between psychological extremes, individuals in democratic times find themselves beset by alternating impulses toward self- and other-directed behavior, or in Tocqueville's language, between solipsistic individualism and the surrender of the self to public opinion.[7] Tocqueville defines individualism as a propensity toward isolation, "a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends" (*DA*, 506). Modernity's egalitarian impulses result in "a general distaste for accepting any man's word as proof of anything" and, consequently, "each man is narrowly shut up in himself, and from that basis makes the pretension to judge the world" (*DA*, 430).

These dual tendencies of individualism and solipsism denigrate the authority of particular individuals or groups. By isolating men from one another, individualism deprives men of a sense of place in the word; at the same time, his solipsism makes him confuse his moral sense with truth. Together, these two forces result in democratic man being more likely to trust "society" as a whole. Unable to see qualitative distinctions between one another, people find it easy to place more and more confidence in the mass of their fellows. Thus, "public opinion becomes more and more the mistress of the world" (*DA*, 435). What makes this so dangerous is that the "same equality which makes him independent of each separate citizen leaves him isolated and defenseless," and, in the end, unable to free himself from alternating between either his own narrow vision or the one public opinion provides (*DA*, 435).

Tocqueville's main point here is that the evacuation of the middle ground between these two modes of understanding is one mark of the truly democratic society. With this tremendous unsettling of human identity, democratic man's instincts finally allow egalitarian intellectual tendencies to flourish. For Tocqueville, the loss of personal identity and stability conferred by old social forms and modes of interaction allows systemic and gnawing doubt to make inroads among democratic peoples. It is dangerous because this mode of thought has no principle within it that restricts skepticism to one sphere of life or another.[8] Without boundaries that restrict the Cartesian method's application to all aspects of life, every belief and practice comes into question.[9] The restless motion engendered by a culture that is constantly and willfully questioning its own foundations exacerbates this difficulty. Materially, everything in democratic society is "in constant movement, and every movement seems an advance" (*DA*, 404). In turn, these seeming improvements further suggest the absence of limitations to any human endeavor: "in his eyes something which does not exist is just something that has not been tried yet" (*DA*, 404). This means that in such a state, "[f]ortunes, ideas, and laws are constantly changing" and people continually subject old ways of life to scrutiny (*DA*, 614). Often these fall away, making democratic society naturally unstable.

According to Tocqueville, man is a naturally religious creature (*DA*, 534–35). Yet, in cases in which the Cartesian spirit rules, "religious belief is silently undermined by doctrines which I shall call negative because they assert the falseness of one religion but do not establish the truth of any other" (*DA*, 299). Without mediating institutions, the alternating solipsism and surrender to public opinion can lead to a decline of sincere faith; those in the democratic age tend to "abandon the faith they love to follow the doubt that leads them to despair" (*DA*, 299). Absent the fulfillment of faith, democratic man's manic behavior takes on an even more problematic cast.

In this state, people alternate between two specific extremes. The first is a brooding desire to find unity and completeness in the world, at its limit resulting in a pantheistic vision that effaces the dignity of man,[10] and in which "[i]ndividuals are forgotten, and the species alone counts" (*DA*, 451). The second response manifests itself in a restless, feverish attempt to acquire material goods, wherein "Americans cleave to the things of this world as if assured that they will never die, and yet are in such a rush to snatch any that come within their reach, as if expecting to stop living before they have relished them" (*DA*, 536). Instead of stable social order and steady faith, the twin desires for intellectual unity and material satisfaction work in concert with democracy's tendency toward solipsism and the rule of public opinion. Together, they alter the patterns of language and thought in democratic society in deeply troubling ways.[11]

Human weakness always necessitates some consistent way for men to interpret the world, for if "a human intelligence tried to examine and judge all the particular cases that came his way," he would find himself "lost in a wilderness of detail" (*DA*, 437), unable to act at all. Tocqueville insists that men always develop general ideas and categories as a shorthand through which they interpret events.[12] For citizens in democratic times, "[l]ife is so practical, complicated, agitated, and active that they have little time for thinking," and generalizations save time (*DA*, 440). Such expedients "have this excellent quality, that they permit human minds to pass judgment quickly on a great number of things," but they come at the cost of incompleteness and an inability to see the thing in itself, for "what is gained in extent is always lost in exactitude" (*DA*, 437).

Kept within their proper boundaries, general ideas function as a necessary coping mechanism for dealing with a complex world. Yet, the unmoored democratic soul finds it hard to impose limits on any activities; at the same time, his social and economic circumstances militate against restricting abstractions to their proper place. Instead, "it becomes an ardent and often blind passion of the human spirit to discover common rules for everything, to include a great number of objects under the same formula, and to explain a group of facts by one sole cause" (*DA*, 439). Whereas Tocqueville's concern about general ideas extends to the whole of their effects on society, here it is crucial to note one thing: because abstractions erode man's ability to understand subjects in their concrete particulars, they inevitably also affect man's relation to man. Recall Tocqueville's observation that "[l]anguage is perhaps the strongest and most enduring link that unites men" (*DA*, 33); it is in this same vein that he later writes, "Feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon the other" (*DA*, 515). This underscores the importance of authentic face-to-face communication in Tocqueville's theory.

This enlargement of hearts and development of understanding are only possible when men view one another as men, not as members of a class or group. Unmoored from their traditional sources of identity and left with either brooding solipsism or the whims of public opinion, democratic people naturally view their fellow citizens in an increasingly abstract light. Instead of partners in conversation, the mania for general ideas subtly transforms citizens into dim objects vis-à-vis one another within a world from which the ordinary democratic man disconnects himself completely. In such an isolated, uncertain, and subjected state, Tocqueville suggests men naturally turn to an authority to provide a sense of stability to their rapidly changing world (*DA*, 690–95). Yet, although Tocqueville insists the march of equality is inevitable, he also holds some hope that society might maintain a fruitful tension between the archetypes of radically egalitarian democracy and lost aristocracy, and that, as a result, democracy might live in freedom rather than servitude (*DA*, 503–6). Later, we discuss some of the practical and theoretical implications of this claim. It is to Percy's diagnosis of the modern malaise that we now turn.

WALKER PERCY AND THE EPIPHANY OF LOGOS

The Cartesian self is *unspeakable* not only to itself; it is unable to fully understand the nature of its relationship with others and the cosmos. For Percy, this is the central problem of modernity. By way of addressing it, he examines the nature of language to demonstrate both who man really is and the poverty of Cartesian natural philosophy. He recognizes language as an ontological and not merely biological phenomenon; speech is the very essence of human existence. In this section, we delineate his theory of language and explain its relationship to the problems of the modern world. Throughout, we intimate Percy's deep connection to Tocqueville's sociological insights. We begin once again with the Cartesian self.

When Descartes tore man asunder, mind from body, he inaugurated a new era of incoherence that deprived man of the ability to understand himself. As a ghost in a machine, Cartesian man is "seen as a 'mind' somehow inhabiting a 'body,' neither knowing what one had to do with the other" (Percy 1975, 44). What in practice joined to form the mysterious but unified entity known as man was, at least in theory, compartmentalized and rendered obscure from itself. As noted earlier, the methods of science can only tell a man how he is like other men, and that fact contributes to the loss of life's meaning in modernity. Yet Cartesian dualism also tells man he is part beast and part angel, opening the way for the scientist to think about humans not as a sacred whole, but as a divided entity largely explainable in the same way as the physical world. For Percy, Descartes not only contributed to the birth of modern science, which became the distinctly modern way

of knowing, but, through dualism, he deprives man of the mysterious unity that might have partially exempted him from the dictates of that science.

For Percy, one of the greatest problems with the modern way of knowing is that it cannot explain the most distinctly human capability, language.[13] The cause-and-effect model of an organism responding to stimuli is linear or dyadic, whereas language is a triadic phenomenon. Put differently, Percy understood that "a sentence utterance is a triadic event involving a coupler and the two elements of the uttered sentence" (1975, 167). When a man says "this is a balloon," he imputes a relationship with the coupler "is," which brings together an object and the conventional signifier associated with it. Thus, "[t]riadic behavior is that event in which sign *A* is understood by organism *B*, not as a signal to flee or approach, but as 'meaning' or referring to another perceived segment of the environment" (Percy 1983, 95).

Against the tide of behavioral psychology, Percy insists that this triad of organism, signifier, and referent is irreducible. We cannot reformulate it as just a series of dyadic exchanges. The nature of man's symbol mongering, his incessant use of language, can be diagrammed as a triangle and nothing else. Human language, as such, is simply a different sort of phenomenon than what modern science typically encounters. The bestowal of meaning—an object actually *becoming* something through its association with a sign—is qualitatively dissimilar from the stimulus-response model that dominates man's understanding of purely biological phenomena.

Once the concept of a triadic relationship is clear, Percy emerges as something more than a straightforward critic of science. He defends the elegance and achievements of the scientific method, but he urges that scientists direct their work toward those phenomena that genuinely fit within dyadic parameters.[14] Percy understands that "if a dyadic relation is abstracted from a triadic relation and studied as such, the study may have validity as a science, but the science will not be a science of triadic behavior" (1975, 167–68). Naming or symbolization—participation in the triadic behavior that is language—is not merely an *interaction* between organism and environment, as modern science would have it, but an "affirmation of the thing as being what it is under the auspices of the symbol" (Percy 1991, 133).

The continual misappropriation of science is one reason for modern man's sadness and despair. He no longer understands himself as anything more than a thinking organism on which the world acts. Contemporary notions of language that treat it as merely biological are category mistakes—errors with the most insidious of results, ones that lead us to conclude men respond merely as their environment determines. Percy believes that as one "comes face to face with the nature of language, one also finds himself face to face with the nature of man" (1975, 150). But if we misconstrue language as a merely biological event, one explained only in terms of a dyadic science, the result is not understanding but frustration. Following Percy's logic, because a proper conception of language leads us to the essence of man, then when the prevailing ways of knowing obscure the truth about speech, the nature of human existence itself becomes incomprehensible.

Our misunderstanding regarding language's place in human life is tragic for Percy because "language, symbolization, is the stuff of which our knowledge and awareness of the world are made, the medium through which we see the world" (1975, 151). Put differently, language is intimately related to human consciousness—triadic relationships form the basis for man knowing himself and the world. Taking aim at Descartes, Percy acknowledges that we typically think of consciousness as "a more or less isolated awareness which we have trouble relating not only to other consciousnesses but to the very body within which it resides" (1991, 124). But we never simply experience consciousness. Instead, when conscious at all, we are always conscious of something: "Consciousness is always intentional. It is always about something else" (Percy 1991, 124). Even more, when we understand man to be the symbol-mongering or languaged creature Percy tells us he is, we are not just always *conscious of something*, "we are also conscious of it as something we conceive under the symbol assigned to it. And, without the symbol, [Percy] suggests we would not be conscious of it at all" (1991, 124). Language is how we burst into the world as knowing creatures. Consciousness operates as an "epiphany of the logos," for by the word we know ourselves and the world (Bigger 1989, 50). These issues are crucial because by tying consciousness to language, Percy attempts to overcome Cartesian dualism.

So conceived, man is not mind and body, a ghost in a machine, but a unified whole best understood as "*Homo symbolificus*, man the symbol-mongerer" (Percy 1991, 122). The only place to surmount the great modern rift between mind and matter is where they meet: language, the human capacity to deal in signs and symbols. This is because "[l]anguage is both words and meanings. It is impossible to imagine language without both" (Percy 1991, 279). Understanding language holds profound existential consequences for modern man and provides us with the possibility of healing the wound Descartes inflicted on our self-understanding. When we treat language as an ontological phenomenon bound up with human consciousness, the self can once again be understood coherently, if still imperfectly. Finally made as complete as possible in the world, the self becomes speakable to itself. Although this relatively coherent self-understanding can never provide spiritual completion in the city of man, the theory provides reasons for our restlessness—it explains language and life in a way dyadic science cannot.

The proper recognition of language as a triadic event not only gives the self coherence in an individual sense. It transforms the way we see others, our understanding of man as a social creature. Indeed, the self not only ceases to be a stranger to itself but also stops being a stranger to others. Again noting Percy's insistence on the relationship between language and consciousness, we find that the etymology of the word conscious reveals it literally to mean "knowing with." Consciousness as such "is not a state of affairs, but a relation, or rather two relations, the relation of knowing and

the relation of with" (Percy 1991, 124). We do not merely *know* or understand ourselves and the world, but we only do so in conjunction *with* others. The triadic or languaged creature—man the symbol-mongerer—becomes itself only in relation to others. As Percy put it, "the triadic creature is nothing if not social. Indeed, he can be understood as a construct of his relations with others" (1991, 289). For Percy, the individual consciousness itself is not the prime reality. To follow an example he uses, the Cartesian formulation that "I am conscious of this chair" is mistaken, as is the way in which Sartre would revise it, "There is consciousness of this chair." Percy argues it should read "This 'is' a chair for you and me." Such a mode of understanding allows one to realize that to be aware of something is a "co-celebration . . . under the auspices of the symbol," which "is itself the constituent act of consciousness" (1975, 276).

In this way, we experience reality and consciousness with one another. Our words, our language, point the way to a better understanding of the nature of social life.[15] Men are cocelebrants of all that is before them, and for Percy, recognition of this gives us a "sense of discovery, of affirmation" that closely resembles Tocqueville's description of how human interaction enlarges hearts and develops men's understandings (1991, 125; *DA*, 515). When we recognize language as ontological, not biological, we come to realize the necessity of face-to-face interaction—it becomes not just a political prescription but also a requirement sown in the nature of man. The renewal that comes through association with others follows from Percy's ruminations about man's ontological status as that being that knows with others and celebrates reality through intersubjective experiences.

The theoretical unity provided by language that allows us to move beyond the Cartesian self also intimates Percy's ultimately religious vision. Even more, with Percy's emphasis on the mystery of the triadic event—literally, three components forming an irreducible whole—he points us to an even deeper understanding of language and human existence that shows how words can be a way to the Word and language a path to God. In a pregnant phrase, Percy even goes so far as to express man's predicament, exacerbated by the rise of the modern scientific-technological world, in theological terms: the promise of God is that the Word-made-flesh came to save man "from the death of SELF in search of itself without any other SELF" (1983, 249). It is the Word that remedies man's unspeakable condition, his loss of apprehension of his nature and destiny. Man's own *words* fail him and are misunderstood, and the Word not only saves the individual self but also provides the way to a right relationship with others.

A NEW SCIENCE FOR AN EXHAUSTED AGE

Although they wrote roughly one hundred fifty years apart, both Tocqueville and Percy approach modernity with a very similar outlook. An important element of what unites them is their belief that modern man requires a new way of understanding if he is to overcome modernity's existential crisis. As we have suggested, for both authors the combination of psychological instability and rapidly changing social conditions culminates in a diminished capacity for authentic face-to-face communication between citizens. Yet, they also suggest the changing nature of language carries within it a danger in that it obscures man's true condition from himself. Here we must note that both—but especially Tocqueville—recognize the persistence of ideas and behavior that recur over time through imitation across the generations.[16] They both claim that the lingering effects of our old modes of living and understanding remain with us, even when they are transformed into nothing more than hollow platitudes. Despite the loss of a Judeo-Christian faith or belief in some philosophical Good or universal truth, some elements of these traditions remain. As Percy wrote, "[a]lmost everyone is in favor of love, truth, peace, freedom, and the sacredness of the individual, since for one thing, these prescriptions are open to almost any reading (1975, 19). These "dangling chains" leave democratic peoples with "a mishmash view of man, a slap-up model put together of disparate bits and pieces," one made up of incoherent and contradictory opinions about our place in the world (*DA*, 32; Percy 1975, 19).

Thus, long after once vital ideas lose their power, we can still speak and act as if nothing has changed. For Tocqueville and Percy, the reality these "dangling chains" obscure holds something quite different from many people's ordinary perception. Although people in these times are usually moral and productive, they are nevertheless occasionally anxious and alienated without being able to explain why; they cannot understand—much less find a way to cope with—their plight. In such a world, people can live through "a subtler form of death, a death in life," in which "people . . . seem to be living lives which are good by all sociological standards and yet who somehow seem more dead than alive" (Percy 1991, 162). For both, this quandary has an essentially theological root. Tocqueville holds that "[w]hen a people's religion is destroyed, doubt invades the highest faculties of mind and half paralyzes all the rest" (*DA*, 444). For Percy, modernity leaves man "estranged from being, from his own being, from the being of other creatures in the world, from transcendent being. He has lost something—what, he does not know; he knows only that he is sick unto death with the loss of it" (1991, 262). Despite Percy's observation (following Kierkegaard) that this anxiety may aid in "the discovery of the possibility of becoming a self," the modern lack of authentic face-to-face communications nonetheless remains a major obstacle (1991, 136).

For Tocqueville and Percy man's fallen nature is the root cause of his restlessness (Percy 1975, 24; *DA*, 442–49). Nevertheless, both believe that the authentic, face-to-face communication between citizens provides genuine potential for reviving their lost sense of self and reducing their alienation. Through the mediation of authentic speech, both thought man could find a partial rest from his longings (Percy 1975, 254–59; *DA*, 33, 515). The difficulty here is that the mania for general rules and abstraction alongside the democratic taste for constant change steadily works against providing either a stable

meaning to language or an easy path to authentic communication between people. In Tocqueville's discussion of how democracy modifies language, he notes that modern writers "are forever using abstract words of this sort, and using them in a more and more abstract sense. They go further and to make speech run quicker, personify these abstractions and make them act like real men" (*DA*, 481–82). When "words become polluted," the very language we use allows us to evade our discontent and obscure the depth of our alienation from each other (Percy 1991, 161). This language renders our spiritual sickness and anxiety into purely medical terms—for him, therapy and antidepressants provide one more evasion from the crisis of being (1991, 251–62).

Thus, Percy and Tocqueville invoke the idea of both a new science and a novel prescription for dealing with a world irrevocably changed by the force of events (Percy 1991, 167; *DA*, 11–12). Both recognize that in such times, people ignore or simply misunderstand direct appeals to old traditions or orthodox religion; in the face of modern sciences and the post-Enlightenment hermeneutics of suspicion that form Descartes's indirect legacy, neither customs nor faith easily persist. We have said much about both Percy and Tocqueville's new science. For the former, an appropriate investigation into semiotics opens a long-ignored path back toward ontology. With the latter, *Democracy in America* itself and its move to explain the whole from a thick description of individual parts are the primary examples of how this new political science should operate.[17]

Yet, however perceptive their diagnoses, neither is content with description. Rather, Percy and Tocqueville insist we require a new mode of addressing the problems of the age. Tocqueville's prescriptions are well-known and predominantly experiential: various institutional contrivances might aid us in this endeavor to "educate democracy" and "to put, if possible, new life into its beliefs" (*DA*, 12). Government can subtly and indirectly work to force citizens to undermine their precious abstractions through "daily practical attention" to concrete particulars and the details that "show them the weak points in the theory" (*DA*, 442). Politicians can shape expectations and institute long-term projects (*DA*, 547–49); leaders of culture and educators might use their positions of lingering authority to slowly shape manners, mores, and opinions against the tide of skepticism and egalitarianism (*DA* vol. 2, part 1, chapters 10–20).[18] Yet Tocqueville always returns in some way to his fundamental insight: only through the broadening experience of face-to-face interactions through civil society can hearts be enlarged or understandings renewed (*DA*, 515), and this is best accomplished indirectly, without the conscious awareness of citizens about the mediating forces that shape their expectations.

With Percy, we find a more existential approach to modernity's ills. Indirectly and in passing, he seems to indicate that those who understand their problem and are moved to address it will find or create a community that suits their temperament.[19] For Percy, work that modifies the understanding is the most important activity of the day, and this is something that he thought novelists were peculiarly well suited to accomplish. Yet, as with Tocqueville, this work must proceed quite indirectly, so Percy rejects a description of the novelist's task that includes opining on "large subjects" such as "God, man, and the world" (1991, 155). Instead, and more modestly, the writer should search out "fault lines in the terrain, small clues that something strange is going on, a telltale sign here and there . . . that things have gotten very queer without anyone seeming to notice it" (Percy 1991, 155).

The very corruption of language, the overextension of science's ability to explain the world, and the inauthenticity of communication led Percy to conclude that "*only* the writer, the existentialist philosopher, or the novelist can explore this gap [between abstractions and reality] with all the [necessary] passion and seriousness and expectation of discovery" (1991, 213). So, the novelist's main calling is to ruthlessly "[a]ttack the fake in the name of the real," creating a jarring vision capable of evoking "the upside-downness about modern life" (Percy 1991, 161–62). Given the failure of language and the derangement of the self, the writer may sound a clarion call to those lost in the ruins of modern life. Such a call might awaken otherwise lost instincts toward community and authentic communication.

Tocqueville and Percy choose their indirect method above all others because of their conviction that whatever the direct effects of this work—say, causing citizens to participate in local government or to move to a small town without quite the same restless motion of big-city life—both believe that their greatest possible indirect effect might be to slowly and imperceptibly lead democratic peoples back to faith. By quietly forcing us to pay attention to the self and to our interlocutors as human beings rather than as placeholders for a general category of individual, by urging us toward forms of authentic participation in the world and thus allowing us to see it anew, both writers hope that man might turn his attention to that which transcends our fragile existence.

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NOTES

1. Only Peter Augustine Lawler seems to have written directly about both thinkers (2001, 220, 226; n. 4; 1999, esp. "Introduction and ch. 3; 2002, 241–72).

2. Tocqueville's recognition of man's restlessness in the midst of material well-being has led Lawler (1999, 3) to label Tocqueville "the first postmodern thinker."

3. For an introduction to some of Percy's philosophical background, especially his reading of various existentialist thinkers, see Coles (1978, esp. ch. 1).

4. Hereafter, we cite Tocqueville 1969 simply as *DA*.

5. For more on this point—that the equality of the democratic age is deeply connected to autonomy or liberty—see Manent (1996, esp. 220).

6. On the problem of difference in democratic society, see Mitchell (1995, 178–93). Also, on the idea of envy in democracy, see Schoeck (1987).

7. Alternatively, Mitchell (2006, 175–896) calls these psychological opposites the "soliloquy" and "they say."

8. On the relationship of democratic people to boundaries, see Mitchell (1995, 29–33).

9. Again, we are concerned here with a *mode* of thinking that Tocqueville (and Percy) traced to Descartes. The present task is not to explicate Descartes's writings, but to deal with the ramifications of his method, even if it was applied in areas of life he never intended. As the commonly accepted originator of a certain mode of thought, the use of phrases such as "Cartesian self" or "Cartesian doubt" become placeholders or archetypal terms—this is the way in which Tocqueville and Percy invoked his name, and thus we follow their lead. We are concerned more with Tocqueville and Percy than their interpretation of Descartes. For a persuasive account of Descartes's unintended consequences, see Taylor (1989, 143–58).

10. On pantheism, see Lawler (2001, esp. 218–19).

11. On this specific form of spiritual oscillation and its link to an Augustinian vision of human nature, see Mitchell (1995, 40–56, 78–87).

12. One of the most important contemporary explorations of this phenomenon and its effects is "Rationalism in Politics," in Oakeshott (1991. 5–42).

13. In no way can the descriptions here exhaust the work that Percy did on the nature of language and its triadic nature. The approximately forty-page "intermezzo" in *Lost in the Cosmos* (1983, 85–126) might be the single best introduction to how Percy thought about language, but the essays in *The Message in the Bottle* (1975), taken together, give the most nuanced account of Percy's theory of language. A few of the essays in *Signposts in a Strange Land* (1991) are also quite helpful. We draw from them where appropriate.

14. This appreciation for genuine science is reinforced both by Percy's initial fields of study—chemistry and later medicine—and various comments in his writings. In *Lost in the Cosmos* (1971), Percy's character Abbot Liebowitz remarks that he wished Christians "loved learning more, as they loved it in the High Middle Ages, loved science and art more, like our brother Aristarchus here, just as they loved them in the age of the great Giotto and Roger Bacon and the monk Copernicus and the great Galileo" (248).

15. For a discussion of Percy's understanding of intersubjectivity, especially as it relates to the existential philosophy of Gabriel Marcel, see Howland (1990, esp. 2–23).

16. Tocqueville begins *Democracy in America* with an evocation of this notion (31–32); it recurs throughout both volumes, but most chillingly in vol. 1, part 2, ch. 10 on the "three races" in America (316–407). With Percy (1991, 326–39), this idea occurs particularly in his discussion of race relations in the South. Also, the idea of imitation stands at the center of Mitchell's interpretation of Tocqueville (1995, esp. 167–78; 2006, 175–89).

17. On this, see Boesche (1983, esp. 80–83), and Ceaser (1985, esp. 662–64). Also crucial to an understanding of Tocqueville's method is what Mitchell (1995, 18–22) refers to as the "circularity of cause and effect"—that is, the fact that throughout Tocqueville's analysis, many social forces work to codetermine one another in a manner that defies linear causation.

18. For a good discussion of how political elites and intellectuals can assist in this regard, see Ceaser (1985, 663–67).

19. See, for example, Percy's (1991, 3–9) explanation of his move to Covington, Louisiana, in "Why I Live Where I Live," and its discussion of how one experiences living in a place.

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