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Losing Sight of Man: Percy and Tocqueville on the Fate of the Human Sciences

BRIAN A. SMITH

Abstract: Social scientists rarely seem troubled by the ways their work evades the questions that animate people in everyday life. The terms of most social science inquiries into the causes of large-scale human behavior force scholars into a set of explanations that represent our motivations as essentially materialistic. At best, social science work provides its readers with a limited guidance for their actions; at worst, the nature of the inquiry itself leaves a vacuum where traditional belief once thrived. In this continual process of theorizing about society, something about humanity often disappears. In fairness, any theorizing about individuals—let alone the study of society—must greatly simplify lived experience. But the path social science took over the last century ruled out the idea of leaving man a workable theory that aided his self-understanding without reducing his life to a mere assortment of uncontrollable external causes. This essay argues that through a reading of Alexis de Tocqueville and Walker Percy’s various writings, we can come to a fuller understanding of both the limitations of social science as well as those of any purely humanistic inquiry into social life. Using both, we might more fully regain sight of man.

Keywords: social science, Alexis de Tocqueville, Walker Percy, democratic equality, scientific materialism

I. LIVING WITH WEBER

Social scientists rarely seem troubled by the ways their work evades the questions that animate people in everyday

life. Perhaps evasion is too conscious a word, though. The very terms of most social science inquiries into the causes of large-scale human behavior force scholars into a set of explanations and predictions that represent our motivations as essentially materialistic. At best, social science work provides its readers with a very limited guidance for their actions; at worst, the nature of the inquiry itself leaves a vacuum where traditional belief once thrived. But in this continual process of theorizing about society, something about humanity often disappears. In fairness, any theorizing about individuals—let alone the study of society—must greatly simplify lived experience. But the path social science took over the last century ruled out the idea of leaving man a workable theory that aided his self-understanding without reducing his life to a mere assortment of uncontrollable external causes.

Though historians may dispute the relative influence of European thought on the transformation of American education, I think most modern sciences follow Max Weber’s argument about the nature and purpose of scientific inquiry. Any “really definitive and valuable achievement” rests on rigorous specialization, and the truly scientific scholar must develop “the ability to don blinkers” to all questions outside the narrow range of inquiry.¹ At the same time, Weber emphasized the need for passion in studying any subject professionally—to the exclusion of all other endeavors.² But for the modern Weberian, science implies not only a single-minded approach to the subject matter but also an inevitably progress-oriented agenda that transforms our understanding of the world:

It means that in principle, then, we are not ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces, but that, on the contrary, we can in principle *control everything by means of calculation*. That in turn means the disenchantment of the world.³

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The difficulty Weber identifies—but to which he provides no deep answer—is that the intellectual tools of science we seek to employ in understanding and transforming the world also lead inexorably to difficulties in society.

With the dismissal of life's mysteries in the face of reason, Weber assures us that scientific progress will improve life, and that if we all specialize in our own field, some integrity of character remains possible, even if recognizing the truth of any particular religion does not. In the lecture on "Science as a Vocation," Weber clearly identifies the dilemma individuals who think in material terms face. He insists that "the ultimate and most sublime values have withdrawn from public life," leaving us exposed to a variety of dangers from those who would "invent" novel, "wretched monstrosities" in art and culture.⁴ The world of closed scientific disciplines, each presenting an integral perspective on the world, resonated with Weber's contemporaries and inheritors.

Of course, if God is dead to man, the old ordered and comprehensive liberal arts of the medieval university become nonsense. Yet there is no small irony in the fact that Weber wrote "Science as a Vocation" in part as a response to Nietzsche. Weber's turn to the internally consistent but isolated and structured pursuit of knowledge is the opposite of Nietzsche's hope for an "expansive" sort of human knowledge and deepening of man's creative will.⁵ Weber assumes that by dismissing the most naïve hopes of the Enlightenment, he escapes Nietzsche's deep critique of the tendencies of scientific materialism. Weber ignores Nietzsche's real challenge: that in order to cope with God's passing, men must "become gods simply to appear worthy of it."⁶ If we wish to avoid nihilism, Nietzsche insisted that men's spirits must grow to fill the vacuum left by our materialistic pursuits—and together with Marx and Freud, an echo of his emotive subjectivism dominates most of the humanities. The ordinary person who hopes to become educated in today's universities has remained caught between Weber and Nietzsche ever since. Weber mentions the "great problem of *life*," but his science can only run as deep as its own first principles about humanity—it must subsume humane questions into those of method.⁷ This science cannot address questions of meaning, only fact.⁸ Nietzsche's focus on those very questions of the meaning and purpose of life led him within the human heart—and led to little more than the yawning abyss that stares back at man and further erodes any sense of purpose life might reveal.⁹ Students today find themselves left with a set of disconnected inquiries that can never address more than a fragment of human life and cannot advise how or why we might wish to live well.

I argue a third path exists in the writings of Walker Percy and Alexis de Tocqueville. Each developed a profound critique of where science and, particularly, the social sciences might lead us. In light of this criticism, they each attempted to sketch an alternative to the modes of scholarly inquiry common to our age. Both aim at the creation of a truly scientific understanding of humanity, one that acknowledges the genuine differences of the human from all other creatures, and which accounts for how the ways of studying the natural environment do not easily translate to man. Each argues that any science must account for the distinctiveness of human

reason and address the gap between life's many experiences and our theorizing of them. Only then might we regain sight of man.

II. TOCQUEVILLE AND THE LONGINGS OF THE DEMOCRATIC SOUL

Focusing on the effects of equality and the way they clash with people's persistent habits and memories, Tocqueville gave us a powerful means of analyzing modern life. Even though Tocqueville himself could not escape his own theological doubt, he recognized that, to some degree, all men betray contradictory desires that lead them away from recognizing the nature of their condition on earth. Where the old aristocratic culture softened the expression of some extreme desires, the egalitarian spirit that possesses so much of the modern world cannot. The mania for radical equality and its intellectual consequences exacerbate our tendency toward misunderstanding ourselves. Tocqueville identified several intellectual tendencies that make democratic man peculiarly vulnerable to falling into confusion and despair. He also traced several ways that these desires result in a transformation of the theories we use to comprehend our place in the world. These theories in turn shroud our world in doubts about our capacity to shape events around us.

In the introduction to *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville briefly sketches the march of recent history, and insists that men might possibly defer accepting the legitimacy of equality but cannot escape its eventual spread throughout the world. Equality's power over men's minds gradually expanded into an "irresistible revolution" that all societies must eventually conform to, or at least recognize.¹⁰ At the time, Tocqueville argued that statesmen and students of politics betrayed all too little understanding of this. Even Edmund Burke, who Tocqueville does not deny understood the likely consequences of egalitarian revolution, could not see what made a thoroughgoing transformation of society appeal to the French.¹¹

Coping with this situation required a new approach, one that recognized the transformations of equality, and it meant that democratic society needed to embrace a mode of understanding quite different from the one that came before. For Tocqueville, the "new political science" that could accommodate this changed world must work to shore up the intellectual and cultural weaknesses democratic egalitarianism creates:

The first duty imposed on those who now direct society is to educate democracy; to put, if possible, new life into its beliefs; to purify its mores; to control its actions; gradually to substitute understanding of statecraft for present inexperience and knowledge of its true interests for blind instincts; to adapt government to the needs of time and place; and to modify it as men and circumstances require.¹²

The call to emphasize civic and moral education alongside the cultivation of high statecraft diametrically opposes the most common tendencies of contemporary political science. Yet Tocqueville's account of the tendencies of the democratic mind presents reasons why the abstractions and materialism of modern political science took hold in our time.

In one of his more frequently noted passages, Tocqueville references the naturally “Cartesian” approach to the world that Americans (and presumably, all egalitarians) embraced. This skepticism toward all inheritances and previous dogmas and overweening utilitarianism helps cultivate a kind of imaginative genius for worldly things. This leads them down a dangerous path:

Seeing that they are successful in resolving unaided all the little difficulties they encounter in practical affairs, they are easily led to the conclusion that everything in the world can be explained and that nothing passes beyond the limit of intelligence. Thus they are ready to deny anything which they cannot understand. Hence they have little faith in anything extraordinary and an almost invincible distaste for the supernatural.¹³

But without a solid grounding in any sort of authority—religious, cultural, or political—the egalitarian soul develops a peculiar reliance on his or her own intellectual power but a contrary tendency to bow to public opinion.¹⁴

At the same time, the democratic soul’s desire for practical knowledge and sense of deep equality leads to the embrace of various general theories about man and his world. Each lends something unique to this desire. At least in America, the need for rapid judgment, practical education, and scorn for tradition encourages ideas that allow us to “know” more with less work in the shortest possible amount of time.¹⁵ But even more interestingly, the egalitarian impulses of the democratic soul also encourage the development of generalizing abstractions: “Truths applicable to himself seem equally applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to his fellow citizens and to all men.” Democratic souls often see no limit in principle to this and constantly extend their general ideas well beyond their prudent application, and “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.”¹⁶ Democratic souls do this without any sense of proportion, blind to the ways that these incomplete notions distort our vision.

This creates a set of conditions ripe for both misunderstanding the world and ourselves. The basic limitation general ideas present is that in disregarding the details of any specific case, we encourage tendencies of thinking that lose sight of the qualities that set human beings apart. The central problem is that the “human idea of unity is almost always sterile,” simplifying and reducing events in the world to material causes outside of human—or for that matter, divine—control.¹⁷ While no theoretical system or religion can avoid embracing a degree of materialism for the simple reason that democratic souls cannot think any other way, as we saw with Weber, such men naturally begin to think in terms of constant material progress.¹⁸

Democracy’s materialistic tastes and thirst for means of ever-greater control over nature yield some perverse effects. Obsessed with the material value of ideas, democratic souls find it hard to cultivate an “ardent, proud, disinterested love of the truth which leads right to the abstract sources of truth.”¹⁹ Instead of truth, they focus on practical sciences and avoid engaging purely theoretical endeavors of science or mathe-

matics. He argues that over the long run, this might leave democratic people with a severe weakness in the practical affairs they pursue so devoutly.²⁰ However, the evasion of deep scholarly inquiry oriented to truth and that fully appreciates the world’s complexity bears other consequences outside science.

When egalitarian scholars turn their attention to society, Tocqueville argues that they wreak profound but largely unseen damage on the souls of men. Although Tocqueville focused his attention on historians, his critique applies equally harshly to all modern attempts to apply science to complex human events, for “[h]istorians who live in democratic ages are not only prone to attribute each happening to a great cause but also are led to link facts together to make a system.” This fits with the democratic soul’s embrace of general theories, but it also undercuts the idea that we can identify great individuals who bear disproportionate responsibility for the events of their day.²¹ Tocqueville argues that practitioners of both democratic and aristocratic history lose something in their drive to explain the entire world through a few objects of study—he presumes “both are equally deceived.”²² But if in previous eras, students of the past missed something about the place circumstance and the actions of ordinary men played in the world, the democratic historian errs much more deeply and dangerously. Their analysis tends to erase the very traces of human will and action from view, leaving us “with the sight of the world moving without anyone moving it.”²³ To be fair, Tocqueville notes that all “[h]istorians have a passion for decisive events” and that “[o]ne must admit they are very convenient” because they allow scholars to clarify and streamline their explanations of so much.²⁴ But Tocqueville argues these scholars go too far.

Even if men grant the *existence* of general causes that determine our actions from day to day, nothing about this understanding enlivens our character or aids our predicament—nothing about this vision serves liberty or the development of moral character.²⁵ For this reason, Tocqueville detested

those absolute systems, which represent all the events of history as depending on great first causes linked by the chain of fatality, and which, as it were, suppress men from the history of the human race. They seem narrow . . . under their pretence of broadness, and false beneath their air of mathematical exactness.²⁶

He suggests that to the degree we believe in any deterministic theory of the world, “one is very near believing that one cannot stand up to it,” and, ultimately, the “blind fatality” it encourages might lead us to think we cannot change any aspect of our situation, or worse, that we bear no moral responsibility for our choices and actions.²⁷

Worse still, the way democratic souls understand language aids this movement away from responsibility. As a result of their constant innovation of new words and redefinition of old ones, democratic people make language less and less precise and therefore make the sort of patient inquiry into the truth that Tocqueville believed democratic man needs the most ever more difficult to begin, let alone to do well.²⁸ He observed that the very nature of democratic language supports an evasion of responsibility for our actions. Turning

to “general terms and abstract words,” democratic men “are forever using abstract words . . . and using them in a more and more abstract sense.” The danger in this comes because they cannot merely stop with undoing precise meaning: “They go further, and . . . personify these abstractions and make them act like real men.”²⁹ In this way of seeing the world, concepts and grand forces act rather than men, making it easier to avoid claiming one’s actions or labeling our own situation rightly. As a result, democratic souls unthinkingly describe their own actions in the passive voice—and this might place them one step from living passively as well.

Tocqueville foresaw our tendency to indulge in abstraction as a way of coping with the world’s dizzying complexity, and he feared the results of this movement. But if anything, he underestimated the strength of the democratic age’s yearning for technical knowledge and expertise. The Weberian turn made the “disciplines” ever more important bastions of rational expertise, and the individual weakness of the democratic person that Tocqueville warned would cause so much difficulty bore dangerous fruit. To understand the way modern social science loses sight of man more fully, we must turn to Walker Percy.

III. PERCY AND THE VANISHING HUMAN PERSON

Percy shared Tocqueville’s concern with the limits of social science and specifically the way language transformed man’s capacity seeing for his situation rightly. Percy focused his attention on the consequences of reducing man to an organism and draws our attention to the curious reality of our scientific times: “There does not presently exist a coherent theory of man in the scientific sense—the sense in which we have a coherent theory about the behavior of rats.” The incoherence he references rests in the weakness of our explanations for various aspects of man’s rational nature. He suspects that

most of us hold to . . . man as a body-mind and man as an organism, without exactly knowing how he can be both—for if man is yet another organism in an environment, he is a very strange organism indeed, an organism which has the unusual capacity for making himself unhappy for no good reason, for existing as a lonely and fretful consciousness which never quite knows who he is or where he belongs.³⁰

Against many humanists, Percy never denies the value of scientific inquiry; indeed, he argues that *true* science might provide the only path out of the intellectual morass in which humanity finds itself. But to do this, scientists must see the limits of their explanations and the ways in which their work cannot actually address the most important questions of human life.

At a minimum, Percy tells us that any true “theory of man must account for the alienation of man,” and today’s sciences cannot or will not make this attempt.³¹ Instead, the “mishmash view of man” that most people today subsist upon poses significant dangers to our ability to ever find our way out. Percy argues that, for most people, this incoherent worldview consists of two essential components. In the first, we place ourselves “as an organism in an environment” and accept the premise that we evolve just as other creatures do,

“learning and surviving by means of certain adaptive transactions with the environment.” In the second, we somehow see man as “endowed with certain other unique properties which he does not share with other organisms . . . certain inalienable rights, reason, freedom, and an intrinsic dignity.”³² Of course, the first of these propositions radically undercuts the second—and a significant part of Percy’s project focuses on why we cannot live well if we rest in a comfortable belief in both dogmas.

Part of Percy’s explanation rests on a diagnosis of how modern man has ceded far too much authority and judgment to experts in social science. Our confusion about the sources of our dignity and our parallel belief in our status as a mere organism create a curious situation in which individuals turn to experts for “solutions” to *essentially human* questions—experts who pursue their analysis entirely through reductionist theories that “cannot utter a single word about an individual thing or creature insofar as it is an individual but only insofar as it *resembles* other individuals.”³³ Although in certain disciplines we might learn something from comparing ourselves to groups, or our “fit” within some general type, this mode of analysis tells individuals nothing about how to live as individuals. Nevertheless, social scientists constantly work to transform the way we act from day to day.

By accepting the sovereignty of “science” without realizing the incredible degree to which its disciples have overreached, Percy argues that ordinary individuals allow scholars and technicians in the various human sciences a sort of false ownership over an entire category of our lives, and that when it happens, the “surrender of title is so complete that it never even occurs to one to reassert” the right to analyze, judge, and believe without their approval.³⁴ Though he mentions a wide variety of pernicious social science work, Percy focuses primarily on two fields that he believed presented the strongest case for the incoherence of our implicit theory of man: linguistics and psychology. The practitioners of each lose sight of the truly unique characteristics of human life, and Percy argued that their failure to see these characteristics poses significant problems for reasoning our way out of the present impasse in social science.

Percy turned to language first and foremost because it represents “the place where man’s singularity is there for all to see and cannot be called into question, even in a new age in which everything else is in dispute.”³⁵ Animals might respond to linguistic signs and other external stimuli; humans alone use symbols in ever-changing ways. But as Percy observes, scientists have spent much of the last several decades denying this difference. He surveyed the literature on linguistics and discovered a peculiar phenomena: no scholar investigating human beings solely as products of stimulation in an environment could explain why “a child, after two or three years’ exposure to language and without anyone taking much trouble about it, can utter and understand an unlimited number of new sentences in the language.”³⁶ Investigating the nature of communication, Noam Chomsky could not determine how children suddenly acquire the ability to speak in sentences. Instead, he labeled this aspect of human language a “black box.”³⁷ As Percy presents it at first, the argument

seems rather odd. What could our misunderstanding of language have to do with our loss of self-understanding in the modern age?

To the degree that we understand ourselves as a material substance—a deterministic bundle of biochemical impulses that results in speech and thought—we cease to be able to explain our own daily experience. After all, “a material substance cannot name or assert a proposition.”³⁸ We might shrug off the direct consequences of the behaviorist assault on our personhood as absurd if only for the reason that “the individual always transcends every system that is created to explain him.”³⁹ But Percy notes that if we follow the culture around us, a half-acceptance of this proposition remains. Linguists and neuroscientists study the way we process language and never investigate the most curious things about its nature. However, this is a scholarly problem that does not actually change people’s lives much. Our incapacity to shake this softer notion of man as an organism that merely responds to its environment creates other difficulties that run far deeper.

Percy argues that an unserious approach to language results in an incapacity to evaluate speech and writing as a means of disclosing claims about the truth or the morality of our actions. If we interpret our language and the culture it produces as the mere by-products of evolution and not as the creative invention of active human minds, all culture takes on a utilitarian or emotive character: “When myth is studied as an empirical phenomenon, it is evaluated not according as it is true or false or nonsensical but according to the degree to which it serves a social or cultural function.” As a result, we find the professor who “recognizes only functional relationships and refuses to recognize norms,” but that nevertheless “is a passionate defender of the freedom and rights and sacredness of the individual.”⁴⁰ That is to say, their understanding of the human person allows professors no solid ground to support their beliefs, making them more or less incoherent emotional inclinations, not the result of any deeply held truth.⁴¹

The difficulties Percy identifies in language share much with his criticisms of modern psychology. In 1957, Percy observed:

The very men whose business is mental health have been silent about the sickness of modern man, his emotional impoverishment, his sense of homelessness in the midst of the very world which he, more than the men of any other time, has made over for his own happiness. . . . The suspicion is beginning to arise that American psychiatry with its predominantly functional orientation . . . is silent because, given its basic concept of man, it is *unable* to take account of the predicament of modern man.⁴²

Torn between Freud’s hydraulic metaphors and the neuroscientist’s quest to locate human behavior in the brain alone, the discipline still seems at a loss when dealing with modern life.

Percy traced some of this difficulty to two of the basic issues that confront all social sciences. First, he points us to the discontinuity between any study of man and “the well-established laws of the chemical, physical, and biological sciences.”⁴³ Second, he reminds us that “the scientist, in practicing the scientific method, cannot utter a single word about

an individual thing or creature insofar as it is an individual but only insofar as it resembles other individuals.”⁴⁴ The envy of “hard sciences” leads psychology into reducing our psychological state to either biochemical causes or byproducts of our inability to “healthily” process events in our past. The discipline treats our failure to live at ease in the world not as a more or less incurable reminder of our alienation and clue to the real state of mankind, but rather as a symptom of disorder within that the expert must help the patient eliminate.⁴⁵

Again, in focusing on the processes by which people adjust themselves to the world, Percy suggests that the experts ask the wrong questions. Most contemporary thinkers, including psychologists, seek to develop “such familiar goals as maturity, creativity, autonomy, rewarding interpersonal relations, and so forth.”⁴⁶ Percy observes a vagueness to their diagnosis:

what of the alienated man of the twentieth century who reads this vast library of popular mental hygiene and dutifully sets out in quest of “emotional maturity,” “productive orientation,” “cultural integration,” and suchlike . . . ? Somewhere there has occurred a fatal misplacement of the real. To hold out to a man lost in the abyss of anxiety and anonymity the solution of a “productive orientation” is like telling a man who has fallen into a pit that the answer to his troubles is a pitless orientation.⁴⁷

The experts accept these goals as givens because our emotions lead us toward finding pleasure and fulfillment in them, but within the terms of their disciplinary inquiry, they cannot evaluate whether these goods constitute the whole of human life—or actually are *good*. Having accepted a more or less pragmatic understanding of truth and morality, psychologists cannot suggest any patient’s unhappiness bears a link to their moral choices.

In critiquing the sciences, Percy did not surrender to the purely humanist impulse of suggesting they could not speak to human life. He argued that while these “objections may or may not be justified . . . even if they are, they leave the status quo ante unchanged, science as regnant over the entire domain of facts and truth.” Instead, Percy saw his purpose as “to challenge science, as it is presently practiced by some scientists, in the name of science.”⁴⁸ Both he and Tocqueville identified similar flaws in our world’s dominant ways of thinking, and it is to their suggestions for a science that sees man for what he is that I now turn.

IV. TOCQUEVILLE, PERCY, AND THE RETURN TO TRADITIONAL HUMANE SCIENCE

Percy and Tocqueville suggest the dominant story Western intellectuals have told themselves since the Enlightenment is a lie. Instead of safely adjusting ourselves to the ideals of democratic equality and scientific materialism, something else happened. Faced with the prospect of a world without God, the educated citizens of the twentieth century “entered on an orgy of war, murder, torture, and self-destruction unparalleled in history.”⁴⁹ The idea that man will peacefully accept a disenchanting world of tolerance and ever-advancing material progress based on the satisfaction of all physical needs and psychological desires persists, however, despite this

bloodbath. In their own way, Percy and Tocqueville each explain elements of this idea and point us toward a way back toward being able to gain wisdom through the sciences of man.

Tocqueville's notion that democratic souls' peculiar fascination with general ideas would lead them to scorn historical wisdom explains part of the persistence of this idea of progressive improvement. As part of his argument about the inevitable march of equality, Tocqueville predicted the growth of a tame world where

the movements inside the body social could be orderly and progressive; one might find less glory there than in an aristocracy, but there would be less wretchedness; pleasures would be less extreme, but well-being more general; the heights of knowledge might not be scaled, but ignorance would be less common; feelings would be less passionate, and manners gentler; there would be more vices and fewer crimes.⁵⁰

As Percy argues, a cursory glance at the history of the twentieth century turns this fable on its head—but only partially. In his reliance on the device of the “social state” to explain the march of equality, Tocqueville emphasized the many ways culture shapes our perceptions. Although he identifies some “universal and permanent needs of mankind,” his explanation presupposes the idea that culture overwrites nature to such a degree that democracy's materialist impulses would tame conflict.⁵¹ But I would argue Tocqueville failed to grasp the way neither materialism nor orthodox faith would reign over our hearts; he did not quite predict the degree to which Percy's unsatisfying but simple “mishmash” theories of the human person would take hold in society.

Percy checks Tocqueville's fable against the persistent needs of the human person and our love of violence as a reaction to boredom and anxiety. But over the course of his diagnosis of modern life, he paints a bleak picture of mankind as so thoroughly subject to theories about ourselves and preformed images of the world that one hesitates to identify a path to recovering our sanity. Percy argues that in ceding sovereignty over human affairs to the experts, we obscure the objects of human study within a “symbolic package” that presents knowledge about the world and our psyches to us.⁵² He suggests two means by which men might rediscover their sovereignty over these things. The first is by ordeal: he argues in various texts that only through experiences vastly out of the ordinary do we really *see* objects and people as the extraordinary elements they are. He provides an illustration:

the citizen of Huxley's *Brave New World* who stumbles across a volume of Shakespeare in some vine-grown ruins and squats on a potsherd to read it is in a fairer way of getting at a sonnet than the Harvard sophomore taking English Poetry II.⁵³

The second mode of recovery he proposes rests in his sophisticated semiotic theory that aims to recover the unique and creative role of the symbol in human language. I will not attempt to summarize the theory here, but Percy hoped that if scientists directly and adequately grappled with the human difference in language, they might be forced to return to an understanding of man that accepted his role as a wayfarer in the world—or at least cease operating on the assumption that “metaphysics” bears no relationship to their work.⁵⁴

But neither of these methods seems quite right, especially if we reconsider elements of Tocqueville's analysis of democracy. Percy's theory of language arguably presents us a coherent anthropology, not a means of dragging men back to reality. Similarly, while we might only see objects and ideas ranging from a Shakespeare sonnet or an ordinary animal in their full mystery and wonder when jarred out of our everyday experience, this leaves us little in the way of counsel for ordinary life. But if the danger of general ideas and mishmash views of human life stems from the way they truncate experience, then a Tocquevillean approach may prove a better corrective than trial by ordeal or the slow dissemination of a new approach to science:

If, then, there is a subject concerning which a democracy is particularly liable to commit itself blindly and extravagantly to general ideas, the best possible corrective is to make the citizens pay daily, practical attention to it. That will force them to go into details and the details will show them the weak points in the theory. The remedy is painful but always effective.⁵⁵

Percy, too, recognized this notion in the way he lambasted social scientists for collapsing individuals into ideal types—“a consumer or a public or a mass man”—but he does not quite seem to believe that men can consciously construct a remedy to this outside of theory.⁵⁶ Interestingly, between Tocqueville and Percy together, we might find a workable humane science.

Regaining sight of man requires something in each of these thinkers. Following their analysis, any new science of man must explain or at least recognize the symptoms of man's homelessness, despite the fact that we live in a world as completely tailored to our comfort as possible.⁵⁷ Together, Percy and Tocqueville suggest that a humane science with a theory of the human person rooted in man the symbol-maker both identifies the uniqueness of our nature and places us in the cosmos as a wayfarer. The fact is that this theory emphasizes the way mankind radically diverges from the rest of creation and addresses our need to feel and be distinctive despite our hunger for equality.⁵⁸ It would remind us that we, constantly lapsing from ourselves, inevitably fall short from our true nature and yet never cease in our desire to transcend mere flesh. Such a science would see our anxieties and wildly oscillating desires as a clue to understanding something of our permanent nature rather than as symptoms of disorder that can be eradicated.

At the same time, reading Percy and Tocqueville together suggests a political science that drags men back to the concrete facts and everyday existence that shatters the constant pretensions of expertise that aims to transform the world. An insistence on a political science that eschews a constant reduction of the world to a few variables, and instead returns to cultivating statesman-like judgment, might help avoid the besetting sin of social science: to relentlessly change and improve the world around us.⁵⁹ If scientists allow us to see the objective regularities in human nature alongside a fuller theory of the human person, it might dampen our obsession with material progress and the righting of all imperfections

in the world—a humane science such as this might remind us of limits and confirms our status as wayfarers.

NOTES

1. Max Weber, *Science as a Vocation* in *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2004), 8.
2. *Ibid.*, 10–11.
3. *Ibid.*, 11–13.
4. *Ibid.*, 30.
5. For a direct comment on Nietzsche, see Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, 16–17.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 181.
7. Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, 23–24.
8. *Ibid.*, 27–28.
9. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 89.
10. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper, 1969), 12.
11. Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Anchor Books), 20–21.
12. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 12. On the traditional political science that Tocqueville suggests, see James W. Ceaser, *Liberal Democracy and Political Science* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 41–69.
13. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 430.
14. *Ibid.*, 435.
15. *Ibid.*, 437, 440.
16. *Ibid.*, 439.
17. *Ibid.*, 735.
18. *Ibid.*, 448, 456.
19. *Ibid.*, 461.
20. *Ibid.*, 464.
21. *Ibid.*, 493–95.
22. Tocqueville, *Recollections*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), 63–64.
23. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 495.
24. Tocqueville, “Reflections on English History,” in *Journeys to England and Ireland*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence and J. P. Mayer (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1988), 24–25.
25. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 495.
26. Tocqueville, *Recollections*, 64.
27. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 495–6.
28. *Ibid.*, 479–80.
29. *Ibid.*, 481.
30. Walker Percy, “Is a Theory of Man Possible?” in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway (New York: Picador, 1991), 113.
31. Percy, “The Delta Factor,” in *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Picador, 1975), 23.
32. *Ibid.*, 20.
33. Percy, “Diagnosing the Modern Malaise,” in *Signposts*, 210–11.
34. Percy, “The Loss of the Creature,” in *Message*, 53–54.
35. Percy, “The Delta Factor,” 7.
36. *Ibid.*, 32.
37. *Ibid.*, 15.
38. Percy, “The Fateful Rift: The San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind,” in *Signposts*, 287.
39. Percy, quoted in Charles E. Claffey, “American Writer Walker Percy: The Novelist as Searcher,” in *More Conversations With Walker Percy*, ed. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 71.
40. Percy, “Culture: The Antinomy of the Scientific Method,” in *Message*, 225–26.
41. Compare to chapter one of C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Harper, 2001).
42. Percy, “The Coming Crisis in Psychiatry,” in *Signposts*, 252.
43. Percy, “Is a Theory of Man Possible?” in *Signposts*, 116.
44. Percy, “Diagnosing the Modern Malaise,” in *Signposts*, 211.
45. Percy, “Naming and Being,” in *Signposts*, 136.
46. Percy, “Diagnosing the Modern Malaise,” in *Signposts*, 208.
47. Percy, “The Coming Crisis in Psychiatry,” in *Signposts*, 260.
48. Percy, “The Fateful Rift” in *Signposts*, 272.
49. Percy, “The Delta Factor,” 3.
50. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 15.
51. *Ibid.*, 616.
52. Percy, “The Loss of the Creature,” in *Message*, 56–57.
53. *Ibid.*, 56.
54. I believe the best single summary of Percy’s philosophy of language is in his *Lost in the Cosmos* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1983), 85–126.
55. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 442.
56. Percy, “The Culture Critics,” in *Signposts*, 265.
57. Percy, “Is a Theory of Man Possible?,” in *Signposts*, 127–8.
58. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 622–7.
59. Percy, “The Coming Crisis in Psychiatry,” in *Signposts*, 261.