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INTRODUCTION

Four French Thinkers on the Modern Quest for Contentment

Every human society is animated by an assumed understanding of the nature and purpose of human life. This is true, as Tocqueville points out, even of liberal societies—societies that self-consciously avoid making such assumptions explicit and enshrining them in law. Whether or not we make these assumptions official, we cannot avoid relying on them: human life is busy, thinking things through is difficult, and the pressure of circumstance often requires that we take the answer to the question “How should I live?” for granted and get down to the business of the moment. While every society has its dissidents—oddballs, independent minds, and temperamental contrarians—the very possibility of the dissident is defined by the existence of a standard way.¹

The vision of human flourishing that animates modern life received distinctly powerful articulation in sixteenth-century France. As it came to fascinate the imagination of increasing numbers of men and women, this vision became a subject of intense debate for generations of French writers. The writers who engage in this argument belong to France’s tradition of

moralistes, or “observers of men.” We have here selected four of the *moralistes* for special attention: Michel de Montaigne, Blaise Pascal, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Alexis de Tocqueville. Each of these authors possesses the uncanny capacity for spelling out one of the few basic modern alternatives for thinking about happiness. Sometimes developing the premises of modern philosophic anthropology, sometimes attacking those premises at their roots, these authors give voice to thoughts that occur to every modern mind from time to time but with a power few of us can hope to match. Here, we seek to borrow that power and put it in the service of our own self-understanding.²

The story of the *moralistes* begins in the midst of France’s sixteenth-century religious wars, with the great essayist Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592). Although he lived in a world most different from our own, Montaigne lays out the modern vision of contentment with all its basic elements, exercising immense influence on subsequent generations of thinkers in the modern West. Anyone who dips into his book for an hour or two will understand why. As one recent critic has formulated the experience of centuries of readers, “I defy any reader of Montaigne not to put down the book at some point and say with incredulity: ‘How did he know all this about me?’” If we want to understand ourselves, we should come to know Montaigne.³

In the unforgettable prose of his semi-autobiographical *Essays*, Montaigne articulates the most basic aspiration of his moral philosophy: to “loyally enjoy” the human condition. “When I dance, I dance,” Montaigne writes, “when I sleep, I sleep”: he finds his happiness by disdaining no aspect of the human condition but partaking joyfully of all of it—books and horses, travel and love, food and art, talking with his daughter, playing with his cat, tending to the cabbages of his unfinished

garden. Although he is remembered as a skeptical individualist who debunks the idea of a universal human good so as better to appreciate humanity's manifold variety, the practical consequence of his skepticism is this new and particular ideal of happiness—an ideal we call *immanent contentment*. The formula for Montaignean immanent contentment is *moderation through variation*: an arrangement of our dispositions, our pursuits, and our pleasures that is calculated to keep us interested, “at home,” and present in the moment but also dispassionate, at ease, and in balance.⁴

As Montaigne's life shows, this ideal also has a social dimension, which one pursues by presenting to others the variegated and balanced self one has fashioned in the hope of receiving their complete, personal, *unmediated approbation*: the affirmation that we are lovable, not merely for the pleasure, utility, or even nobility of our company but because we are who we are—irreducibly distinct human wholes, worthy of the esteem, affection, and attachment of others. Such approbation, when reciprocated, can be the heart of a friendship such as Montaigne depicts in his story of the bond he shared with his own great friend Etienne de la Boétie.⁵

Taken together, the personal and interpersonal aspirations that make up the ideal of immanent contentment constitute an affirmation of the adequacy of human life on its own terms. By elaborating this new standard of human flourishing as an alternative to the heroic ideals of happiness he inherited from the classical and Christian traditions, Montaigne offers his contemporaries what Charles Taylor has called an “affirmation of ordinary life.” Montaigne promises that if we know how to attend to it properly, life simply—not the philosophic life or the holy life or the heroic life, but simply *life*—can be enough to satisfy the longings of the human heart. That revolution in our

understanding of ourselves implies a revolution in our understanding of politics, laying the groundwork for a liberal political order that takes the protection and promotion of life so understood to be its aim.⁶

In the decades after Montaigne's death, a new class will rise to prominence in France, one that distinguishes itself more by wealth, education, and accomplishment than by noble birth or feats of arms. That class naturally seeks a new moral vision to replace the chivalric ideal of the warrior aristocracy they have begun to supplant. Calling themselves *honnêtes hommes*, they celebrate Montaigne as the principal exemplar of this new ideal, which they call *honnêteté*. With these *honnêtes hommes*, the ideal of immanent contentment gains a newfound social significance as it begins to shape the aspirations of the seventeenth century's ascendant human type—a type that prefigures many of the attitudes that will come to characterize the modern moral outlook in centuries to come.⁷

This new style of living does not please everyone. The great polymath Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) frequents the circles in which the ideal of *honnêteté* has currency, studies its adepts closely, and comes to believe that they are fooling themselves. Beneath the surface of the charming and variegated arts of living by which they arrange their days, he sees that the *honnêtes hommes* are secretly unhappy. Their ideal of moderate worldly contentment denies but does not change the truth about the human soul, which is both greater and more miserable than Montaigne had imagined. To be human, for Pascal, is to be haunted by longing for a wholeness we feel we have somehow lost. Learning to die, the fundamental lesson of Montaigne's moral art, is not as easy as the *honnêtes hommes* imagine. Indeed, Pascal believes it is a lesson only a God could teach us. The search for unmediated approbation in social life that Montaigne

encourages is, at bottom, a tyrannical quest to have others recognize us as the center of the universe. There is no such thing as immanent contentment; the basic choice of modern man is one between sadness papered over with diversion and the anguished but clear-eyed search for God.⁸

Pascal's intransigent criticism of the ways of the modern world is not calculated to flatter anyone, and it does not go over well with powerful people in his own age. The Roman Catholic Church brands the Jansenism of Pascal's friends and collaborators a heresy and puts his writings on its Index of Forbidden Books; Louis XIV razes the convent that had been the Jansenists' headquarters and desecrates their tombs. These attempts to erase Pascal's sad wisdom from modern memory are not without effect. As the great French literary critic Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve puts it, the eighteenth century seems to forget the seventeenth century ever existed, and simply picks up where the sixteenth left off.⁹

The Montaignean ideal of immanent contentment will enjoy unprecedented prestige in the age of Voltaire, when the expansion of trade, the flourishing of the arts, and the spread of learning made it a more widely available possibility than ever before. But the Enlightenment also gives rise to a dissident philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), who understands that Pascal discerned something true about the secret sadness of those seeking to live in the light of the Montaignean moral model. Rousseau will launch his own, semi-Pascalian critique of the ubiquitous human type of his time, the *bourgeois*—an old epithet to which he gives new meaning. Beneath his veneer of pretentious pleasures and pleasing manners, Rousseau writes, the restless heart of the bourgeois is full of envy and anger; he is an empty and divided nonentity with no substantial self and no real care for anyone else. Rousseau does not, however,

encourage his readers to seek their solace in the next world, as Pascal does. He instead provokes them to tighten their grip on this one. Radicalizing the ideal of immanent contentment, Rousseau depicts a variety of highly experimental ways of life designed to realize that ideal more completely than ever before. Divergent as they are, however, all of these ways of life break sharply with what he saw as the socially and psychically intolerable status quo of his era.¹⁰

Though the life and thought of Rousseau have been heavily scrutinized, reading him as the heir of Montaigne and Pascal, as we do here, can allow us to see his work in a new light: as a transformation of the Montaignean ideal of immanent contentment. In Montaigne's hands, the pursuit of immanent contentment is a way of living with a light touch. Pascal attacks that lightness of touch as shallow, hypocritical, and inhuman. Rousseau seeks to reconcile Montaignean immanence with Pascalian depth. His pursuit of immanent contentment is an ardent and uncompromising quest for immersion in what he calls the "sentiment of existence": the simple pleasure of being alive, which he claims can be enough to satisfy our restless hearts if we will only remember how to feel it. It is also an earnest and insistent *cri de coeur* for the kind of unmediated social transparency Montaigne enjoyed with La Boétie, which Rousseau earnestly seeks from his own friends and lovers, who inevitably disappoint him. Disappointed though he may have been, Rousseau's enormously popular presentation of this ideal will exercise immense influence over the generation "at once sentimental and violent" that makes the French Revolution. And as the bourgeois social class he critiques rises to dominance in the nineteenth century, Rousseau's radicalization of the ideal of immanent contentment grows ever more influential. For his bohemian

dreams are calculated to speak with particular power to the empty and divided heart of the bourgeois he so disdains.¹¹

The preoccupations and passions of the bourgeois are on display on an unprecedented scale when Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) arrives for his famous visit to America. There he discovers a society John Stuart Mill called, in a revealing exaggeration, “*all* middle class.” While it is not an accurate picture of American socioeconomic relations, then or now, Mill’s description captures the monolithic power of middle-class ideals on the moral horizon of modern liberal democracy. For the modern middle class invests with particular intensity in the pursuit of immanent contentment, expending its life in labor so as to secure the material conditions of this form of human flourishing. Moreover, as Tocqueville points out, democracy makes the majority into a moral authority and multiplies the points of contact between this authority and the individual human soul. Our democratic ideals thus impinge upon us with a uniquely pervasive pressure. Achieving happiness, here and now, appears to us not only as a desire but as a duty; immanent contentment becomes a command. This transformation heightens the restlessness endemic to the quest for immanent contentment, for it deepens our unhappiness by transforming it into a form of moral failure.¹²

Americans, Tocqueville observes, end up dispiriting and depressing themselves through their very pursuit of happiness. These free, prosperous, enlightened modern people are also “grave and almost sad, even in their pleasures.” That experience of unexpected dissatisfaction drives a restless love of change, as we search for some amelioration of our condition that will relieve the existential unease that afflicts us when prosperity’s satisfactions come to seem hollow and when others prove

unable to give us the unmediated approbation we so ardently desire. In a democratic society, the restlessness that grows in the shadow of the ideal of immanent contentment becomes a politically decisive phenomenon. That restlessness explains the ritualistic idol-smashing so characteristic of modern societies, as we impose upon ourselves “the psychological equivalent of permanent revolution” in our quest to tear down the social barriers that seem to block our path to the contentment we believe it both our right and our obligation to enjoy.¹³

Tocqueville’s admiring portrait of American democracy is thus darkened by a shadow of foreboding, an anticipation of what will become of our inner lives as the restless quest for immanent contentment expands its empire over them, and an intimation of how our disquiet will eventually come to undermine our political institutions. In this book, we seek to address that disquiet by considering the genesis and development of the ideal of happiness to which it is so intimately connected. For it is only when we understand this ideal in terms of the most decent human aspirations to which it speaks that we may begin to assess it dispassionately.

As Tocqueville might have predicted, a basic commitment of many modern societies—the commitment to liberalism—is today coming to seem increasingly questionable. Scholars concerned about this trend have been reexamining the philosophic anthropology that underwrites liberalism, some in order to defend it, others to explain why it has failed. In this book, we attempt to do justice to both sides of this argument, seeking at once to understand the deepest reasons for our attachment to the modern idea of happiness, as well as the thread of restless unease it weaves into the fabric of our common life. In so doing, we strive, like Tocqueville, to see “not differently, but further” than the parties of our time, the liberal and anti-liberal coalitions

that are coming to define our moment's intellectual polarity. We hope thereby to point the way to a richer anthropological vantage point from which we might discern how to preserve what is best in our political order while addressing the source of our waxing disquiet.¹⁴

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