Philosophy in Review

Benjamin Storey and Jenna Silber Storey, "Why We Are Restless: On the Modern Quest for Contentment"

Stefan Koppert

Volume 42, numéro 3, août 2022

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1092047ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1092047ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)
1920-8936 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Koppert, S. (2022). Compte rendu de [Benjamin Storey and Jenna Silber Storey, "Why We Are Restless: On the Modern Quest for Contentment"]. *Philosophy in Review*, *42*(3), 26–28. https://doi.org/10.7202/1092047ar

Benjamin Storey and Jenna Silber Storey. *Why We Are Restless: On the Modern Quest for Contentment*. Princeton University Press 2021. 264 pp. $27.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780691211121); $19.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780691220116).

Evidence that the architects of modern politics, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke, etc., understood themselves to be cutting the political order free from domination by transcendent ideals is not difficult to find. Each rejects the idea that political life should be directed toward transcendent, unattainable ideals, and instead looks to what is within human power to know and to control. But if we wish to understand the implications of this change for the individual human psyche, what resources do these thinkers have to offer? Machiavelli's prince seeks riches and glory—but why? Hobbes and Locke look to comfortable self-preservation as the pursuit that will orient our political existence, and as is likely, our individual pursuits as well. In *Why We are Restless,* Benjamin Storey and Jena Silber Story have made a compelling case that if we wish to understand these implications more fully, the tradition of the French *moralists* is a more profound source of reflection on the effects of modernity on the soul. They survey the career of modernity's ideal, 'immanent contentment' as they call it, from its early formulation in Michel de Montaigne, through Blaise Pascal's radical critique, through Jean-Jacques Rousseau's attempt to address some of its apparent shortcomings, and finally to its full flower in Alexis de Tocqueville's America, and America today.

The path they follow as they retrace the career of this ideal is a path that has been trod, although perhaps not through these exact waypoints, many times before. But it is not for that reason less true, less important, or less timely. The book is accessible political philosophy at its finest. It is an earnest exploration of timeless questions of human nature, politics, and the good life. It is not weighed down by attempts at relevance through statistics, but rather allows the seriousness of the questions to emerge in its own right. The Storeys are especially interested in whether the answers to these questions that underlie our modern liberal order are solid, and their choice of four French thinkers—Montaigne, Pascal, Rousseau, and de Tocqueville—provides the opportunity for a fresh angle on them through the eyes of some of our modern order's most perceptive originators and critics.

The Storeys have come to some definite conclusions of their own about the inadequacy of immanent contentment. This becomes clearer as the book's four chapters move successively through the alternatives of Montaigne's ideal, Pascal's critique, and Rousseau's experiment in immanence. By the time they get to Tocqueville, their cards are on the table, and they engage in an all-out culture critique, showing the flawed logic of a society that attempts to universalize (ironically) the rejection of universals or forms. The Storeys draw on decades of scholarship and classroom discussion, but they also engage more popular works, including recent books such as Matthew Crawford's *Shop Class as Soul Craft* or Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed*. They even cite an occasional opinion piece along the way. The nearly forty pages of footnotes are also worthwhile reading, allowing a broader engagement with scholarship than the tightly argued chapters allow.

The Storeys recount Montaigne's reasoning that, in the face of the brutality of conflict over irreconcilable transcendent ideals and the impossibility of ascertaining the truth of one or the other of these ideals, immanent contentment provides a surer way to happiness, and very likely a truer one

at that. Montaigne thus learns to revel in the pleasures of the everyday, suggesting that humans adopt the mode of the butterfly, flitting from one pleasant flower to the next with nonchalance and with ultimate acceptance of mortality. And while Montaigne himself advocates withdrawal from active political life (being an impediment to more pleasant pursuits), the Storeys show that radical implications for politics are not far to be sought.

But, as I have already suggested, the Storeys reserve their most political analysis for their chapter on Tocqueville. Their next waypoint is Blaise Pascal's *Provincial Letters* and *Pensées,* where they find a searing critique of Montaigne's claim that continual diversion is happiness. They recount Pascal's insistence that the human soul is made for more than this—that the desperate emptiness beneath immanent contentment can never be satisfied with just one more diversion. The Storeys then give a nuanced telling of Pascal's wager, showing that Pascal intends the logic of the wager not as a foundation for faith, but as an entry-point for a journey of real experience of a God who is purposefully hidden from those who do not seek him. Pascal's alternative to Montaigne can hardly be prescribed as recipe for happiness, however, and the Storeys do not make this mistake. Instead, they challenge their readers to take seriously the critique of Montaigne's ideal, and leave open the possibility of experiential faith in a transcendent God, marked by longing and suffering, but also by joy.

One of the book's most intriguing aspects is its reading of Jean Jacques Rousseau. On the Storeys' reading, the disparate elements of Rousseau's oeuvre, the contradictions of which so frequently repulse even friendly analysts, prove to cohere as so many unsatisfactory attempts to respond to Pascal's unsettling of the immanent ideal. Rousseau's life, the Storeys argue, is an ultimately tragic series of attempts to give more depth to life without resorting to transcendent ideals. The wholly committed citizen, the ideal of the harmonious nuclear family, the minimally religious self-acceptance of the Savoyard Vicar*,* and the ecstatic self-forgetting of the solitary walker—all are attempts to overcome the petty dividedness of the modern bourgeois soul. The Storeys suggest that the very fact that Rousseau's list is so long points to the impossibility of finding a satisfactory reply to Pascal's critique within the realm of immanence. And, taken singly, each attempt is subject to significant objections, which they also elaborate.

When they do turn to Tocqueville, the Storeys find his analysis of America exactly appropriate to our contemporary restlessness and moral confusion. They show the politics of immanence, arguing that a politics built on the principles of immanent contentment descends into the very barbarity from which it was intended to provide an escape. They note the many facets of modern life that follow, almost inexorably, from Montaigne's effort to re-found human happiness; a shaky but vocal demand for equality, an overwhelming emphasis on material well-being, and a constant but always suppressed 'existential moan' underneath it all.

Do they have an answer to whether liberal politics has space for fuller visions of the good life than Montaigne's? Or does the liberal order always militate against this? If they do, their book doesn't make them explicit, but, having brought to the fore the questions with such clarity, it positions its readers admirably for such investigation.

On an individual level, the Storeys hold out Pascal as a model of living life as a passionate pursuit,

but when they offer their take on the first steps to such a life, they do not endorse his prescribed approach to God, recommending instead a return to philosophy (180-181). Their investigation seems to rely heavily on the premise that we ought to pursue the most solid kind of happiness—a quest that holds out the promise, or at least the potential, of satisfying the deepest longings of the human soul. Their prescription—that those who would look for happiness more meaningful than immanent contentment should look to the history of ideas, to see what keen questioners before them have said in order to eventually evaluate the possibilities for themselves (181), is somewhat ambiguous. Are they suggesting that philosophy itself is the best way of life? Or that it positions one to discriminate between other claims to that title? And what gives them the confidence that searching for the truth will avoid the challenge to that project that Nietzsche so clearly set forth—what if the truth attainable through philosophy is unfavorable to life, or if philosophical investigation leads to Montaigne's exact conclusions?

One might argue that Storeys have a strong response to this critique, contained in their discussion of Tocqueville's account of the demise of 'forms' in American life. America, a regime that brings into full fruition the ideal of immanent contentment, has carried Montaigne's opposition to forms to the utmost. Montaigne's rejection of forms, they argue, entails no mere dislike for social nicety in the name of a more natural existence, but is at bottom an assertion of a formless material existence that can make no adequate account of a human being, let alone a reason for respecting equality. The human soul, with dimensions that cannot be accounted for in simply material terms, thus gives the lie to Montaigne's most fundamental premise (174). Some hints of a deeper ambiguity in the book's approach begin to emerge here. In their brief discussion of forms, the focus of the questioning shifts from the quest for human happiness to other, perhaps more fundamental concerns. What is a human soul? Is knowledge of a transcendent order possible? If these questions come to the fore only in a critique, has Montaigne's mode of life ultimately withstood the challenge the Storeys set forth? Deep longings for a more meaningful happiness can hardly prove the existence of a cosmic moral order. Philosophy might ultimately counsel resignation, or a kind of moderate Epicurean life—perhaps even including a dash of the pleasure of contemplation. One wishes, then, that the Storeys had spent more time exploring the implications of their claim about forms, and perhaps gone further in explaining the intent of their prescription of liberal education. But the very fact that the book raises concerns such as these is a testament to its worth.

Stefan Koppert, Baylor University