

Tocqueville's 'Self-Interest Rightly Understood': The Profound Value of Compassion in the West

In [*Democracy in America*](#), Alexis de Tocqueville writes compellingly about how religion in the U.S. turns us away from narrow self-interest to what he calls "self-interest rightly understood." While the former is entirely selfish, in the latter we recognize how our interests are necessarily intertwined with the interests of others. When we act, we accept some moral responsibility for attending to the latter as well as the former.

The evidence of this is all over the place in our history. The role played by [religious institutions](#) in providing care for the indigent, for example, is remarkable. This was in one sense voluntary action by those providing the care, but in another sense, it was mandated because it was a requirement of their faith.

In a more recent example, a close American friend once told me the story of living in France with his family for a year while on a sabbatical leave. Someone knocked on their apartment door in the wee hours of the night. He got up to look through the door hole to see who it was, and he saw an elderly woman who lived somewhere else in the building. He'd seen her in the lobby a few times but did not know precisely where she lived and had never exchanged more than a word of greeting with her, as was customary for interactions in the lobby in this urban (Paris) setting.

My friend immediately opened the door and let her in.

She was having some kind of medical emergency, trouble

breathing and heart racing, and was seeking help. He called SAMU (the French emergency medical service) and directed them to the building, then tended to her and tried to comfort her until help arrived. She had heart problems, as it turned out, but they got her to the hospital, and she came through the episode okay.

Later, when she was home from the hospital, she told him that on the night of her emergency, she had knocked on every other door on the floor before knocking on his, but no one had answered except my friend. She thanked him profusely, but he told her he genuinely felt he could not have done otherwise. He learned then that she was an immigrant from Algeria whose husband had died some years before. They had no children. He gave her his phone number and told her to call whenever she needed anything.

Of course, my friend was literally free not to answer the door, just as everyone else on the floor had done. It would in fact have been better for him to act in a purely self-interested way, he told me, as he would have gotten more sleep (he had to work early that morning and, as a result of the interruption, dragged around in a stupor the whole day), instead of spending time at 3 a.m. tending to his elderly neighbor and waiting for the squad to come.

But his “self-interest rightly understood,” which he told me he had learned as part of the religious upbringing in his family (though without Tocqueville’s language) kicked in, and there was no question what he would be doing. He told me, “I typically hear my grandmother in my ear in such situations, saying, ‘There but for the grace of God go I.’”

I’ve thought a lot about that example from my friend’s experience over the years. The French—and other Europeans—[place](#) state guarantees of welfare over individual liberty. Perhaps the French apartment dwellers thought paying their taxes was therefore how they tended to the suffering of

others.

Of course, too much compassion can cause problems. If our compassion permits us to bare our throats to enemies or to recklessly give away all our precious resources, then awful consequences will necessarily materialize at some point. A politics based on a view that [compassion](#) must mean giving someone whatever they want—whether that be handing drugs to an addict or knives to a toddler—would be an awful thing.

But Tocqueville's "self-interest rightly understood" is key to American culture. Would a culture not guided by concern for genuine suffering and a desire to alleviate it when feasible even be one worth having? I, for one, think not.

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