

interpretation

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Virtue and Individual Rights in John Adams' *Defence*

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I

John Adams is a most important figure in the thought and politics of the American Revolution. General commentators on the thought of the Revolution tend to depend upon Adams more than any other author as a source for explaining what the Revolution was all about.¹ One reason for this dependence upon Adams is that he was very influential in Boston radical politics, in colonial revolutionary politics as a leading member of the Continental Congress, and in the creation of the new government that came with the Revolution. "His *Thoughts on Government*," writes John Paynter, "was widely circulated in 1776 and helped hasten and shape the formation of independent states out of former British colonies. His *Report of a Constitution . . . for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* was adopted with few changes, by that state, in 1780, and became the model for movements toward constitutional revision in other states."²

The special attention given to Adams by students of eighteenth-century American political thought, however, does not stem merely from the fact that he was one of the country's most influential politicians. It stems from the fact that he was the most thoughtful of those influential revolutionary politicians. Gordon Wood observes that "no one read more and thought more about law and politics" during the revolutionary period than Adams.³ Pauline Maier adds that Adams was "perhaps the country's most learned student of politics."⁴ Because it was based upon extensive reading of political history and philosophy, Adams' political thought is more complex than that of most of his contemporaries. My effort here is to present an understanding of an especially difficult aspect of Adams' thought, a problem that arises especially in John Adams as constitution maker.

During the dispute that culminated in the Revolution, John Adams' arguments were like those in the Declaration of Independence. He argued that the British were failing to secure the individual rights of the American colonists. His argu-

1. See Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969); Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967); and Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1972). Adams receives the longest entry of the American revolutionaries in both Bailyn's index and Wood's index. In Maier's book only the entries on Samuel Adams and Arthur Lee are as long as the one on John Adams.

2. John Paynter, "John Adams: On the Principles of a Political Science," *Political Science Reviewer*, vi, Fall 1976, p. 35.

3. Wood, p. 58.

4. Maier, p. 287.

ments originated in the teaching of modern political philosophers that politics should concentrate upon securing the natural rights of human beings rather than upon teaching human beings the lofty virtues of the classical and Christian traditions.⁵ Yet there is another persistent strain in Adams' thought that appears to take the opposite path. At times Adams does argue the need for virtue. In the days before the Revolution, the argument about the need for virtue was subordinate to the argument about rights. Adams argued that citizens must be virtuous if they are to restrain themselves from violating one another's rights.⁶

Still there are occasions, relatively rare, when Adams treats the production of virtue as the purpose of government rather than as a means to another purpose, that of securing individual rights. This presents a difficulty because the modern teaching that government exists to secure natural rights is based upon an explicit rejection of the ancients' argument that government's purpose is to make human beings virtuous. Neither the ancients nor the moderns argued that it was possible to achieve both the security of the rights to life, liberty, and property and the loftier virtues. Governments must aim primarily at one or the other since the project of securing rights appeals to the selfish material and physical desires of human beings, while the project of creating virtue demands that such desires be controlled.⁷

The difficulty appears in *Thoughts on Government*. There Adams begins by stating that "the happiness of society is the end of government." He continues to write that "All sober inquirers after truth, ancient and modern, pagan and Christian, have declared that the happiness of man, as well as his dignity, consists in virtue. Confucius, Zoroaster, Socrates, Mahomet, not to mention authorities really sacred, have agreed in this" (IV, 193). Yet when Adams moves from this discussion of ends to a discussion of forms, he also moves from ancient authorities to modern ones. His second list is composed of "Sidney, Harrington, Locke, Milton, Nedham, Neville, Burnet, and Hoadley." Of these modern thinkers he writes, "The wretched condition of this country, however, for ten or fifteen years past, has frequently reminded me of their principles and reasonings" (IV, 194). From there Adams goes on to outline a scheme of government involving a popular assembly, a council, and an executive without elaborating on the influence of ancient and modern principles over this scheme and without indicating an awareness of the tension between the two sets of principles.

5. See, for example, the "Novanglus" letters where Adams argues that the Americans' goal in the revolutionary struggle is to "preserve the liberties" naturally theirs, and where he argues that human beings leave the state of nature by forming a contract to establish a government to secure their liberties. Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1851), 10 vols., vol 4, pp. 14, 128, and 11-177 *passim*. Citations to *The Works* will be indicated hereafter by volume and page numbers appearing in the text.

6. See John R. Howe, Jr., *The Changing Political thought of John Adams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), Ch. II.

7. For a good discussion of the impossibility of uniting ancient and modern political principles, as well as for an application of this discussion to the American regime, see Martin Diamond, "Ethics and Politics: The American Way," in Robert H. Horwitz, ed., *The Moral Foundations of the American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1979), pp. 39-72.

Fortunately, the sketchy *Thoughts on Government* is not Adams' only work on political architecture. Adams' understanding of why a certain form of government is best is elaborated at great length in his three-volume work, *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States* written in 1786 and 1787. Gordon Wood writes that the *Defence* "was the only comprehensive description of American constitutionalism that the period produced."⁸ In this work there is a thorough discussion of the ends and means of government. Through a study of this discussion it is possible to gain an understanding of the relationship between virtue and rights, between ancient and modern political principles, in the thought of John Adams.

II

The *Defence* is an argument about forms of government. Adams' goal is to defend the form of government instituted by most of the constitutions in the American states against a criticism made by the French philosopher M. Turgot. In 1778 Turgot had written that the constitutions adopted by the American states after they had declared their independence from Great Britain were each characterized by "an unreasonable imitation of the usages of England. Instead of bringing all the authorities into one, that of the nation, they have established different bodies, a house of representatives, a council, a governor, because England has a house of commons, a house of lords, and a king" (IV, 279). The attempt to balance different governing authorities, Turgot continued, was necessary in England to control the strength of the monarchy. It is unnecessarily divisive, however, in a nation of equal men. Adams' work, written in response to Turgot, but for both European and American audiences, is designed to demonstrate the usefulness of the creation of three governing authorities and the danger of uniting all governing power in a single democratic body.

Adams was, of course, aware of the similarity between the American constitution and the British form of government. His argument, however, is that the similarity did not arise from a blind reverence of the former colonies for the mother country, but from a careful understanding of the nature of human beings and their governments. He produced the *Defence*, Adams writes, "to lay before the public a specimen of that kind of reading and reasoning which produced the American constitutions" (IV, 293–94). Adams is firm on the point that the American system is the product of reasoning and not prejudice: "The United States of America have exhibited, perhaps, the first example of governments erected on the simple principles of nature" (IV, 292).

Adams agrees with Turgot that government must be "founded on the natural authority of the people alone" (IV, 293), and that its purpose must be to preserve the rights and liberties of the people. He disagrees with Turgot on the question

8. Wood, p. 568.

of whether a single democratic assembly can secure those rights and liberties effectively. In his letter to Price, Turgot had written of the inadequacy of the definition of liberty offered by many republican writers. Such writers were content to define liberty as the rule of law. Turgot's response was that it makes a difference for liberty whether the laws are just or unjust, that is, whether they secure or violate the rights of human beings (IV, 278). In responding to Turgot, Adams leaps upon the Frenchman's observation. "I shall cheerfully agree," he writes, "with M. Turgot, that it is very possible that laws, and even equal laws, made by common consent, may deprive the minority of citizens of their rights" (IV, 402). The great problem, then, is to find a system of government that will recognize at once the people's claim to political authority and the need to ensure that governmental power is used by the people and their officers for "protecting the lives, liberties, and properties of the people" (IV, 557).

The overall argument of the *Defence* is that this objective can be reached only if there are three institutions dividing governing authority: a house of commons, a senate, and a separate executive. This political arrangement uses "the only three discoveries in the constitution of a free government, since the institution of Lycurgus," which three are "representations, instead of collections, of the people; a total separation of the executive from the legislative power, and of the judicial from both; and a balance in the legislature, by three independent, equal branches" (IV, 284). Even these great improvements, the only progress in the science of politics in two or three thousand years, Adams writes, have not been frequently employed in making governments. Apart from the Americans, only the British have seen the importance of these discoveries. It is this fact, and not mere prejudice, that makes the British constitution, in theory at least, "the most stupendous fabric of human invention" (IV, 358).⁹

The specific ends that Adams has in view for government are more clearly understood through a discussion of these modern forms. Adams' argument is that government must be made up of three parts: a house of commons, a senate, and an executive. These three parts represent different parties made up of different natural orders of human beings present in any community. The commons represents the many, and the senate represents the few superior, the aristocracy. It is difficult to characterize the executive, for although Adams says that the executive represents the natural party of the one (IV, 385), he does not make clear what that natural order is in communities without hereditary monarchs. Adams' argument is about the few and the many who form interest groups whose desires and rights must be taken into account by government. He does not discuss the executive in the same depth or as an interest similar to the other two that must be addressed for reasons of justice and stability. His discussion of the executive is of a govern-

9. This argument from Adams opposes Peter Shaw's contention that Adams reinstated British governmental principles out of remorse caused by "bringing down paternal authority." Peter Shaw, *American Patriots and the Rituals of Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 126.

mental power, whose importance lies primarily in being a third power in government capable of preventing either the few or the many from dominating.¹⁰

The democratic branch of the legislature is simply essential in a free government. If the end of government is, as Adams quotes from Marchmont Nedham, “the good and ease of the people, in a secure enjoyment of their rights, without oppression” (VI, 65), it seems essential that the people have at least some share in governmental power. Americans know, writes Adams, “that popular elections of one essential branch of the legislature, frequently repeated, are the only possible means of forming a free constitution, or of preserving the government of laws from the domination of men, or of preserving their lives, liberties, or properties in security” (IV, 466). Of these rights, Adams treats property as the most important throughout the *Defence*. It should be noted, however, that according to Adams the security of property is intimately related to the security of life and liberty. He writes that the word “republic” originally “signified a government, in which the property of the public, or people, and of every one of them, was secured and protected by law. This idea, indeed, implies liberty; because property cannot be secure unless the man be at liberty to acquire, use, or part with it, at his discretion, and unless he have his personal liberty of life and limb, motion and rest, for that purpose” (V, 454). Adams argues that for the people to secure their liberties and property from oppression they must use their natural authority to create a government that, in addition to creating a popular branch, gives power to the few and to the one. Adams demonstrates through argument and with many examples that “it may be laid down as a universal maxim that any government,” including, perhaps especially, a democratic one, “that has not three independent branches in its legislature will soon become an absolute monarchy or an arrogant nobility” (IV, 371).¹¹

To understand the need for a branch of the legislature representing the few, it is necessary to be precise as to what Adams means by the few. Adams is not primarily concerned about using the wisdom and virtue of the few best. While he agrees that there usually is more wisdom brought to bear on decision-making in aristocracies than in democracies (IV, 295), and while he argues that it would be best to try to make use of the positive qualities of the few best in government, it is not the few best he has in view when he speaks of the natural order of the few. The group with which Adams is concerned can be understood by examining a distinction he makes between “principles of authority” and “principles of power.” The principles of authority are qualities that ought to be the qualities sought in office holders. They include “virtues of the mind and heart, such as wisdom, prudence, courage, patience, temperance, justice &c.” (IV, 427). These virtues ought to translate into power, but most often they do not. The qualities

10. See Paynter, pp. 65–68.

11. As this passage indicates by speaking of “three branches in the legislature,” Adams’ argument in the *Defence* is not about separation of powers, but more about mixed government. His primary concern is to grant to each major class a share of governmental power.

that are likely to belong to possessors of power, the principles of power, are “the goods of fortune, such as riches, extraction, knowledge, and reputation” (IV, 427). Adams includes knowledge, “which is by no means necessarily connected with wisdom or virtue” (IV, 427), because it comes from education and travel, which are usually more available to those of wealth and good birth. Adams further discriminates between the principles of power by noting that “riches will hold the first place, in civilized societies, at least, among the principles of power” (IV, 427). Thus, the superior few in most societies will be defined by wealth more than by any other quality and in particular more than by virtue, the real quality that divides the naturally superior and the naturally inferior. The interest of the few to be represented in the senate, then, is the interest of the wealthy.

Adams’ willingness to consider only conventional superiorities rather than natural ones when discussing political representation indicates his fundamental choice to adopt modern political principles and to reject ancient ones. The ancients’ understanding of mixed government assumed an order in nature that humans should adhere to. It was understood to be critically important, for that reason, to secure wise rulers who might discern that natural order and use political power effectively to teach people to live well. Despite the claim that rule by the wise or virtuous is just, a mixed regime might be established to quiet those who would seek political power for selfish reasons or to cope with the problem of there being an insufficient number of virtuous people to rule. In any case, the ancient mixed regime is a form designed to bring as much virtue to bear on political rule as possible under given circumstances.¹² Adams’ mixture, unlike the ancients’, is not meant to secure the rule of wisdom but merely to prevent selfish groups from being able to use the power of politics to harm one another’s rights. As his “principles of authority” are replaced by his “principles of power” as the things to be taken into account in mixing government, the ancients’ fundamental concern to secure virtuous rulers is rejected.

Adams presents two results, both disastrous for the people’s rights, that could follow from failing to supplement the democratic branch of the legislature with a senate to represent the wealthy. The first possibility is that the wealthy, deprived of their own branch of government, will make the people’s branch their own. The people have less money, less time to be concerned with politics, and fewer political arts than the rich. The people’s disinclination to spend time on politics (IV, 308; V, 457) puts the wealthy, who are well-known and visible, at a clear advantage in elections. This advantage can be further cultivated by the rich through the use of well-developed political arts (IV, 292). These arts can include the use of wealth to corrupt the people in order to win elections. Adams writes that if the wealthy “found an opposition among their constituents to their elections [they]

12. For a discussion of this sort of ancient political argument see Harry V. Jaffa, “Aristotle,” in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, eds., *History of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963), especially pp. 94–125.

would immediately have recourse to entertainments, secret intrigues, and every popular art, and even to bribes, to increase their parties" (IV, 444). Since the merits of candidates in elections tend to be similar, and since, therefore, the conscientious citizens' votes will tend to be divided fairly equally in most elections, the balance of electoral power tends to be held by "the most profligate and unprincipled, who will sell or give away their votes for other considerations than wisdom or virtue" (IV, 444). The end result is that "he who has the deepest purse, or the fewest scruples about using it, will generally prevail" (IV, 444).

Adams' argument, then, is that he who moves from the premise that the people are the best protectors of their own liberty to the conclusion that legislative power ought to be contained in a single democratic assembly fails to understand that the people are unlikely to be able to maintain control of that assembly. Instead, the few rich are likely to turn that seemingly democratic government into an oligarchy (VI, 59). Once the rule by the people has become in fact rule by the rich, it is likely to degenerate still further. The rich will form factions. The struggles between factions will eventuate in civil war. The civil war will end in tyranny (IV, 406). The people are more likely to keep their power, and therewith the security of their rights, if they give to the rich a part of the legislative power that belongs exclusively to the rich. "The rich, the well-born, and the able, acquire an influence among the people that will soon be too much for simple honesty and plain sense, in a house of representatives. The most illustrious of them must, therefore, be separated from the mass, and placed by themselves in a senate: this is, to all honest and useful intents, an ostracism" (IV, 290). The rich will be less likely to seek control of the people's branch if they have their own to protect their property and satisfy their ambition. By this method, the people's branch, so essential for the preservation of liberty, is maintained as the people's branch.

Even if the people should maintain their power in a single legislative assembly, it is safe to say, Adams argues, that they would not use that power to secure individual rights. "We may appeal to every page of history we have hitherto turned over," writes Adams in the third volume of the *Defence*, "for proofs irrefragable, that the people, when they have been unchecked, have been as unjust, tyrannical, brutal, barbarous, and cruel, as any king or senate possessed of uncontrollable power. The majority has eternally, and without one exception, usurped the rights of the minority" (VI, 10). Specifically, a legislature made up of a single popular assembly could not be expected to pay the "sacred regard to property" (V, 152) which it ought. "Property is surely a right of mankind as well as liberty" (VI, 8–9). A popular assembly might restrain itself from moral or religious motives from taking the property of the wealthy for a while, "but the time would not be long before courage and enterprise would come, and pretexts be invented by degrees, to countenance the majority in dividing all the property among them" (VI, 9) through abolition of debts and heavy taxes on the rich. The people, it seems, may be the safest repository of their own rights, but the major-

ity is clearly not the safest repository of the rights of the minority. The rich minority “ought to have an effectual barrier in the constitution against being robbed, plundered and murdered, as well as the poor; and this can never be without an independent senate” (VI, 65).

If government exists to secure individual rights, it must have a senate. But the need for a senate to represent the wealthy does not follow only from considerations of justice to the rich minority. It also follows from a consideration of the well-being of all. Adams writes that once a poor majority has succeeded in its unjust redistribution of property and the precedent of redistribution is established “there must be a perpetual succession of divisions and squanderings, until property became too precarious to be sought, and universal idleness and famine would end it” (VI, 133). An insecure right to private property would result not only in gross injustice to the rich, but also in a worsened economic condition for all. Both justice and the self-interest of the people, then, suggest the establishment of a senate to represent the interests of the few rich.

III

There is in the *Defence* the same difficulty found in *Thoughts on Government*. While the primary focus is upon the security of individual rights as the end of government, there are a few places where another goal appears. At one point, for example, Adams presents this formula for the purpose of government: “the end of government is the greatest happiness of the greatest number, saving at the same time the stipulated rights of all” (IV, 318). This definition is made more specific by noticing that two volumes later Adams quotes with approval Aristotle’s conclusion “that a happy life must arise from a course of virtue” (V, 458). Elsewhere, Adams writes that virtue involves the classical virtues of “prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude,” but that its most sublime form is “Christian virtue,” “which is summarily comprehended in universal benevolence” (VI, 206).

In the “Preface” to the *Defence* Adams writes that “whether the end of man, in this stage of his existence, be enjoyment, or improvement, or both, it can never be attained so well in a bad government as a good one” (IV, 294). The statement is an interesting one, for it suggests at once that there is a distinction between the two goals and that Adams may be undecided as to which ought to be sought. It is possible for human beings to find the greatest enjoyment in virtuous actions, and in such a case there is no tension between enjoyment and improvement. But it is not easy for most human beings to come to the realization that the greatest enjoyment lies in virtuous action, and in such cases they are likely to define enjoyment in terms of physical and material pleasures only. This more narrow definition of enjoyment is the one Adams has in mind when he distinguishes enjoyment as political goal from improvement. Now the major argument of the *Defence*, the argument that government must be properly structured to secure individual rights,

is an argument that appeals primarily to the narrow human desire for enjoyment. This is especially true of the right to property, whose protection encourages most people to acquire the things that lead to the satisfaction of material desires.

It is true that property can be used to support virtue rather than simply to gratify appetites. Wealth is essential, for instance, for the exercise of the virtues of liberality and magnanimity. But the security of the right to property as a political goal is far different from the need for property that arises when virtue is the political goal. Property in and of itself does not create virtue, and people are far more likely to seek to acquire it for reasons of material well-being than as support for virtue when the primary goal of government is to secure the right to property rather than to make people virtuous.

If the goal of enjoyment is present in Adams' dedication to the security of rights and especially the right to property, the goal of improvement is present in Adams' statements that human happiness consists in virtue, in performing duties to others and not in supplementing one's own material well-being. Inspection of Adams' argument in the *Defence* reveals that indeed he did understand there to be a tension between enjoyment and improvement as ends of man as well as a corresponding tension between a government whose goal is to secure individual rights and a government whose goal is to create virtue in human beings. Inspection of the argument indicates further that while Adams himself believed that human happiness is indeed found in virtue, he also believed that when the goals of securing rights and encouraging virtues conflict, government should choose to secure rights.

Part of Adams' concern for virtue is wholly subordinate to his opinion that government ought to secure the rights of all. If government is to be just, then its officers must seek the common good rather than the satisfaction of narrow selfish interests. Thus if the right to property is to be secure, the majority must not rob the minority, and the minority must not rob the majority. According to John R. Howe, this was the basis of Adams' concern for virtue in the 1770s, although, Howe argues, Adams had become less sanguine by the time of the writing of the *Defence* about the possibility that genuine virtue could restrain the unjust use of governmental power.¹³ Certainly it is correct that in the *Defence* Adams counsels against an expectation that a desire to do what is good for one's fellows would restrain the unjust actions of governing bodies.

Several times in the course of the *Defence* Adams makes statements reminiscent of the caution in the fifteenth chapter of Machiavelli's *Prince*. "In the institution of government," writes Adams, "it must be remembered that, although reason ought always to govern individuals, it certainly never did since the Fall, and never will, till the Millennium, and human nature must be taken as it is, as it has been, and will be" (VI, 115). And again: "To amuse and flatter the people with compliments of qualities that never existed in them, is not the duty nor the

13. Howe, pp. 108–31.

right of a philosopher or legislator; he must form a true idea and judgment of mankind, and adapt his institutions to facts, not compliments" (VI, 98–99). The important fact about human nature, then, is not that men are sometimes capable of virtue, but rather that the number of human beings that dependably act from virtuous motives is very small indeed (VI, 8, 211). Government is needed precisely because people, if left to themselves, will violate one another's rights (VI, 7). It is foolish to expect genuine virtue to be useful in securing behavior for the common good. Such virtue is simply too unusual and too difficult to create.

Whether virtue is considered as the end of human beings or as a means to the security of individual rights, the Americans have particular difficulties in creating it. One stems from the size of the Americans' country. Adams notes that Socrates and Pythagoras argued that politics would be oppressive "until mankind were habituated, by education and discipline, to regard the great duties of life, and to consider a reverence of themselves, and the esteem of their fellow citizens, as the principal source of their enjoyment" (IV, 556–57). Notice here Adams' recognition that the goals of virtue and enjoyment are not always incompatible, that virtuous acts can be seen as the greatest source of enjoyment. But he continues to say that this alternative of educating people to virtue "might" be plausible in a small community, but is utterly unrealistic for a large one. "The education of a great nation can never accomplish so great an end" (IV, 557), so that in a large community it is unlikely in the extreme that people will identify enjoyment with virtue. Thus Adams at once acknowledges and rejects the best political alternative. If government could create virtue it would be good both for the community and its individuals. This alternative, however, is not available to a great nation. Large communities cannot expect to create a virtuous citizenry.

The other special difficulty the Americans have in creating virtue in citizens comes directly from the goal of securing individual rights. John Adams realizes quite well that human beings who seek to acquire property are less likely to be virtuous than human beings who are not taught that they have a right to property. Toward the end of the *Defence*, Adams discusses Montesquieu's understanding of a republic, noting that for Montesquieu virtue is the spring of a republic. Adams correctly decides that Montesquieu has in mind neither Christian nor classical virtue, but a kind of love of the republic that will lead to sacrifices of self-interest for the community. This love of the republic requires both a love of equality and a love of frugality. Neither of these last two, Adams writes, is any part of human nature (VI, 209). It is true that frugality is a virtue, but a passion for it "never existed in a nation, if it ever did in an individual" (VI, 209). Adams suggests that republican virtue as discussed by Montesquieu may be nothing more than the absence of ambition and avarice caused by poverty (VI, 207). Certainly it is true that for Montesquieu, republican virtue requires a satisfaction with poverty. Earlier in the *Defence* Adams noted the connection between poverty and virtue, but he argued that human beings would not choose to pay such a price for virtue (VI, 97).

Of course wealth in and of itself is not hostile to virtue. As has been noted, Aristotle argues that a certain amount of wealth is necessary for virtuous actions. Adams also argues that material luxury is an evil only in excess. The problem is not wealth itself, but the dominance of the desire for wealth. When human beings become more concerned about improving their material well-being than about virtue, then the opportunity to pursue wealth becomes destructive of virtue rather than supportive of it. Adams' argument is that given the opportunity, most human beings will live lives in pursuit of wealth rather than in pursuit of virtue, and that, therefore, most human beings must live without luxury and without realistic hope of attaining luxury if their lives are to be free from a dominance by the desire for material well-being. This poverty that can make virtue more easily attainable is especially unlikely in free states, for the love of wealth is so dominant in human beings that with the liberty to pursue riches they will almost universally choose to pursue riches. Adams writes that "to expect self-denial from men" who have the "power to gratify themselves, is to disbelieve all history and universal experience" (VI, 61).

Adams' argument that the opportunity to pursue material well-being will lead most human beings to live lives whose purpose is the pursuit of material luxury is an argument made later by Tocqueville in observing that most Americans were dominated by a taste for material well-being. Tocqueville wrote of the existence of a "universal, natural, and instinctive human taste for comfort." He argued that this taste could be prevented from becoming the purpose of life if material well-being could be taken for granted as it could be by the old aristocrats of Europe or if material advance was impossible as it was for the serfs of feudal Europe. But when material advance is possible and material position is insecure, people are likely to live lives with the primary purpose of pursuing material well-being. Tocqueville writes: "If one tries to think what passion is most natural to men both stimulated and hemmed in by the obscurity of their birth and the mediocrity of their fortune, nothing seems to suit them better than the taste for comfort." Because this is the circumstance of most Americans, Tocqueville finds that "love of comfort has become the dominant national taste. The main current of human passions running in that direction sweeps everything along with it."¹⁴

Adams and Tocqueville agree, then, that the freedom to pursue property makes it true that "a free people are the most addicted to luxury of any" (VI, 95). The addiction, Adams writes, grew especially quickly in America. "In the late war, the Americans found an unusual quantity of money flow in upon them, and, without the least degree of prudence, foresight, consideration or measure, rushed headlong into a greater degree of luxury than ought to have crept in for a hundred years" (VI, 96). But though the war accelerated the growth of luxury, the political principles of the Americans together with their happy physical circumstances made the growth of luxury inevitable. "In a country like America where the

14. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. by J. P. Mayer, trans. by George Lawrence (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 533-34.

means and opportunities for luxury are so easy and so plenty, it would be madness not to expect it" (vi, 96). Only if the right to property were insecure would poverty grow in America (vi, 133), and only with virtually inescapable poverty would widespread genuine virtue be a realistic possibility.

Adams, then, understands that classical or Christian virtue on a large scale is unlikely in America because of human nature, the size of the American nation, and American political principles. He knows that the doctrine of individual rights exacts a toll in virtue. If politics is to encourage those rights and especially the right to property, the citizens will be less virtuous than they might otherwise be. Knowing this price, Adams argues that it is nonetheless more important for politics to secure individual rights than it is for politics to encourage virtue. Moreover, Adams argues that those kinds of political communities that can succeed in producing virtue in their citizens are to be blamed precisely because they do so at the price of individual rights.

Not all luxury is evil. Adams writes that luxury in excess is evil and ought to be restrained by law and morality (vi, 97). However, the most effective restraint of luxury—poverty—allows no luxury at all. This prohibition frustrates a natural desire of human beings to improve their condition (iv, 520). Adams argues that human beings ought to be free to seek material ease even though this freedom will lead many to the evil of excess luxury. This point, as well as another justifying the choice to pay a price in virtue to secure liberty, is made in Adams' discussion of Sparta.

Cousin Samuel Adams once mentioned in a private letter to a friend that he would have liked to see Boston established as "the Christian Sparta."¹⁵ Although the context clearly indicates that Samuel Adams was referring to the need for virtue as a means for securing individual rights, some commentators take the phrase as an indication that the revolutionaries had it in mind to establish a classical republic whose goal was virtue.¹⁶ In this context, John Adams' discussion of Sparta in the *Defence* is very interesting. John Adams appreciated the accomplishment of ancient Sparta. He knew that Lycurgus' laws had sought to shape character and had succeeded so thoroughly that the Spartan regime had enjoyed excellent longevity (iv, 542). Furthermore, Adams has mild praise for Lycurgus' system of "three orders and a balance." It was not perfect, writes Adams, but it was a system built along the right lines (iv, 553).

Yet Adams' final judgment on the Spartan constitution is that it was "not only the least respectable, but the most detestable in all Greece" (iv, 555). Adams is aware that in this assessment he differs with the "aristocratical philosophies, historians, and statesmen of antiquity" (iv, 553). Indeed it is Adams' acceptance of modern natural rights principles that leads to his strident criticism of Sparta. In particular, Adams criticizes the measures Lycurgus used to shape the character

15. Harry Alonzo Cushing, ed., *The Writings of Samuel Adams* (New York: Octagon Books, 1968), vol. iv, p. 238.

16. Notably Gordon Wood, see Wood, pp. 114–18.

of the Spartans so as to make them concerned only with the public good. To create this attachment "it was necessary to extinguish every other appetite, passion, and affection in human nature" (IV, 553). Adams objects to:

The equal division of property; the banishment of gold and silver; the prohibition of travel and intercourse with strangers; the prohibition of arts, trades, and agriculture; the discouragement of literature; the public meals; the incessant warlike exercises; the doctrine that every citizen was the property of the state; and that parents should not educate their own children (IV, 553).

That is, Adams criticizes the laws invading individual rights in the name of virtue. The Spartans' civil liberty, he concludes, "was little better than that of a man chained in a dungeon—a liberty to rest as he is" (IV, 555). And it is in this context that Adams reminds his readers, with emphasis, that government "should never have any other end than the greatest happiness of the greatest number, *saving to all their rights*" (IV, 555). Clearly, then, when the things needed to secure rights conflict with the things needed to produce virtue, as they do with the right to property, Adams' choice is for rights.

There is more to Adams' condemnation of Sparta and his refusal to compromise individual liberty than the argument that human beings ought to be able to act to satisfy their natural desire for material well-being. There is his belief that the dignity of individuals can be realized only if they have the personal liberty to control their own actions. This point can be made through reflecting on a passage in which Adams objects to an argument made in Aristotle's *Politics*. Adams quotes a summary of Aristotle's argument that since human felicity consists "in the operations of virtue, and chiefly in the exertions of wisdom and prudence," those whose occupations are not primarily concerned with the exercise of those virtues, such as husbandmen, artisans, and merchants, ought not be allowed to be citizens (V, 455).

This "dogma of Aristotle," writes Adams, "is the most unphilosophical, the most inhuman and cruel that can be conceived" (V, 457). Although it is true, Adams writes, that farmers tend to be inattentive to public affairs (V, 459), it is nonetheless true that they must be allowed to participate in the election of the legislature if liberty is to have any meaning at all. Adams argues that so long as a man has "any small property, by which he may be supposed to have a judgment and will of his own" (V, 456), he must be allowed a role in government. Of Aristotle's argument he writes that "there is no doctrine, and no fact, which goes so far as this toward forfeiting to the human species the character of rational creatures" (V, 456).

It is instructive to note that Adams appears to misinterpret Aristotle in this discussion. For Aristotle it is precisely the fact that human beings are rational creatures that leads to the conclusion that the most reasonable ought to rule in political communities. If the most reasonable rule, then more reasonable behavior will be required of all than if all rule together. But for Adams what is more important

is not that all people do reasonable things, but that they have an opportunity to exercise reason, however imperfect it may be, in making public and private choices. For Adams the observation that human beings are rational creatures leads to the conclusion that all human beings must be allowed to use reason in public affairs. He does not appear to comprehend Aristotle's argument that the fact that human beings are rational creatures means that they ought to allow public affairs to be directed by the most reasonable among them in order that all may act in a more reasonable manner. Humans cannot be human, according to Adams, without the opportunity to guide their wills by their rational faculties. A human being who acts always as he is told by a superior, no matter how good the laws or how much the actions correspond to the demands of virtue, is not really human. It is far more dignified for that person to rule himself and make frequent mistakes than to live a thoroughly virtuous life under command.

IV

Adams argues that since human beings and nations are ordinarily actuated by passions and prejudices (VI, 211), it is foolish to expect tyranny to be prevented by the virtue of citizens and rulers. This is especially the case under free government, where human beings are more likely to be moved by a desire for material well-being. Adams argues further that it is wrong for governments to take strong measures, such as Lycurgus did, that would be necessary to stifle these narrowly selfish desires, for such measures would make it impossible for humans to acquire luxury even in moderation, and such measures would also deny human beings the liberty and dignity appropriate to their humanity.

It is, therefore, most prudent to create a form of government under which self-interested human beings will be neither oppressive nor unjust toward one another despite their selfishness. This is the attraction, for Adams, of a mixed system including a popular branch, a senate, and a separate executive to hold the balance between them. When discussing the dangers for communities brought by the desire for luxury, as well as the inevitability of the growth of luxury in the United States, Adams writes that "the problem ought to be, to find a form of government best calculated to prevent the bad effects and corruption of luxury, when, in the ordinary course of things, it must be expected to come in" (VI, 94). The advantage of the mixed system is that it can do the job of preventing the bad effects of selfish desires from being realized (VI, 98). With the members of the three branches acting even for selfish purposes, the three branches "restrain each other mutually by the laws" (V, 90), so that oppression and injustice do not result.

Paradoxically, having abandoned a dependence upon virtue to restrain tyranny in government, Adams insists that an advantage of his mixed government is that it is better than any simple form at producing virtue (V, 289). To understand this argument it is necessary to recall the evils of unmixed aristocracies and de-

mocracies. In democracies the majority is led to “rob” the minority, and in aristocracies, the few will oppress the many. Because mixed government places an effective check on both parties, neither will be able to commit its crimes. “Although the vices and follies of mankind, no more than their diseases and bodily infirmities, can never be wholly eradicated,” Adams writes, “the balance of three branches appears to afford all that the constitution and course of things will admit” (VI, 182–83). Although it does not positively encourage the formation of classical or Christian virtues, then, neither does the mixed system positively encourage vices, and herein lies the great advantage of the mixed and balanced system over others. It restrains the passions of men so that they can only be satisfied within boundaries that preserve the rights of all.

During the decade before the Revolution, Adams had been very disturbed about the system used to fill governmental positions in the British colonies. The best example is that of Thomas Hutchinson, lieutenant governor and then governor of Massachusetts. Not only did Hutchinson himself hold as many as four political offices simultaneously, but he also obtained governmental posts for his relatives. To Adams the system did not reward skill and hard work, but family connections and political scheming. Edmund S. Morgan has written that “Adams’ dedication to work was more and more affronted by the sight of men who had discovered a political shortcut to success and wealth. There was nothing more obnoxious to him than the man who satisfied his ambition and avarice by obtaining appointments from the crown.”¹⁷ The system for which Adams argues in the *Defence* would not promote the vices encouraged where offices are filled by corrupt means. Herein lies a major advantage of Adams’ “trinity in unity”: it curbs “the audacity of individuals and the turbulence of parties” (V, 316). It does so “by doing justice to all men on all occasions, to the minority as well as the majority; and by forcing all men, majority as well as minority, to be contented with it” (VI, 152–53). This failure to encourage men to develop the vices that lead to success under a corrupt system is perhaps the greatest encouragement to virtue, or rather lack of discouragement to virtue, that Adams’ system provides.

Yet this is not all, for Adams claims that the mixed system of government does more to create virtue than simply to restrain vicious behavior. Adams argues that his balanced government actually encourages certain patriotic virtues as well as certain bourgeois virtues. Here, though, it must be remembered that Adams’ analysis is comparative. He makes no claim that the system for which he argues makes human beings benevolent or selfless, but he does claim that it will make them act better than they would under a system dominated by a faction of either the rich or the poor. The key reason for this is that the checks and balances in a mixed system allow neither the rich nor the poor to command, and make it more likely than it would be were either faction to have unchecked power that the rewards of society will be distributed justly. This just distribution of rewards is

17. Edmund S. Morgan, *The Meaning of Independence* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976), p. 13.

likely to result in liberty and prosperity (vi, 159). Both the prosperity and the steady inability of the idle and vicious to gain financially encourage frugality and industriousness (vi, 90). Furthermore, the liberty, along with the desire for luxury, support a desire for knowledge, especially knowledge that is likely to result in increased material well-being (v, 289).

Finally, there is the ability of Adams' mixed system to produce a kind of patriotism in the people. As the well-being of each becomes more connected to the nation than to a party, which it will when no party is able to dominate the government, the "trinity" indeed becomes a "unity," and a "love of law, liberty, and country" (v, 289) becomes more likely than in a pure democracy or aristocracy. The sort of patriotism about which Adams speaks here is described by Tocqueville:

There is another sort of patriotism more rational than [a simple feeling of love for country]; less generous, perhaps less ardent, but more creative and more lasting, it is engendered by enlightenment, grows by the aid of laws and the exercise of rights, and in the end becomes, in a sense, mingled with personal interest. A man understands the influence which his country's well-being has on his own; he knows the law allows him to contribute to the production of this well-being, and he takes an interest in his country's prosperity, first as a thing useful to him and then as something he has created.¹⁸

Adams makes no claim that the virtues encouraged under a mixed system would come to be the moving force behind the conduct of all or even some human beings. He argues only that their influence would be greater under a system where neither the many nor the few holds unchecked political power and where both parties are forced to work together to govern than it would under a system where either party held absolute power.

V

There is a genuine lack of clarity in John Adams' political writings. The difficulty stems from Adams' appreciation of the arguments made both by ancient political philosophers and by modern political philosophers. He agreed with the ancients and the Christians that human happiness is to be found in the possession of the lofty virtues of character. He believed, accordingly, that the goal of ancient politics was a great one because it involved bringing out the best in human nature. Adams also believed, however, that the means that would have to be used in any realistic attempt to reach that goal were unacceptable because they required severe restrictions on liberty. Such restrictions would involve the effective stifling of free will and, hence, would result in virtuous actions without a real choice for virtue. In removing freedom, they would actually destroy human nature rather than fulfill it. In the absence of spartan measures to remove the

18. Tocqueville, p. 235.

opportunity for vice only education could make people choose virtue, and the vices of human beings are strong enough that only a fool would depend upon education's ability to make people choose virtue.

Since people cannot be expected to live as they ought, and should not be forced to, Adams believed, the course recommended by prudence is to construct a political system whose primary purpose is merely to control the effects of narrowly selfish behavior and not to create human beings who will be genuinely virtuous. Adams' system, accordingly, is based upon the belief that to preserve liberty is more important politically than to inculcate virtue. The disadvantage of a system with this goal is great. Not only can it not be expected to initiate positive action to create in its citizens the "sublime" virtues Adams believes necessary to human happiness, but it also tends to discourage the formation of those virtues through encouraging human beings to pursue wealth by protecting property and liberating people to indulge their natural desire for luxury. This profound disadvantage, however, is finally outweighed by a great practical advantage. A mixed system whose goal is to secure liberty is likely to result in less vice and injustice than any realistic alternative. Liberty being as important as it is, and human imperfections being what they are, this imperfect political alternative is the best available because it does not discourage the formation of virtue in the way that more unjust regimes do. In the final analysis, although Adams' system tends to encourage the desire for luxury, it also secures liberty, and because it does so, writes Adams, the people living under it "may be happy if they will" (VI, 88).

Adams understood what had been lost in the rejection of classical political goals. He believed that human beings could be genuinely happy only when they were genuinely virtuous. But he also believed that in practice politics was not capable of making people virtuous and that an attempt to use political power to make people virtuous would result in disaster. The best that political action could do to contribute to human virtue, Adams believed, was to restrain vicious behavior. Thus Adams accepted classical political goals for human beings but rejected them for politics. The lack of clarity in Adams' political thought, then, does not result from a shallow or incomplete understanding of the basic political alternatives. It stems from John Adams' thoughtfulness.