Reflections on Human Nature

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We saw in the preceding lecture that in the late seventeenth and much of the eighteenth century man (as Vauvenargues put it) “was in disgrace with all thinking men” in the Western world—or at least with most of those who wrote disquisitions in prose or verse concerning him. He was described as a being actuated always by non-rational motives—by “passions,” or arbitrary and unexamined prejudices, or vanity, or the quest of private economic advantage—and yet as always inwardsly and incorrigibly assured that his motives were rational. When human nature was so conceived, it might naturally have been inferred that men were hopeless material for the construction of a peaceful, smoothly working, stable, and just political system, in which these diverse, conflicting, purely personal motivations would constantly be voluntarily subordinated to, and even made contributory to, “the general good.” And such a view of human nature might well have appeared most of all incompatible with a scheme of government in which ultimate political power would be, through a wide (though still far from universal) extension of the franchise, placed in the hands of a multitude of individuals or groups prompted by such irrational and irreconcilable passions and prejudices. How could you build a safe, solid, and enduring structure out of bricks in which there were
forces impelling them perpetually to push in different directions and to collide with one another? Yet it was precisely in the later eighteenth century that the scheme of "republican" government won the advocacy of political philosophers of immense influence in their time and made its first decisive advances; and (this is the particular fact relevant to our general subject which I wish to point out here) it was just at this time that the American Constitution was framed under the leadership of a group of extraordinarily able men who had few illusions about the rationality of the generality of mankind—who, in short, held in the main the theory of human nature and human motivations which was set forth in the preceding lecture.

This fact (for which I shall presently give some of the evidence) has the look of a paradox; but it is in large part (I do not say wholly) explained by the wide currency in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth century of two other conceptions, not hitherto mentioned, which implied that it is entirely possible to construct an ideal political society out of bad human materials—to frame a rational scheme of government, in which the general good will be realized, without presupposing that the individuals who exercise ultimate political power will be severally actuated in their use by rational motives, or primarily solicitous about the general good. Of these two conceptions, I shall try to elucidate and illustrate the first, which is the simpler and less far-reaching, in the present lecture; to the second we shall turn later in Lectures V and VI.

Although philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when discoursing on the divine government of the
world, often declared it to be axiomatic that the Creator always accomplishes his ends by the simplest and most direct means, they also tended to assume that he is frequently under the necessity of employing what may be called the method of counterpoise—accomplishing desirable results by balancing harmful things against one another. This was illustrated in the admirable contrivance on which popular expositions of the Newtonian celestial mechanics liked to dwell, whereby the planets had within them a centrifugal force which alone would have made them fly off into space in straight lines, and a centripetal force, which alone would have caused them to fall into the sun; happily counterbalancing one another, these two otherwise mischievous forces cause these bodies to behave as they should, that is, to roll round in their proper orbits. And human nature was increasingly conceived after the analogy of such a mechanical system. Voltaire proposed to amend the famous dictum of Descartes: “God, whom he called the eternal geometer, and whom I call the eternal mechanician (machiniste); and the passions are the wheels which make all these machines go.”¹

¹ Dieu et les hommes; cf. also Traité de Métaphysique, 1734, Ch. VIII. For an example of the parallel of celestial and political mechanics, cf. Montesquieu, De l’Esprit des lois, Bk. III, ch. vii: “Ambition,” or the desire for “honor,” which is the “principle” of the monarchical form of government, “moves all the parts of the body politic; it unites them by its own action, and the result is that each individual serves the public interest while he believes that he is serving his own. . . . You might say that it is like the system of the universe, in which there is a force which incessantly moves all bodies away from the centre and a force of gravity which brings them back to it.”
The place of the method of counterpoise in the dynamics of human nature had been tersely pointed out by Pascal before 1660: "We do not sustain ourselves in a state of virtue by our own force, but by the counterpoise of two opposite faults, just as we stand upright between two contrary winds; remove one of these faults, we fall into the other."² La Rochefoucauld used a different simile to express the same conception: "The vices enter into the composition of the virtues as poisons enter into the composition of remedies. Prudence assembles and tempers them and makes them serve usefully against the evils of life."³

And the creator of a state, like the Creator of the universe and of man—and, in fact, as a consequence of this favorite method of the Author of Nature—must accomplish his lesser but beneficent design by pitting against one another forces (that is, human motives) which, taken separately, are disruptive or otherwise bad, or at the least nonmoral—since no other forces, no rational and virtuous motives, can be relied upon. He must harness together and counterbalance contrary defects and competing egoisms. It had been laid down by the judicious Hooker, in the earliest classic of English political thought, that

Laws politic, ordained for external order, are never framed as they should be, unless, presuming the will of man to be inwardly obstinate, rebellious, and averse from all obedience unto the sacred laws of his nature; unless, in a word, presuming man to be in regard of his depraved

³ *Maximes*, 182.
mind little better than a wild beast, they do accordingly provide notwithstanding so to frame his outward actions that they be no hindrance unto the common good for which societies are instituted: unless they do this, they are not perfect.4

This at least stated the problem: how, by means of what political device, could you bring creatures whose wills were always moved by irrational and "depraved" passions to behave in ways which would not be inconsistent with the "common good"? There were several proposed solutions to the problem; the one which here concerns us and which was to play an extremely influential part in eighteenth-century political thinking was the method of counterpoise. It was set forth in 1714 in doggerel verse by the very injudicious Mandeville. As was his custom, he put it in the most violently paradoxical form, describing a well-ordered state in which,

Though every part was full of Vice,
Yet the whole Mass a Paradise.
Such were the Blessings of that State,
Their Crimes conspired to make them great . . .
The worst of all the Multitude
Did something for the Common Good.
This was the State's Craft that maintained
The Whole of which each part complain'd:
This, as in Musick Harmony,
Made jarrings in the main agree.5

4 Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, I (Everyman's Library ed., p. 188).
But the textbook—though it was a very confused textbook—on the theory of human nature which was most widely read and admired in the middle decades of the eighteenth century was provided by Alexander Pope. Every well-educated Englishman of the period, in Britain and America, was acquainted with the Essay on Man, and many of them doubtless knew its most famous lines by heart. And one thesis concerning the modus operandi of volition and the motivation of all of men’s actions which the poem set forth, especially in the Second Epistle, was essentially the same as that in the lines which I have quoted from The Fable of the Bees, though more elegantly expressed. For Pope, too, “statecraft” consisted in the recognition and application of the two premises underlying the political method of counterpoise: that men never act from disinterested and rational motives, but that it is possible, none the less, to fashion a good “whole,” a happy and harmonious State, by skillfully mixing and counterbalancing these refractory and separately antagonistic parts.

Since the Essay on Man is, I fear, much less familiar in the twentieth than it was in the eighteenth century, it is perhaps advisable to bring together here the principal passages illustrating the summary which I have just given. Men’s actions, Pope declares, are always prompted by their

On the question of Pope’s acquaintance with The Fable of the Bees, see the Introduction to A. Hamilton Thompson’s edition of the Essay on Man, 1913, p. xi. Mr. Thompson concludes that “it is certain that Pope knew Mandeville’s book,” and that it “furnished a prominent portion of the argument of the Second Epistle.”
passions, not by their reason. The latter, it is true, has an important part as a factor in human behavior, but it is an ancillary part. It enables us to judge of the means by which the passions, which are all "Modes of Self-Love," can be gratified, but it has no driving power.

On life's vast ocean diversely we sail,
Reason's the card, but Passion is the gale.\(^7\)

The card (i.e., compass) neither propels the ship nor determines the direction in which it is to sail; it merely enables the mariner to know in which direction it is moving, or in what direction to steer in order to reach the port he desires. And the passions, which thus provide the sole dynamic factor in human behavior, are not only diverse but antagonistic to one another. Every individual's will is dominated by some obsessing "Master Passion," which is the "mind's disease":

Reason itself but gives it edge and pow'r,
As Heaven's blest beam turns vinegar more sour.\(^8\)

That is one half of Pope's picture of the working of human motivations; but there is another half. Though these conflicting passions cannot be got rid of, they can be so combined and made to counteract one another that the total result will be social peace and order; and this was the purpose of the Creator in making man:

Passions, like elements, tho' born to fight,
Yet, mix'd and soften'd, in His work unite:

\(^7\) Epistle II, 107-8.
\(^8\) Epistle II, 147-8.
These, 'tis enough to temper and employ;
But what composes Man, can Man destroy? . . .
Each individual seeks a sev'ral goal,
But Heav'n's great view is one, and that the whole.
That, counterworks each folly and caprice,
That, disappoints th' effect of every vice.\(^9\)

Thus the statesman's task is to carry out this divine purpose by so adjusting the parts of "the whole" that "jarring interests" will

of themselves create

Th' according music of the well-mixed State.

By this means it will be possible for him to

build on wants, and on defects of mind,
The joy, the peace, the glory of mankind.\(^10\)

\(^9\) *Ibid.*, 111 ff., 235 ff. The lines which immediately follow are pertinent rather to the ideas about human motivation which will be set forth in Lecture V. Pope fused, or perhaps confused, the two conceptions.

\(^10\) The last two quotations are from Epistles III, 239-4 and II, 247-8. The group of passages brought together above constitute the one consistent and coherent argument, on the subject with which this lecture is concerned, that is to be found in the *Essay*. But it must be added, and emphasized, that there are other passages inconsistent with them and with one another in that highly confused poem; these are chiefly due to Pope's timidity about assigning to that traditionally venerated faculty, the Reason, the subordinate and all-but-impotent role which was essential for his principal argument and was, as shown above, frequently insisted upon by him in the most unequivocal terms. His waverings and contradictions on this matter have been well pointed out by Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 63, n. 197.
To achieve this great end, in short, it is not at all necessary to assume that man is controlled by his reason; it is, on the contrary, necessary to assume that he is not—since that is the fact about him.

Two decades later, probably borrowing some of these ideas from Pope, the poet laureate of the time, William Whitehead, included a syncopated version of them in his poem “The Enthusiast”;

[God] bids the tyrant passions rage,
He bids them war eternal wage,
   And combat each his foe,
Till from dissensions concords rise,
   And beauties from deformities,
   And happiness from woe.

Vauvenargues wrote in 1746: “If it is true that one cannot eliminate vice, the science of those who govern consists in making it contribute to the common good.” And Helvétius, later in the century, more diffusely versifies a particular form of the same general conception: every man always pursues his private interest, but the art of government lies in contriving an artificial identification of private with public interest—or at least, in persuading men that the two are identical:

Le grand art de régner, l'Art du Législateur,
Veut que chaque mortel qui sous ses lois s'enchaîne,
   En suivant le penchant où son plaisir l'entraîne,
Ne puisse faire un pas qu'il ne marche à la fois
Vers le bonheur public, le chef-d'oeuvre des lois.
Selon qu'un Potentat est plus ou moins habile
Bearing in mind these earlier statements of the two presuppositions of the method of counterpoise, as applied to the problem of government, we are now ready to turn back to what happened in Philadelphia in 1787 and, I think, to understand somewhat better what it was that then happened. To any reader of The Federalist it should be evident—though apparently it sometimes has not been—that the chief framers of the Constitution of the United States, who had been reared in the climate of opinion of the mid-eighteenth century, accepted the same two presuppositions and sought to apply them, for the first time in modern history, in the actual and detailed planning of a system of government not yet in existence. The ablest members of the Constitutional Convention were well aware that their task—unlike that of the Continental Congress of 1776—was not to lay down abstract principles of political philosophy, not to rest the system they were constructing simply upon theorems about the “natural rights” of men or of States, though they postulated such rights. Their problem was not chiefly one of political ethics but of practical psychology, a need not so much to preach to Americans about what they ought to do, as to predict successfully what they would do, supposing certain governmental mechanisms were (or were

11 Helvétius, Poésies, 1781, p. 111: “Épître sur le plaisir.”
not) established. Unless these predictions were in the main correct, the Constitution would fail to accomplish the ends for which it was designed. And the predictions could be expected to prove correct only if they were based upon what—in the eyes of the chief proponents and defenders of the Constitution—seemed a sound and realistic theory of human nature.

That theory was unmistakably set forth in what has come to be the most famous of the Federalist papers (No. X), written by James Madison, the member of the Convention who is, I suppose, now generally admitted to deserve, if any one member can be said to deserve, the title of “Father of the Constitution.” Since, however, it would be unsafe to assume that the argument even of this celebrated essay is now familiar to most Americans, let me briefly summarize it, mostly in Madison’s words. “The great menace,” he writes, “to governments on the popular model” is “the spirit of faction.” By a “faction,” he explains he means “a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion or of interest adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.” There are two conceivable “methods of curing the mischiefs of faction: the one, by removing its causes, the other, by controlling its effects.” The first method, however, is wholly inconsistent with popular government; you could abolish factions only by totally abolishing the “liberty” of individual citizens, i.e., their

12 See the notable volume of Irving Brant, James Madison, Father of the Constitution, 1950, especially pp. 154-5.
exercise, through the franchise, of the right severally to express and to seek to realize their own opinions and wishes with respect to the policies and acts of the government. But to expect that their exercise of that right will be, in general, determined by anything but what we now call “special interests”—which is what Madison chiefly meant by “the spirit of faction”13—is to expect an impossible transformation of human nature. “As long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed.” And “as long as the connection subsists between his reason and his self-love, his opinions and his passions will have a reciprocal influence upon each other. . . . A division of society into different interests and parties” will therefore be inevitable. Since, then, “the latent causes of faction are sown in the nature of man,” the “indirect and remote considerations” which are necessary to “adjust these clashing interests and render them all subservient to the public good will rarely prevail over the immediate interest which one party has in disregarding the rights of another or the good of the whole.”

But though the “causes” cannot be eliminated, the “ef-

13 The “passion” which Madison regarded as the chief source of the “spirit of faction” is economic self-interest. He was a pioneer of the conception of political struggles as, often disguised, class conflicts, and of economic determinism. But (unlike Marx) he also (to borrow Mr. Brant’s summary on this point) “recognized the influence of differing opinions in religion, contrary theories of government, attachment to rival leaders, and many other points which stir the human passions and drive men into ‘mutual animosities.” (James Madison, Father of the Constitution, p. 173.)
fects" of the spirit of faction can be "controlled." How? By making sure, Madison answers, that the number and relative strength of the groups representing conflicting special interests will be such that they will effectually counterbalance one another. When they do so, no part will be able to dominate the whole, to use all the legislative and executive power of the government for its own purposes. Each faction will be unable to get a majority vote in favor of its special interest because all the other factions will be opposed to it, and thereby (Madison assumes) the "general good," or the nearest practicable approximation to it, will be realized.

In thus invoking the method of counterpoise as the solvent of the (for him) crucial problem of political theory, Madison was at the same time defending one of the chief practical contentions of the group in the Convention of which he was the leader. The question at issue, as he formulates it in Federalist No. X, was "whether small or extensive republics are most favorable to the public weal"; but this question did not imply that there was any conflict of opinion as to the number of states which it was desirable to include in the new Union. No one proposed the actual exclusion from membership of any of the former thirteen colonies which were willing to ratify the Constitution. The real issue concerned the apportionment of legislative authority between the national government and the States. And (at this time) Madison was an extreme advocate of "national supremacy"; the States should, of course, have power to make laws on strictly and obviously local concerns, but "in all cases to which the

14 This has been conclusively shown by Mr. Brant, cf. op. cit., pp. 24-25, 30-36, 60-61, and passim.
separate States are incompetent, or in which the harmony of the United States may be interrupted by individual legislation,\textsuperscript{15} that power (and adequate means to enforce its decisions) should be assigned to the Federal Congress. By an "extensive republic," then, Madison means one of this centralized sort.

As to the choice between "small" and "extensive" republics, Madison, in \textit{Federalist} No. X, argues vigorously in favor of the latter, mainly on the ground that it alone would ensure an adequate counterbalancing of the political power of the groups representing regional (which, as he recognizes, were in America often also economic) special interests. "The smaller the society, the fewer probably will be the distinct parties and interests composing it; the fewer the distinct parties and interests, the more frequently will a majority be found of the same party, and . . . the more easily will they concert and execute their plans of oppression." But if all these clashing factions are pitted against one another in a \textit{single} legislative body, it is unlikely that any one of them will be strong enough to carry through any such "oppressive" designs. "Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens." "Extending the sphere" meant for Madison, it is evident, increasing both the number of groups participating in the central legislative authority and

\textsuperscript{15}The phrasing here is that of the "Virginia Plan." See Brant, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 24-25. This (as Brant has pointed out), though presented by Randolph, was merely an "echo" of Madison's proposals.
the number of subjects (touching more than merely local interests) on which it may legislate. The more "extended" it is de jure, the more restricted will be its power de facto. The decisive "advantage," in short "of a large over a small republic" will "consist in the greater obstacles opposed to the concert and accomplishment of the secret wishes of an unjust and interested majority."

All this should be sufficient to justify the conclusion which I earlier propounded in advance of the proof of it, i.e., that the fundamental political philosophy of Madison (at this time) included two crucial propositions: (1) that the political opinions and activities of individuals will, with perhaps the rarest exceptions, always be determined by personal motives at variance with the general or "public" interest—in short, by bad motives; but (2) that, in framing a political constitution, you can construct a good whole out of bad parts, can make these conflicting private interests subservient to the public interest, simply by bringing all of them together upon a common political battleground where they will neutralize one another.

It has seemed to me worth while to present evidence for the first point at considerable length because there appears to be a still widely prevalent belief among Americans that the Founding Fathers were animated by a "faith in the people," a confidence in the wisdom of "the common man." This belief, to use the terminology of the logic books, is a grandiose example of the fallacy of division. For Madison, as we have seen—and in this he probably did not differ from the majority of his colleagues in the Convention—had no "faith in the people" as individuals acting in their political capacity. It
is true that he recognized certain political rights of individual citizens—primarily the right to vote (with the large exceptions, inter alia, of women and Negroes) and to seek public office. It is also true that he sincerely believed, as apparently did many of his colleagues, that they themselves were distinterestedly constructing a scheme of government which would make for the good of the people as a whole and in the long run. But “the people” as voters, the total electorate, was made up wholly of “factions,” i.e., of individuals combined into rival political groups or parties; and a faction always strives to accomplish ends “adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.” “Faith in the people” is plainly and vigorously repudiated in Federalist No. X. But what Madison did have faith in was the efficacy, and probable adequacy, of the method of counterpoise as a corrective of the evils otherwise inevitably resulting from “government on the popular model,” a “republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government.”

One fundamental thesis in this lecture, the learned reader will note, precisely contradicts a historical generalization set

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16 This assumption of the disinterestedness of the makers of a Constitution—their exemption from the motivations controlling the political behavior of the rest of mankind—was psychologically almost indispensable in the Convention; certainly, few were likely to admit frankly that their own arguments were simply expressions of the “spirit of faction.” But that they usually were so in fact is, I take it, now recognized by all competent historians; there are, indeed, few better examples of Madison’s thesis—the shaping of political opinions by private, class, or sectional interests—than are to be found in the debates of the Convention.
forth in a celebrated, learned and brilliantly written book by a recent American historian. Carl Becker's *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* offers an enumeration of "four essential articles of the religion of the Enlightenment"; two of these articles are: "(1) Man is not natively depraved; . . . (3) Man is capable, guided solely by the light of reason and experience, of perfecting the good life on earth. . . . The Philosophers . . . knew instinctively that 'man in general' is natively good, easily enlightened, disposed to follow reason and common sense, generous and humane and tolerant, easily led by persuasion more than compelled by force; above all, a good citizen and a man of virtue." That there were some writers in the eighteenth century who would have subscribed to these articles, and that a tendency to affirm them was increasing, especially in France in the later decades of the century, is true. That the conception of the character and dominant motives of "man in general" formulated by Becker in the sentences quoted was held by most, or even by the most typical and influential, "eighteenth-century philosophers" is not true; it is a radical historical error. To assume its truth is to fail to see the most striking feature of the most widely prevalent opinion about human nature current in the period and to misapprehend the nature of the peculiar problem with which the "enlightened" and innovating political and social theorists and statesmen of that age were dealing. The question here, of course, like all historical questions, is one to be settled chiefly by documentary evidence; and it is partly for that reason that I have cited the *ipsissima verba* of the designers of our own Constitution. To these let us now return.
It is not solely in his argument on the division of powers between the national and state government, in the tenth Federalist paper, that Madison rests his case upon the two propositions of which I have been speaking. In his defense of all the major provisions of the Constitution concerning the internal structure of the national government itself—its division into three departments (legislative, executive, and judicial), the division of the legislature into two houses, the whole scheme of "checks and balances"—the same two premises are fundamental and decisive. When Madison undertakes to justify the separation of the Federal government into three mutually independent departments, his distrust of human nature and his conception of the way to offset its defects in planning a system of government are even more sharply expressed than in No. X. I hope those who are familiar with the text of The Federalist will forgive me for quoting from it at some length, for the benefit of those to whom it is not familiar:

The great security against a gradual concentration of the several powers in the same department, consists in giving to those who administer each department the necessary means, and personal motives, to resist the encroachments of the others. The provision for defence must in this case, as in all others, be made commensurate to the danger of attack. Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interests of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?
... The policy of supplying, by opposite and rival interests, the defects of better motives might be traced through the whole system of human affairs, private as well as public. We see it particularly displayed in all the subordinate distribution of power; where the constant aim is ... that the private interest of every individual may be sentinel over the public interest.\footnote{The Federalist, No. LI; italics mine. Long attributed to Hamilton, this paper is now known to have been written by Madison; cf. Brant, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 184 and 486, n. 12. It should be mentioned that in a single sentence in this essay Madison writes: “A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions.” But this seems no more than a prudent recognition of the fact that the general mass of voters possesses ultimate political power; and what Madison thought of “the people,” in this sense, we have already seen. His chief concern was to prove the indispensability of the “auxiliary precautions.” For the full presentation of the evidence that No.}

And this policy, Madison declares, is completely exemplified in the Constitution, which was then awaiting ratification.

In the Federal Republic of the United States, whilst all authority in it will be derived from, and dependent on the society, the society itself will be broken into so many parts, interests, and classes of citizens, that the rights of individuals, or of the minority, will be in little danger from interested combinations of the majority. In a free government, the security for civil rights must be the same as that for religious rights. It consists in the one case in the multiplicity of interests, and in the other in the multiplicity of sects. The degree of security in both cases will depend on the number of interests and sects; and this
may be presumed to depend on the extent of country and
the number of people comprehended under the same
government.18

In short, the bigger the country ("provided it lies within a
practicable sphere"), the greater the assurance that "a coaliti-
on of the majority of the whole society could seldom take
place upon any other principles than those of justice and the
general good." It must be remembered that, in Madison's
opinion, no coalition based upon these principles is likely
except, perhaps, in times of grave national danger. Under
such circumstances, there may be virtually universal agree-
ment as to the measures necessary to avert the danger. But
under normal conditions, the people will always be divided
into factions, and it is essential that no faction—in other
words, no fraction of the people—shall ever obtain a ma-
jority in the legislature. This, however, can easily be pre-
vented by means of the counterposition of the factions to
one another.

Madison's thesis here, then, may be summed up thus:
The whole people has the sole right to rule, but no mere ma-
jority, however large, has that right. This seems a political
paradox; but as actually applied—primarily, in the situa-
tion confronting the Convention itself—it resulted in the
adoption of a series of compromises with which no faction

1 I, II, and the two preceding and seven following Federalist
papers were composed by Madison, see Edward G. Bourne's
study, "The Authorship of the Federalist," in his Essays in
Historical Criticism, 1901.

18 Ibid.
was wholly satisfied, but which all, after much wrangling, were willing to accept, *faute de mieux*. Being under the practical necessity of arriving at *some* agreement, they reached a reluctant unanimity (barring a few irreconcilable individuals) made necessary by the approximate counterbalancing of the conflicting groups and interests represented. And when embodied in the Constitution, these compromises for a time—though with steadily increasing tensions—*worked*; they held the Union together for more than seventy years. In this sense, and to this extent, Madison's theoretical principles may be said to have been pragmatically vindicated.

Lest it be supposed that faith in the method of counterpoise was peculiar to Madison among the members of the Convention, let me cite one more example from a member very different in temperament and character and in many of his opinions on specific issues. In the discussion of the powers of the "second branch" of the Federal legislature—i.e., the Senate—Gouverneur Morris delivered a characteristic speech in which he declared that the essential function of such a second chamber is "to check the precipitation, changeableness and excesses of the first branch." But "what qualities are necessary to constitute a check in this case? . . . The checking branch must have a personal interest in checking the other branch. One interest must be opposed to another interest. Vices as they exist must be turned against each other." Morris regarded the Senate—whose members, he thought, should hold office for life—as representing the interest of the propertied class. Doubtless, "the rich will strive to establish their dominion and to en-
slave the rest. They always did; they always will. The proper security against them is to form them into a separate interest. The two forces will then control each other. By thus combining and setting apart the aristocratic interest, the popular interest will be combined against it. There will be a mutual check and a mutual security." As the body representative of those who have "great personal property," the Senate will "love to lord it through pride. Pride is indeed, the great principle that actuates the poor and the rich. It is this principle which in the former resists, in the latter abuses, authority." 19

But though Morris here voiced the same opinion of human motives that we have seen expressed by Madison and also, in order to offset the absence of "better motives," relied upon the counterbalancing of bad ones, he was in fact employing partially identical premises to support a different conclusion. For Madison, when writing in *The Federalist*, assumed that there would always be a "multiplicity" of such special interests and that the numerical ratios of the groups severally supporting them, or of their representatives in Congress, would be such that no coalition of them could ever obtain a majority. 20 But Morris—at least when

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19 Elliot's *Debates on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, V (1870), pp. 270 f.

20 Why Madison made this assumption may seem at first hard to understand; he writes as if he, like Pope, accepted as evident beyond the need of proof the assumption that "jarring interests" will "of themselves create th' according music of the well-mix'd State"—though Madison adds, in substance, that they will not be well-mixed unless the mixture comprises *all* of them, in an "extensive republic." As a generalization the assumption was
making this speech—recognized only two permanently opposed forces in politics, the rich and the poor. And he cannot, of course, have supposed that these two would usually, or, indeed, ever, numerically counterbalance one another. They must therefore be made equal in legislative power—or, more precisely, in legislative impotence—by a specific constitutional provision; one of the Houses of Congress must be reserved for men having great wealth and the "aristocratic spirit," an American analogue of the House of Lords. True, Morris grants—human nature being what it is—such a body will always be inimical to the interests of "the rest," the nonpropertied classes. It is therefore necessary to have another chamber representative of the latter, to hold in check the former. But it is not in this latter consideration that Morris seems chiefly interested. What he wished to ensure was the protection of the vested interests of large property-holders. And he saw that the method of counterpoise, especially in the form which he proposed, was certainly not self-evident, nor particularly probable. But in fact Madison had specific reasons for the assumption, which he set forth in his speech in the Convention on June 28, 1787. He was then arguing (unsuccessfully, as it turned out) in favor of giving to the larger states more Senators than to the small states. To the objection that this would enable the larger states to combine to dominate the smaller ones, he replied that this could happen only if the larger states had common "interests," which they did not have. The three largest were Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. These were remote from one another; they differed in "customs, manners, and religion"; and, still more important, their trade interests were entirely "diverse." "Where," then, "is the probability of a combination? What the inducements?" Thus, it will be seen, Madison was here asserting an actual
perfectly adapted to the accomplishment of this end. For
the effect of that method, when applied to a legislative body,
would be—as Madison’s arguments said—to prevent any
one of the opposing factions from ever accomplishing its
purpose. A Senate that was representative exclusively of one
economic class would never concur in any measure affect­
ing class interests passed by a House that was representa­
tive of other classes. And it followed that “the poor” could
never get a law passed which would be unfavorable to the
economic interests of “the rich.” 21

Thus the method of counterpoise could, without relin­
quishment of its two essential premises, be proposed as a
means to the realization of quite different designs with
respect to the distribution of legislative power. But, what­
ever the purpose for which it might be advocated, it ob­
viously could have only negative effects. It was simply a way
of preventing new proposals from being adopted. If it ever
became completely effective (which, of course, it never

existing counterpoise of political forces in the Federal Union:
where there is no identity of economic and other interests, there
can be no “coalition,” and therefore no majority in Congress for
any one group. But since the proposal of unequal state repre­
sentation in the Senate failed to carry, he turned, in the Federal­
ist, to another and less specific argument: be the states equally
or unequally represented in the “second chamber,” there would
in any case be a natural counterbalancing of voting strength
among such a “multiplicity” of sections and economic interests
and religious sects. And though Madison now gave no definite
or cogent reasons for believing this to be true, it was true, sub­
ject to the qualifications above noted.

21 Madison, in spite of his usual argument based upon the
existing multiplicity of interests and factions, recognized, like
quite did), it could result only in a deadlock, an equilibrium of forces in which no movement in any direction would be possible. It therefore tended to crystallize the status quo and was naturally favored by those who wished to keep the existing political and economic order unchanged—or as little changed as possible. It was a device of conservatives to block innovations. Yet it could hardly be openly argued for upon traditionally conservative grounds—e.g., upon the assumption that change is in itself a bad thing or that the "aristocratic" and propertied class is wiser than, and morally superior to, the "lower classes." For it rested, as we have seen, upon the generalization that (certainly in politics) the aims and motives of virtually all individuals, and therefore of all "factions," are equally irrational and "interested," equally indifferent to the "general good"; and it was only upon this assumption that the scheme of equipoise, of rendering all factions equally impotent, could be consistently defended.

But this generalization, though indispensable to the argument, had some awkward consequences. It implied that, in political discussion and agitation, appeals to purely ethical

Morris, that the most serious conflict within the Union was that between only two factions; but for him, this was not a conflict between "the rich" and "the poor," but between two major sections of the country. In a memorably prophetic speech on June 29th he warned the Convention that "the great danger to our general government is, the great southern and nothern interests being opposed to each other. Look to the votes in Congress [i.e., of the Confederation], and most of them stand divided by the geography of the country, not according to the size of the States." This supreme danger he hoped and believed could be
standards and rational and disinterested ideals would be inappropriate and useless, since, by hypothesis, no such appeal could really influence the opinions and actions of the voters or legislators. But in practice such moral, or ostensibly moral, appeals were not entirely ineffective; and, once organized political parties were actually operating, their orators seldom, if ever, admitted that the policies they advocated were adverse “to the rights of others and the good of the whole”; on the contrary, they usually represented these policies as consistent with, or even required by, the highest moral principles, and they doubtless often believed this to be true. And though this usually was—and still is—simply “rationalization,” even a rationalization is an admission that rational considerations, valid by criteria which are more than biases arising from private interests or from unexamined and unverifiable preconceptions, are relevant to the issue under discussion. However small the part which such considerations really play in the determination of individual opinions and individual behavior, as soon as you admit their relevance, and profess to justify your own contentions by them, you have accepted a change of venue to another and admittedly a higher court, in which the controversy must be fought out under the rules of that court, that is, rules of logical consistency and verifiable averted by means of a balance of power in Congress between the two sections. So long as, by various compromises, that balance seemed to remain approximately undisturbed, Madison’s hope was realized. As soon as the balance was patently overthrown, the danger which he pointed out became a tragic reality.
empirical evidence. In so far as those who invoked the method of counterpoise implicitly denied even the possibility of such a change of venue, they ignored a real aspect of the workings of human nature in politics. But in saying this I am far from intending to imply that their assumptions about men's usual motivations, in their political opinions and actions, were false, or even that they were not the more pertinent and useful assumptions to apply to the immediate practical problems which confronted the Constitution-makers in 1787.

In these comments on the latent implications, the degree of validity, and the practical effect of the theory of counterpoise which so powerfully influenced the framing of the American Constitution, I have deviated from the primarily historical purpose of the present lecture. That purpose was not to evaluate but to illustrate the wide prevalence, even in the later eighteenth century, of a highly unfavorable appraisal of the motives generally controlling men's political (and other) behavior, and to explain in part the seemingly paradoxical fact that, in the very same period, the American republic was founded, largely by men who accepted that appraisal. This purpose has, I hope, now been sufficiently accomplished.

But there was, as I have already said, another idea, or complex of interrelated ideas, about the springs of action in men, which throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was even more widely prevalent than the conceptions underlying the method of counterpoise; and it had a broader scope, and could lead in part to different conclusions. Both, it is true, were in agreement on one funda-
mental premise already familiar to us: the assumption that man's "reason" has, at most, a secondary and a very small influence upon his conduct and that irrational or nonrational feelings and desires are the real efficient causes of all, or nearly all, of men's actions. And there followed from this assumption the practical corollary that one who wishes to control men's "outward conduct"—i.e., by means of a system of government—must do so by employing these nonrational forces, must (as Pope had said) "build on wants, and on defects of mind" the social and political structure which he seeks to realize.

Inasmuch as this general assumption underlay both the theory already expounded—that embodying the principle of counterpoise—and what as yet I can only refer to (since it has not yet been expounded) as the second theory, they may be considered species of the same genus. And, having thus one fundamental presupposition in common, they have often been lumped together as identical—by Pope, among others. But they were actually, in other respects, extremely dissimilar. Whereas the scheme of counterpoise, in order to offset the irrational and mutually antagonistic motivations of individuals, relied upon an essentially external, political, and quasi-mechanical device, the second theory found in the individual—in all individuals—a certain peculiarly potent type of motivation which, though admittedly a mode of self-love and certainly not "rational," was not necessarily mutually antagonistic or "adverse to the common good," but, on the contrary (as many writers maintained, though others denied), consisted of subjective forces which give rise to socially desirable "outward con-
duct," apart from any external controls. Since I have not yet explained what the second theory is or given historical examples of it, this indication of the specific difference (within a generic identity) between it and the theory previously outlined will probably sound rather obscure; nevertheless, the general nature of that difference should, I think, be made explicit at this point, before we go on to the exposition and illustration of the second theory. That theory offers (I think) a more penetrating insight into human nature than any which we have thus far considered. But the seventeenth and eighteenth-century expressions of it were involved in some serious terminological confusions, and they also often failed to bring out its most significant implications. In order that we may understand these confusions and these implications better, I shall, in the next lecture, jump over those centuries and, abandoning temporarily the role of historian, attempt some reflections on certain features of human nature from the point of view—or a point of view—of our own time.