"The Constitution of the People"

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Published by University Press of Kansas

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The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution affirm the vision of *e pluribus unum*. While promising "a more perfect union," they also committed the United States to the essentials of liberal politics: limited government, individual rights, and (eventually) political equality. One influential interpretation holds that Americans have been liberal to a fault. We have avoided political and social fragmentation only by adopting a deep and abiding cultural consensus, and this single liberal ideology has effectively precluded any meaningful disagreement over fundamental—that is, philosophical—issues. The price of our admittedly enviable political stability, therefore, has been an individualism masquerading as "diversity" and a stifling uniformity, indeed a "tyranny," of mass opinion, a caricature of genuine political unity.¹

This claim bears directly on the question of unity and diversity in American life. As I have argued elsewhere, it is partially, but quite seriously, mistaken.² American politics, I contend, has been *pervasively* liberal, but not *consensually* so. For at least a century and a half, it has been marked by a conflict between two very different liberal traditions over a range of essentially philosophical questions. On one side, a *humanist* liberalism has emphasized individuals as holders of preferences that must in principle be respected equally.

This essay benefited from the criticism and comments of Chris Ansell, Robert Calvert, Louisa Bertch Green, Carla Hess, John Schlotterbeck, and Vickie Sullivan.
and ought in practice to be satisfied as equitably as possible. On the other side, to adopt the terminology of Franklin Gamwell, a reformed, originally neo-Calvinist liberalism has emphasized individual faculties that ought actively to be cultivated, often in and through political action. The chief duty is to develop the abilities of oneself and one's fellow citizens. There are profound implications for our politics and political culture in the conflict between these two liberalisms, it seems to me, that the standard theory of liberalism either ignores or misunderstands.

When we view American liberalism as bipolar, we see that our unity is not simple but complex, marked as it is by agreement on some beliefs and divergence on others. Accordingly, I believe this bipolarity is as much a source of cultural diversity as are differences based on religion, race, ethnicity, or gender. Precisely because this diversity derives from so fundamental a tension in our basic political culture, it conditions the ways we deal with other cultural differences in our politics. I want to suggest, finally, that the tension between our two liberalisms, and our sometimes fitful attempts to embrace both, engenders a deep ambivalence both about our personal responsibilities as citizens and about our ethical responsibilities as members of the American community.

To provide a foundation for this claim, I shall examine the thought and politics of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, the two great revolutionary figures on diplomatic service in 1787 who assumed leading roles under the newly ratified Constitution. As I shall try to show, for all Jefferson's egalitarian fervor, his humanist liberalism readily supported the protective attitude toward slavery that he eventually adopted. In contrast, however conservative his own inclinations, Adams's reformed liberalism readily supported his own and, much more, his family's antislavery inclinations.

Before developing this account in detail, a word is in order about procedures and assumptions. First, while noting both their many common convictions and their political disagreements, I mainly want to connect Adams's and Jefferson's specifically philosophic differences to the slavery issue that would engulf their successors. Second, I want to examine the consequences of this connection for the outlooks of their followers, in order to illuminate central features of American political thought and culture. I advance no claim here that their philosophic orientations had a direct or singularly determining influence on the political cleavages of later decades, or for that matter even of their own. At best, Jefferson's humanist liberal-
ism made it easier for most, but not all, of his northern followers to seek an accommodation with the slave states. So too, Adams's reformed liberalism made it easier for many, though not all, of those who shared his ethical commitments to give increasing support to the antislavery cause.

Instead, I shall treat these beliefs not as causes but as dispositions, that is, combinations of concepts and attitudes that encourage certain types of reactions to particular events but discourage others. Such a triggering or genuinely causal event might be an important economic or social change, for example, slavery's growing importance in the southern economy. Given this change, the presence of opposed dispositions helps account for the ensuing heightened conflict. Specifically, I shall argue that the two liberalisms of Jefferson and Adams permitted and even encouraged just such conflicting responses to slavery's changing status. In that sense their debates show Jefferson and Adams to be revealing rather than representative or fundamentally innovative intellectual figures. Though not great philosophers, they nevertheless went beyond their conventional countrymen in delineating the conceptual and normative resources available in their humanist and reformed liberalisms. Thus they illuminated the ground on which the battle over slavery would be fought in the next generation, as well as later cleavages in American politics.

ADAMS, JEFFERSON, AND THE SLAVERY ANOMALY

"I have thus stated my opinion on a point on which we differ," Thomas Jefferson wrote John Adams in 1813, "not with a view to controversy, for we are both too old to change opinions which are the result of a long life of inquiry and reflection; but on the suggestion of a former letter of yours, that we ought not to die before we have explained ourselves to each other." Explain themselves to each other they did, in what is surely the richest and most memorable correspondence in our political history; but while the old passions of the 1790s and 1800s had subsided, their renewed friendship did not mean the end of disagreement between them. On the contrary, their correspondence in their reflective retirement years reveals a range and depth of philosophical differences heavy with meaning for their views on slavery—and for American liberalism. To make this clear, we must recall their old controversies.
During their political conflicts of the 1790s, Jefferson celebrated liberty and equality and, as an ardent believer in progress, scorned the dead hand of the past. A tribune for all those who insisted on political democracy, a champion of the common man, he welcomed the French Revolution as a herald of the new age. Preaching this new creed, he led the revolution of 1800, becoming, after his presidency, a symbol of liberty. By contrast, his predecessor, Adams, insisted on the conservative values of hierarchy and self-discipline, respect for authority, reverence for his ancestors, and institutional constraints on popular passions. He recoiled in horror from the Revolution in France and became a leading Federalist. Encumbered by his elitist and therefore “irrelevant” version of republicanism, however, and embittered by his defeat in 1800, he left the White House for a relatively obscure retirement. His party would never win another national election. “Adams was a voice from the past,” writes Merrill Peterson, “while Jefferson continued to voice the aspirations ... of American democracy.” Peterson’s judgment is accurate enough on most issues, though it overlooks the important areas of agreement suggested by their collaboration during the 1770s and 1780s. In the case of slavery, however, his claim is simply mistaken. It was Jefferson who clung to the past and Adams who showed the way to the future.

Toward the end of his life, the ordinarily optimistic Jefferson became apprehensive about the drift of American politics, in particular the North’s growing opposition to chattel slavery. Although he was a strong opponent of slavery early in his career, in later years his public opposition ceased. As president, he refused to discuss slavery at all, and by 1820, agitated by the Missouri controversy, he called for slavery’s spread throughout the Louisiana Purchase. Northern opposition to admitting Missouri as a slave state, Jefferson thought, would promote sectional rancor without helping the slaves. In effect, he believed that Americans could find happiness in areas with slavery as well as in those without it.

Adams shared some of Jefferson’s caution. As a political conservative concerned about governmental authority and control, he worried about all demands for universal emancipation, and he feared that suddenly freeing the angry slaves would endanger the whites. Even his disagreements in the 1770s with his wife, Abigail, on such subjects as slavery and the position of women reveal a more fundamental agreement that the despotic dominion by one human being over another is intolerable. By 1829 the same development of the slavery controversy that troubled Jefferson left the usually conserva-
tive Adams relatively unperturbed. In his retirement, primarily in his private correspondence (to others than Jefferson), he moved toward his wife's view of slavery. Some of his reasons were prudential, having to do with the effects of slavery on others besides slaves; hence his concern for white workers and distrust of the "aristocratic" slave owners. For such reasons, reversing Jefferson's view of sectional issues, he opposed permitting slavery in Missouri. The prudential shaded into the ethical, however, and a concern for the harm slavery did to white workers was joined by a concern for the slaves themselves: "If the gangrene is not stopped—I can see nothing but Insurrection... till at last the Whites will be exasperated to Madness... [and] shall be wicked enough to exterminate the negroes." Thus the Missourians ought to be moved by "feelings of humanity" in deciding "to exclude slavery sternly from their state." For all Adams's concern for white workers, this appeal anticipated later antislavery arguments that were embraced by his son John Quincy and his grandson Charles Francis and would help lead the antislavery struggle.

Here, then, is the slavery anomaly: A deeply conservative side to Jefferson's genuine egalitarianism was matched in 1820 by a potentially radical, prophetic side to Adams's equally genuine suspicions about popular passion. Heavily qualified as their positions on slavery were, the egalitarian Jefferson had become increasingly protective of the institution, and the conservative Adams came to see it as both morally evil and politically dangerous.

This anomaly, however, was not an aberration in which Adams and Jefferson somehow violated all their most important principles. Nor did it simply reflect differences between them, either in personal or regional interests or in racial attitudes. It is true enough that their racial attitudes and economic and political interests were so pronounced that we are tempted to think these explain the positions on slavery they came to adopt. Adams, for example, had little that was disparaging to say about blacks. On the other hand, even the younger Jefferson who openly opposed slavery had asserted in his *Notes on Virginia* that blacks were inferior to whites, and his draft of the Declaration had treated blacks and whites, as well as Americans and the British, as different peoples. Then, too, many of Jefferson's northern followers were racially prejudiced. It might also be argued that their eventual shift on slavery was but the inevitable recognition of where their economic and political interests really lay. Jefferson derived his income, after all, from his extensive plantations that relied on slave labor, and his political career ultimately de-
pended on backing from other southern whites. More broadly, the introduction of the cotton gin confounded the Founders’ hopes about slavery’s demise by making slave labor an increasingly central feature of the southern economy. In these circumstances, it became steadily more difficult for Jefferson, or any other southern leader, to oppose the institution. By contrast, this argument runs, Adams could so freely invoke the “feelings of humanity” in the Missouri crisis because neither he nor a significant number of his followers had any economic stake in slavery. On the contrary, slavery was also moving toward the center of sectional tensions over such issues as tariffs and internal improvements, and such issues inevitably affected the climate in which Adams and his fellow Yankees thought and talked about slavery.

Nevertheless, the movement in their positions on slavery cannot be seen as merely an expression of their changing interests, comfortable as that explanation may seem. For one thing, neither Jefferson nor Adams, although each man had changed his position on slavery by 1820, seemed to think he had disrupted his intellectual universe. In fact neither man had. It is indeed precisely that intellectual universe, along with triggering economic and social causes, that accounts for, or at any rate allowed for, the evolution of their views on the peculiar institution.

Counterintuitive as it may seem, my claim is that these positions on slavery exemplify the basic polarity of the humanist and reformed sides of the American liberal tradition. Each man’s shift on slavery was firmly rooted in his most fundamental beliefs, in those categories and commitments—political, social, and overtly philosophic—that shaped his view of politics and all human life.

In coming to terms with slavery in their own ways, the “radical” Virginian focused on the concrete and worldly interests and concerns of particular human beings; the “conservative” Yankee, on the other hand, insisted on the central importance of a divinely given and therefore transcendent moral law. This basic opposition, in turn, involved two further sets of questions of a distinctly ethical and philosophic nature:

1. How important is it as a principle of politics to balance the competing claims, rights, and preferences of different human beings, as opposed simply to doing one’s (individual) moral duty? In addressing this question, the two men addressed the issues of happiness, moral obligation, and human freedom.
2. How important ethically are the observable facts of a given situation; in particular, what deference should one accord the existing social practices and institutions of a free society? Here the two men considered both the character of human rationality in determining social action and the philosophic issues of epistemology and ontology.

In exploring these issues we shall begin with Jefferson.

JEFFERSON'S HUMANIST LIBERALISM

Jefferson's humanist liberalism was firmly grounded in a sensationalist and materialist philosophy, a "creed of materialism," as Jefferson himself put it, "supported" by John Locke. Amending Descartes, he wrote Adams that "'I feel: therefore I exist.' . . . When once we quit the basis of sensation, all is in the wind." He thus rejected "all organs of information . . . but my senses." The reality thus known was thoroughly material. "I feel bodies which are not myself: there are other existences then. I call them matter. . . . Where there is an absence of matter, I call it void, or nothing, immaterial space. On the basis of sensation, of matter and motion, we may erect . . . all [our] . . . certainties." On this philosophical basis, indeed, he erected his ethics.

Well-regulated personal pleasures and a tranquil private happiness were among Jefferson's preoccupations. He commended the French for excelling Americans in "the pleasures of the table," and savored these delights himself. He disliked pain in himself or others. "For what good end," he asked Adams, could "the sensations of Grief . . . be intended? All our other passions, within proper bounds, have an useful object . . . [but] what is the use of grief?" Jefferson coupled this concern with a charitable presumption about every individual's motives, including his own. In Miller's words, he believed "in original goodness, not original sin; if man had fallen from grace it was [only] . . . because he had submitted his own free will to the oppressive rule of kings, priests, and nobles." In his view, when "our duties and interests . . . seem to be at variance, we ought to suspect some fallacy in our reasonings." He was "an Epicurean," Peterson adds, "though of sober mien, to whom emotional torment and self-flagellation were alien." "Never [a diarist] . . . [he] kept records of everything . . . except the state of his soul."

Nor was this concern exclusively self-regarding. Jefferson followed the Scottish Enlightenment in holding that pleasure came
from helping others as well as from satisfying oneself. "Self-love," Jefferson wrote, "is the sole antagonist of virtue," and he assailed Hobbes's egoism. As he wrote Abigail Adams, "I am never happier than when I am performing good offices for good people..." This regard for others included a relativistic utilitarianism. "Nature," he remarked "has constituted utility to man, [as] the standard and test of virtue. Men living... under different circumstances... may have different utilities; the same act, therefore, may be useful, and consequently virtuous in one country—[even though it] is injurious and vicious in another differently circumstanced."

But what if people in the same society have conflicting goals? Like Locke, Jefferson thought in terms of rights. As a good humanist, he thought there was little if any room for an obligation to obey God or some transcendent moral law. Instead, individuals had the right to define their own happiness and then pursue it. Because every individual's rights must be weighted equally, no person or group deserved special consideration. Accordingly, he was deeply ambivalent about demands for his continued public service. As he wrote to his protege James Monroe, "If we are made in some degree for others, yet, in a greater, we are made for ourselves... [A situation in which] a man had less rights in himself than... his neighbors [have in directing his activities]... would be slavery." Thus the controlling principle was one of balance—here the balance between Jefferson's own right to happiness, as he defined it for himself, and the claims of his fellow citizens.

Jefferson had a parallel understanding of human freedom. If individuals define happiness for themselves, then they should be as free and unobstructed as possible in pursuing their self-determined goals. As Cooke remarks, Jefferson's position "was... very much in the tradition of what... Berlin has called 'negative freedom,'" or exemption from the coercion of others. This stand, in turn, reinforced Jefferson's fundamental commitment to fairness in weighing competing moral claims. If freedom means unobstructed action, and if individuals and groups have conflicting goals, an equitable arrangement will probably subject everyone to some restraint. In his own words, freedom is rightful only "within the limits drawn around us by the equal rights of others."

This commitment to establishing an ethical balance also supported Jefferson's emphasis on the moral relevance of the factual, of the observable realities of the world around him. The crucial connection here is between the idea of negative freedom and an instrumental view of rationality. Individuals have the right to choose their
own goals without asking permission of others. Others can observe such choices, but there is no reasonable basis on which to criticize them. Thus an individual's action is rational to the extent that it is an effective way to secure whatever goal the actor happens to have. This point illuminates Jefferson's noted enthusiasm for collecting facts. Assuming that an individual's chosen goal will not unduly interfere with the rights of others, the only questions that can be asked legitimately by outsiders are empirical rather than evaluative: Are the actions that an individual undertakes the most effective available? Jefferson himself devoted considerable attention to this question of practical efficacy. It shaped his view of education, of travel, and the way he ran his plantation. "The study of the law," he wrote a nephew, "qualifies a man to be useful to himself, to his neighbors, and to the public." Fortunately, it is also "the most certain stepping-stone to [political] preference."

This orientation is broadly consistent with Jefferson's humanism. One of the Enlightenment's deepest impulses was its revolt against everything supernatural and mysterious in medieval and feudal culture in favor of the natural, the human, the commonplace—and the observable.

JEFFERSON'S PARADOXICAL DISPOSITIONS

No claim can be sustained that Jefferson's humanist liberalism directly caused his proslavery shift. Methodologically, the difficulty is that stable beliefs cannot cause changes in attitude or behavior. Substantively, the problem is that slavery violated Jefferson's general liberal commitment to political freedom and equality, as well as his more specific beliefs in altruism and egalitarianism. So too, his humanist celebration of the solid, observable, and therefore familiar would seem to run against the unwarranted pretensions of any social elite. French aristocrats or southern slave holders might wear expensive clothes and have refined tastes, but for a materialist like Jefferson, all human beings clearly belonged to one biological species—and by virtue of that fact, they enjoyed the same natural rights. These beliefs supported his attack on the French Old Regime and on Hamilton's social and economic vision; the latter not only because it favored those who were already rich but also because it seemed likely to produce new, governmentally created social and economic inequalities.

From this perspective, the youthful Jefferson's opposition to slav-
ery would seem to be a matter of course. In any event, many of the European philosophes whom Jefferson admired joined a society called Amis des Noirs precisely because they moved from their humanist premises to antislavery conclusions. Thus Jefferson's humanism would seem to constitute an ethical disposition to support human equality and oppose human slavery.

Just how, then, did this humanist liberalism dispose either Jefferson himself or his northern followers to protect slavery? As he wrote in the Declaration, these beliefs included, first, human equality at least with respect to basic political rights; second, the ordering of these rights in terms of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; third, instituting government with the consent of the governed. How could those beliefs ever condone slavery? Again, tolerance was a centerpiece of Jefferson's political creed: He detested every governmentally sponsored religious or cultural orthodoxy. How, then, could tolerance come to apply to chattel slavery?

Jefferson offers a clue in his draft of the Declaration. There he berated the English king, not just for imposing slavery on the colonists but for then threatening white lives by trying to incite the slaves to revolt. Evil though slavery was in the abstract, the issue became much more complex once the institution was in place—and presumably enjoyed substantial popular support. This stand can be connected to the Declaration's more fundamental principles. Leaving aside for the moment any possible conflict between the rights of the two races, there is also a tension between the very ideas of individual rights and consenting to the governance of a body of citizens.

For Jefferson, the doctrine of consent, supplemented by his devotion to maximizing human unity, had two important consequences. First, a regime based on consent was intrinsically worthy of support. Second, the regime could only fulfill its obligations through an inherently political process, one that was devoted to helping all its citizens pursue their own self-defined happiness. Accordingly, each decision had to satisfy as many citizens as possible, and the process had to preserve the regime itself so that it could continue to meet its obligations. One could not simply say, as in a Lockean state of nature, that the rights of every individual must be respected. On occasion, citizens might have to sacrifice their own claims either to preserve the regime itself or to help it fulfill its obligations. In this way, Jefferson's doctrine of consent inspired both loyalty to liberal political regimes and support for the process of compromise and accommodation—that is, balancing conflicting claims—characteristic of genuinely democratic politics.
This spirit marked not only the celebrated compromises of the Constitutional Convention but also many key episodes of Jefferson's political career: his reluctant agreement to the assumption of state debts in exchange for locating the new capital city on the Potomac; his middle position on the notorious Yazoo land frauds; his pragmatic decision to buy Louisiana, contrary to his own strict Constitutional principles; his eventual openness to manufacturing as a response to British threats; and above all, his skillful management of the Republican party. In every case, his pursuit of his own preferences was affected by both his assessment of the balance of political forces and the overriding need to preserve the new republic. When Jefferson would not compromise, as in his support for the Revolution and religious freedom and in his opposition to the Alien and Sedition Acts, the issue involved governmental threats to individual freedom. Otherwise, he was typically devoted to harmonizing interests through compromise and accommodation.

Further, as Jefferson pointed out to the defeated and anxious Federalists in his First Inaugural, "though the will of the majority must in all cases prevail, that will, to be rightful, must be reasonable." He then went on to assure them that "the minority possess their equal rights, which . . . to violate would be oppression." He suggested in that address that a genuinely free process of argument and debate would eventually lead to the right political decision. He also accepted the argument of Adam Smith and others that economic activity would be most generally beneficial if only the relevant markets were genuinely free. In each case, the right setting—a republican government or a free market—would produce good results. Here, it seems, was a presumption in favor of those social practices and institutions that had emerged and flourished in a liberal regime, and here, too, was a further warrant for accommodation. As a familiar maxim of democratic politics puts it, in order to get along, one has to go along with established institutions as well as influential politicians. This spirit of accommodation and free interchange would prove as relevant, later, to the interests of slavery as to the worried Federalists of 1801.

Two features of Jefferson's political outlook could be used to argue against a strong antislavery stand. First, with respect to consent and opinion, slavery was strongly supported by many whites in the South and at least tolerated by many others in the North. The idea of compromise suggested taking these views seriously. Second, with respect to social experience, slavery was an important social and economic
institution that had in fact flourished in America's liberal society. At the least, therefore, it had to be treated circumspectly. On both counts, then, there was a political disposition to protect the institution.

To this point, the paradox remains unresolved. Jefferson's humanist ethics seemed to dispose him in one way; his humanist politics seemed to dispose him in another. Early in his career, the balance between them had an antislavery tilt. The question, then, is what triggering conditions caused him to shift to a protective attitude—and why did these conditions have the effect they did? Several events come readily to mind. First, a series of slave revolts, most notably in Santo Domingo and then in the United States, heightened white fears for their safety and even survival. Second, the introduction of the cotton gin made slavery a much more important, and seemingly permanent, feature of southern life in particular and the American economy in general. Partially as a result, southern opinion (on which much of Jefferson's political influence depended) increasingly turned against any antislavery agitation. Finally, the great American experiment in republican government, to which Jefferson had devoted his whole career, seemed more and more secure, more and more successful. Thus, an attack on any of the regime's important political or social institutions, including slavery, seemed more problematic. Taken together, these developments reinforced just those elements in Jefferson's thought that argued for protecting slavery as an existing institution.

In its own terms, I believe this argument is convincing. One question remains: How could Jefferson make this move with so little sense that he was contradicting any of his basic beliefs? To answer that question, we must examine the specifically humanist way in which his creed understood such liberal tenets as freedom, rationality, and human well-being.

SLAVERY AND HUMANIST LIBERALISM

Point by point, Jefferson's basic humanist values reinforced his political disposition to protect slavery. To be sure, his commitment to negative freedom, to the norm of unobstructed action, would seem to favor the slaves' emancipation, since it would surely increase their liberty. But as we have seen, when the people have conflicting preferences, protecting or increasing the freedom of some necessarily limits that of others. As a practical matter, every viable liberal re-
gime will constrain everyone to some extent. In particular, abolition would just as surely limit the freedom—the unobstructed action—of those who favored slavery or owned slaves. True to his altruistic and charitable attitudes, toward himself as well as others, Jefferson never seems seriously to have reproached himself for owning slaves.

More generally, Jefferson's principles required him to recognize the fears of southern whites about the reprisals they would suffer if their slaves were ever freed. Here was a compelling interest to be balanced against the slaves' claims to freedom. As Jefferson himself put it, first in the Declaration and then forty-four years later, the blacks' right to freedom conflicted with the whites' ultimately more important right to life. Nor did he entirely ignore the white masters' property rights. As early as 1781, he could refer rather matter of factly to the southerners' "lands, slaves, and other property." Once again, it was necessary to weigh competing objectives.

At the same time, the relativistic side of Jefferson's utilitarianism sharply qualified the blanket condemnation of any institution. The key question was always the institution's effect in particular cases. As immoral as slavery might be in general, the institution had flourished in a free society, and its persistence could be persuasively justified in the South where racial conflict was a real threat. Specifically, Jefferson qualified his universalism with a certain particularism. If the two races were separate peoples, as Jefferson suggested in his draft of the Declaration, the two races had not contracted with each other to observe and mutually enforce their several natural rights. For that reason, those blacks who were freed might well be expected to be particularly vengeful. For even conscientious whites, then, the primary obligation was presumably to other members of their own political community.

Jefferson's empirical orientation, his philosophic sensationalism and materialism, and his respect for observable facts and the institutions of a free society proved comforting to southern whites in other ways. His humanist belief in progress, for example, meant that historical facts could determine values. Given the political freedom to pursue individually defined goals, social arrangements that survive and flourish can be presumed to be progressive and therefore valuable. As an integral part of American society, slavery could readily be seen to fit this description.

Again, Jefferson surely believed in human equality in the abstract, but his empiricist outlook made it difficult to treat this belief as a postulate from which one might begin to reason. Even if assertions about human equality might all be true, they still had to be
verified by sense perception and more specifically by an empirical inquiry, e.g., into the differences between the two races. Whatever the causes that kept the slaves from acquiring literacy or other valuable skills, the observable fact, as he saw it, was their intellectual inferiority to whites. Jefferson's empiricism, of course, did not require him to read the facts this way; he could have identified the blacks' problems as a consequence of their bondage. Given his self-interest, racial fears, and loyalty to his region, Jefferson's empiricism made it easier for him to reach his conclusion.

A similar account applies to Jefferson's materialism. In fact, his notorious discussion in the Notes on Virginia (Query 14) emphasizes those racial differences that were physical and therefore readily observable. What is more, this outlook encouraged the view that these observed patterns of racial difference and inequality would persist. If human beings are essentially material entities, their future development is likely to be consistent with their physical makeup, including the physiological and thus observable differences between the races.

None of these considerations refutes the claim that Jefferson was committed to the liberal values of freedom, equality, and individual rights. Jefferson's devotion to compromise and accommodation did not block his early opposition to slavery nor his general support for trying to help the common people on most economic issues. Problems arose only when political controversy touched on an institution that was deeply embedded in a society's fabric and was therefore entitled to respect from Jefferson's empiricist outlook. He voiced one version of this attitude when he suggested that the utility of an institution or practice would differ from one situation to another. He applied it in practice when he urged his French friends to take the existing situation into account and therefore to move cautiously in reforming the Old Regime. It was particularly relevant to his own society and polity. First, Jefferson was a good democrat who had a profound confidence in the good sense of the common people; his humanist philosophy helped extend that optimism to those institutions and practices that had developed in a free society. In other words, the fact that the American polity and society was liberal in general created a presumption in favor of any particular social institution that had flourished within its confines. In any case, Jefferson had less and less to say, over time, at least in public, on slavery's evil character. Second, slavery had deeply embedded itself in American life. Thus any attempt to uproot it would threaten the health, or indeed survival, of the liberal republic to which Jefferson had devoted
his life. Here, then, was the real importance of Jefferson's humanist liberalism. His most basic beliefs rationalized and legitimated a process by which his political disposition to protect slavery eventually overrode his ethical disposition to attack it.

**ADAMS'S REFORMED LIBERALISM**

Like Jefferson, Adams valued balance and political compromise. His theory of republicanism focused on the appropriate balance among both political institutions and social groups. At the end of his administration, he frustrated the belligerent Hamiltonians in his own cabinet by deciding to avoid a bitterly controversial war with France. Nevertheless, he was no humanist liberal.

As Peterson puts it, Adams "was a zealot, not about any particular creed, but about religion. It was in his blood and [it] had weighed on his mind all of his life." Without religion, he thought, there could be no philosophy, and he repeatedly praised his Puritan forebears for their morals, courage, intellectuality, and even their anti-Catholicism. He also embraced much of their traditional piety. For all his disagreements with orthodox Calvinists on many issues, he shared their belief in human inferiority and ignorance when compared to God's infinite and inscrutable majesty. There "never was but one being who can Understand the Universe," he wrote Jefferson in 1813. "And . . . it is not only vain but wicked for insects to pretend to comprehend it." Because "the World is . . . a Riddle and an Enigma," he thought humility was the only appropriate response. The human soul "ought to fill itself with a meek and humble anxiety." Here, to be sure, was an almost Kantian focus on the limits of the human mind, anticipating the Transcendentalism of the next generation.

However, Adams also insisted on the individual's responsibility to act in the light of transcendent moral standards, rather than be guided by Jefferson's sensationalist and materialist pursuit of a self-defined happiness. Indeed he *defined* that state, happiness, as had Aristotle, holding that it "consists in virtue," not in a subjective sense of well-being. He was therefore deeply suspicious of pleasure as a goal in human life, at one point proclaiming his own devotion to "business alone." As he wrote in his diary in 1756, "He is not a wise man . . . that has left one Passion in his Soul unsubdued." John Adams was no hedonist.

Adams could not accept Jefferson's view of human freedom. He
agreed, to be sure, on the importance of negative freedom, particularly the right of conscience, and on the need to restrict the negative liberty of some in order to protect that of others. “I have a right,” he wrote, “to resist him [who] shall take it into his head . . . that he has a right to take my property without my consent.” But liberty for Adams also had a positive side. One can undertake an activity only if one has the ability to perform it. Thus freedom from the “Passions,” he believed, meant freedom to cultivate one’s faculties, physical, intellectual, and moral. For his Puritan forebears the object was to secure the greater glory of God. For the more secular Adams, the object was to develop one’s talents and abilities to become more useful to oneself and others. In a sense, liberty defined and empowered the responsible human being and indeed enabled the citizen to do his duty. “Liberty, according to my metaphysics,” he wrote, “is an intellectual quality . . . it is a self-determining power in an intellectual agent. It implies thought and choice and power.” A central goal, then, was to foster general self-improvement, including the improvement of his and other people’s moral faculties.

The contrast with Jefferson is clear. Given his belief in negative liberty and tranquillity, the Virginian placed less emphasis on fundamental changes in individuals. Education and experience would help in pursuing one’s goals more effectively, but even without such assistance, all normal individuals could be trusted to identify their goals, i.e., to define happiness for themselves—and then act altruistically where appropriate. For Adams, however, positive liberty meant that completely free individuals would develop themselves by systematically cultivating their faculties.

As a result, he put relatively little emphasis on balancing competing claims. The true moral imperative was to make sure that individuals did their duty and obeyed an appropriate moral law. Public service offers an interesting case in point. Where Jefferson sometimes regarded it as a burden imposed on him by others for their benefit, Adams saw it as an opportunity for conscientious individuals to undertake self-improvement. The obligation of the rulers, he wrote John Taylor, is “to exert all their intellectual liberty to employ all their faculties, talents, and power for the public, general universal good . . . [and] not for their own separate good or the interest of any party.” Because public service offered this opportunity, the issue of balancing the public’s interest with that of the individual official became irrelevant.

This stand was broadly reinforced by Adams’s epistemology and ontology. In an 1816 letter, Adams dismissed Jefferson’s materialism
as inconsistent with human liberty, conscience, and morality.\textsuperscript{51} At other times, he resorted to skepticism. The "question of spirit and matter" he wrote Jefferson in 1820, was "nugatory because we have neither evidence nor idea of either."\textsuperscript{52} Nor could sensory experience resolve matters. Against Jefferson's sensationalism, he held that the "essences of body and mind" cannot be penetrated by "our senses or instruments." "Incision, knives and microscopes make no discoveries in this region."\textsuperscript{53} What is more, the mind also provided a knowledge independent of sensory experience.\textsuperscript{54} "Philosophy which is the result of Reason," he wrote Jefferson, "is the first, the original Revelation of the Creator to his Creature, Man."\textsuperscript{55} In effect, then, Adams rejected any effort such as Jefferson's to ground notions of human well-being in the sensory experience of the human animal. There was, instead, "a law of right reason common to God and man" that is essential for "all human reasoning on the moral government of the universe."\textsuperscript{56}

ADAMS'S COMPLEX DISPOSITIONS ON SLAVERY

Just as Jefferson's humanist liberalism sustained two seemingly opposed dispositions with regard to slavery, Adams's reformed outlook pointed in two quite different directions. His belief in social and individual development upheld many of his political stands against the Jeffersonians. Despite his reservations about banks, he loyally supported Hamilton's economic program because he believed in the government's obligation to promote individual and collective improvement. Here was the Federalists', and later the Whigs', commitment to government activism that the Jeffersonians assailed as conservative or paternalistic.

This stress on the cultivation of human faculties also implied that levels of development would almost certainly vary from one individual to another. For Adams, these personal differences posed a double threat to republican regimes that required a plainly conservative response. On one side, the able and ambitious might well use their abilities to dominate the government for their own benefit. On the other, the uneducated and undisciplined common people might succumb to demagoguery and become unruly mobs, as they did in the French Revolution and Shays's Rebellion. He prescribed the same familiar solution for both problems: a system of checks and balances in which each governmental institution represents a differ-
ent social stratum, with the people dominating the lower house of the legislature and the elite “ostracized,” as he put it, in the upper chamber. Although Adams angrily denied that his stand favored aristocratic government, it did rely on the well-educated and socially successful to control popular passions.

This generally conservative outlook did not ensure a protective stand on slavery. Other northern Federalists often charged their egalitarian opponents, including Jefferson, with quietly but hypocritically condoning slavery. For our purposes, the important point is that Adams's own doctrine of piety had a similar thrust. If every individual was vastly inferior to God, then all forms of human pride and selfishness were surely unwarranted. From that position it was but a short step to the conclusion, which Abigail had implied in her 1776 letter to him, that slavery is unGodly—impious—because it elevates some human beings to a position over others, an elevation that belonged to God alone. Also, Adams's devotion to a republican system of checks and balances was meant to prevent anyone, be it English rioters or French or American radicals, from exercising absolute power. Excessive power, and the pride that went with it, often tempted the powerful to act on desires that were contrary to their self-development or that of others. As Abigail argued in her letter of 1776, a concern of this sort could readily acquire an anti-slavery cast.

Adams's position on slavery thus exhibited a tension between development and restraint. On one side, he was deeply worried about restraining the passions of the untutored. On the other, if self-development was so important for the species, then the slaves ought to be allowed to cultivate their faculties—and they presumably could not do so if they were owned as chattel. Here, then, are two central questions: First, if there were both pro and antislavery elements in Adams's outlook, how can we say that his position, as a whole, was disposed against the institution? Second, given Adams's obvious conservatism, what triggering conditions brought that anti-slavery disposition into play—what changes in American society or culture actually produced an antislavery shift by Adams himself, and to a greater degree, the Adams family?

Knowing as we do the eventual antislavery drift of the Adams family, it is not hard to identify changes that resolved the tension in his outlook. Consider first the perception that the American republican experiment seemed increasingly secure because it was a proven success. Given that security, there was less need for restraint, because popular protests could be seen to pose a less serious threat to
the political order. Accordingly, there was more room to tolerate anti-slavery agitation and less need to worry about its consequences. At the same time, of course, the cotton gin had made slavery a much more important, and seemingly permanent, feature of the American economy. If slavery subjected one human being to the illicit domination of another, its growing importance could become a reason for opposing and not for protecting it: The individual slaves faced permanent subjection to their masters, and the number of slaves so dominated was likely to increase.

Although these two factors, taken together, may have helped shift the balance between development and restraint that produced Adams's ambivalence, by themselves they seem insufficient to have shaken Adams's deeply conservative outlook. As it happened, however, there was a third triggering condition that had a major impact on Adams's outlook, namely the emergence of a much less elitist and less deterministic current within New England's Calvinist tradition.

According to the orthodox Calvinist doctrines of predestination and original sin, most individuals were doomed to damnation by a divine decree. Only a few redeemed saints would help shape the world according to God's plan—and to better perform this task they would systematically develop their faculties. These beliefs made it feasible—though certainly not necessary—to defend slavery as a regrettable but useful restraint on willful sinners. Indeed, this stand paralleled one for which Adams had some sympathy: keeping the slaves under control of masters whose intellectual faculties were much better developed.

This orthodox argument for protecting slavery became increasingly difficult to assert once the elitist and deterministic doctrine of predestination was abandoned. According to the new view, all individuals were eligible for salvation and could achieve it by following the way of the saint through the exercise of their own free will. Following that path meant showing devotion to God by cultivating one's moral, intellectual and physical faculties in order the better to serve the divine cause, and it was just such a path that the slave masters prevented their chattel from following. In this regard, slavery egregiously violated the obligations that human beings owed their Creator, not just each other. Not surprisingly, the Second Great Awakening of the early 1800s, which powerfully advanced this new liberal creed, also spawned the abolitionist agitation of the 1830s.

The resemblance between Adams's own religion and the Awakening was only approximate. Where the Awakening was enthusiastic and trinitarian, Adams was a philosophically attuned Unitarian.
Where the Awakening stimulated the abolitionist movement, Adams's children and grandchildren became Whigs and Republicans. But if the Adams family did not experience a direct link between evangelical Christianity and abolition, their politics did undergo a somewhat parallel development. Specifically, Adams's son, John Quincy, responded much more than his father to the democratic currents that helped produce both the Jacksonian revolution in American politics and the Second Great Awakening in American Protestantism. Over time, the son therefore incorporated the ideas of political equality and unconstrained self-development into his political rhetoric. At one level, then, the liberal religious beliefs that the two men shared had more direct influence on the political views of the son than on the father's. But toward the end of his life, John Adams himself began to look to his son for political guidance.

In retrospect, at least, these changes do account for Adams's shift on slavery. Still, as with Jefferson we must ask how he accomplished his shift with no real sense of contradicting his basic values. To answer this question, we must ask what features of Adams's reformed liberalism encouraged the emergence of a moderate though still fervently moral antislavery ethos. As I shall now show, the elements of Adams's thought that he largely shared with his New England forebears and that separated him from Jefferson made it especially and increasingly difficult for the Adams family to remain indifferent to human slavery.

SLAVERY AND REFORMED LIBERALISM

Once again, a comparison is helpful. The young Jefferson saw slavery as a moral evil and wished for its elimination when practicable, but this desire had to be balanced against competing considerations of both utility and rights. Adams, in rejecting a subjective, self-determined happiness as an ultimate moral guide, undercut the whole rationale for this concern. Consider, once again, the issue of public service. For Adams this activity offered an opportunity both to cultivate one's own faculties and to serve others. Consequently, the positive freedom of all would benefit. More generally, because there was no necessary conflict between developing one's own faculties and those of other people, there was no presumption that one group's freedom or well-being would necessarily conflict with those of another. Indeed, the public servant had a clear obligation to help oth-
ers follow the right path. Like his Puritan forebears, therefore, Adams favored educating the slaves, however much this position became anathema in the South after his death.  

This analysis applied to policies and institutions as well as to the actions of individuals. Some institutions and policies might help both oneself and others develop their faculties; other institutions or policies might be generally harmful, regardless of the preferences involved. Here too, the question of weighing valid but competing claims could not arise, for either the abolitionists or the Adams family. As Adams himself suggested in his comments about the Missouri Crisis, the institution blighted the moral development of the slave owners as much as it prevented the intellectual development of the slaves. On this view, everyone would benefit from emancipation.

As we have seen, Jefferson’s shift on slavery also rested on his empiricist regard for what he took to be facts, notably that blacks were inferior and that slavery had a growing importance in American life. Here too, though, Adams’s basic beliefs led down a different path because he refused to take individual goals as automatically deserving respect. Instead, he submitted all such goals to moral evaluation and objected to any group’s having unlimited power to pursue whatever aims it wished, be it husbands, wives, or the British authorities. For Abigail in 1776, this list included slave holders, as it did for John (at least on the Missouri question) in 1820. Later, their children and grandchildren would make open war against the slave power.

The deeper contrast with Jefferson was more explicitly philosophical. Consistent with his ontology and epistemology, Jefferson stressed racial differences that were mainly physical and empirically observable. Adams rejected this philosophy because he believed the decisive issue was the condition of an individual’s soul, that is, an immaterial object that cannot be directly observed. On Adams’s view, then, Jefferson was not simply wrong about the facts. The more fundamental mistake was to rely in the first place on irrelevant empirical observations about racial differences. Instead, Adams asserted the moral equality of human beings, i.e., the equality of souls, as a postulate from which one should begin to reason — rather than the conclusion of an empirical, scientific inquiry. For him, this belief warranted supporting education for all, black and white alike. For his family, this same dignity required emancipation.

By rejecting Jefferson’s concern with balance and facts, Adams’s reformed liberalism made every feature of his society open to moral criticism, no matter how popular or well established. For this rea-
son, the changes considered here, i.e., the success of the American republican experiment, slavery’s apparent permanence, and the spread of a more liberal Calvinism, can be seen to have encouraged antislavery attitudes. The Civil War did not come in 1861 simply because there were differences of opinion about the morality of slavery: It came, in part at least, because some antislavery northerners undertook a sustained emotional crusade that eventually enlisted relative moderates such as John Quincy and Charles Francis Adams. Crusades require crusaders, those committed enough to sacrifice for a cause, and here the least humanist feature of Adams’s reformed liberalism, the Calvinist tradition of piety, was crucial.

A perceived contrast between an almost worthless humanity and a remote and finally inscrutable God may not seem a likely source for a moral crusade. If God were so remote that divine will and intention were beyond human knowledge—if the human world were dead in sin, or at least profoundly removed from a majestic, perfect God—how could a conscientious believer confidently adopt any militant cause? Again, if all humankind were so deficient, how could any one of them presume to launch a moral crusade against established social institutions and practices? The short answer is that the great distance between a majestic God and most human beings made it all the more vital to be among those who were singled out for redemption. If that redemption was associated with actively serving God, then the consequence may be militant activism, rather than quiescence. In other words, the very sinfulness of the human state made it especially imperative that the redeemed believers distinguish themselves by actively seeking to remake the world. To be sure, the world was so morally ambiguous that the right path was never fully knowable, human efforts never perfectly successful, and every achievement only provisional. But it followed that every step forward left many more to be taken, and the efforts of the righteous had to be especially intense and unremitting. This profound tension between the human and the divine could be best relieved by throwing oneself into the activity and drama of a moral, reformative crusade—be it the Puritan Revolution, the Great Migration to colonial New England, or Yankee Calvinist support for the American Revolution.

Skeptical as he was about political enthusiasms, Adams recognized just this connection between piety and moral duty. “The faculties of our understanding,” he wrote Jefferson in 1825, “are not adequate to penetrate the Universe.” After thus expressing his piety, he moved immediately to the issue of moral conduct. “Let us do our
duty which is, to do as we would be done by ... 165 In the right circumstances—those of his children and grandchildren after 1830—this sentiment could be more than a demand for good conduct in one's usual calling. It could sustain a prophetic call for a relentless moral struggle.

LIBERAL MORAL CODE
VERSUS LIBERAL CONTEXT

Adam's reformed liberalism in and of itself was not directed against any single type of institution, policy, or practice. It sustained his distaste for the Revolution in France in the 1780s and his opposition to Jefferson's egalitarian politics after 1790 as easily as it supported his own revolutionary stand in the 1770s. The point, instead, is that approval for any such institution or social arrangement was always provisional. No matter how socially important an institution had become, or how much it conformed to the preferences of a political faction, the decisive issue was always one's ethical obligations in respect to it. Institutions repugnant to the moral law must be condemned. As reformed liberalism came to assert the dignity and moral equality of every human soul, this stand turned against slavery.

Here the difference between Jefferson and Adams was one of context vs. moral code. For Jefferson, the essential point about American politics was the liberal character of the context, of the regime and society, in which politics took place. Institutions and practices deserved support because the context from which they emerged was so thoroughly liberal, that is, because they allowed individual freedom and required that the expressed preferences of one's compatriots be taken into account. Jefferson's belief in the intrinsic goodness of individuals prompted in him a suspicion of political institutions; eventually, however, his optimism came to include the political and social institutions as well as individuals that flourished in a liberal society. Genuine as his liberal commitments were, they could not readily be used to criticize the central features of either that society or its polity.

Adams shared Jefferson's devotion to these liberal values, but he understood them differently. For the Yankee moralist, they helped constitute a set of norms, an ethical code, not just for regulating interactions among individuals, but for evaluating and criticizing one's social and political world. In particular, he retained the Cal-
Adams and Jefferson on Slavery

Vinists' lively sense of human sin, or at least frailty. In that sense, his reformed liberalism drew on enduring features of New England culture that encouraged passing negative moral judgments on the social order. Because he had a much more benign view of the human being than the orthodox Calvinists, he was sometimes inclined to relocate that sin in institutions and social conditions, i.e., intemperance and ignorance. As that tendency became more pronounced in the next generation, it sustained a negative disposition toward human slavery.

Adams, then, helped lay a foundation for a prophetic politics that he did not, and perhaps could not, fully embrace. Others—in his family, his region, and his cultural tradition, including western Whigs like Abraham Lincoln—could and did build on that foundation; but they would add to these enduring features of New England culture—that is, to Adams's neo-Calvinist sense of sin and moral obligation—a view of human beings still more egalitarian and voluntarist than Adams's own. Thus they went beyond his view of slavery as an unfortunate practice to see it as profoundly offensive to God or to their own basic moral commitments. As the nation moved closer and closer to secession and civil war, this quarrel with the humanist liberalism became the dominant cleavage in northern politics. What may be less clear—but just as true—is that this same cleavage would continue in later generations and even in our own time.

UNITY, DIVERSITY, AND CIVIC AMBIVALENCE IN AMERICAN CULTURE

This last claim is too broad to be taken up here, but I do want to suggest that we can find in the tension between Jefferson's humanist and Adams's reformed liberalisms a latent theory of *e pluribus unum*. This theory, I contend, is better able than the standard theory of the liberal community to explain and appraise our national political life. To bring up to date Jefferson's observation in his First Inaugural Address, we are all humanist liberals—we are all reformed liberals. Some of us are more one than the other, no doubt, and it is also surely possible to find something like pure types; without question there are individuals or groups who represent an outlook seemingly wholly committed to one or the other poles of our liberalism. However, I would argue that both liberalisms are necessary to a vibrant American democracy, and that neither, untem-
pered, unmoderated by the other, is sufficient. At the same time, to be self-consciously an American, to embrace both forms of our liberalism, is inescapably to live with ambivalence as we ponder our problematic and ambiguous roles as citizens.

Indeed, for either humanist or reformed liberalism to dominate our politics or our culture would arguably be disastrous for the viability of social diversity and for the integrity and coherence of the nation itself. That this is so is strongly suggested by our history.

Return for a moment to the conflict between the reformed and humanist liberalisms of the antebellum era. For many reformed liberals, the prophetic attack on slavery as un-American and un-Christian was a thinly disguised call for moral homogeneity, that is, for the slave holders to adopt a new moral code. Not surprisingly, perhaps, this attitude led some Yankees, though not the Adams family, into a nativist attack on Roman Catholicism as a foreign, immoral, and undemocratic creed. There was, indeed, a significant, though far from perfect, correlation between opposition to slavery and an anti-Catholic nativism. As we perhaps know more vividly from the experience of such dogmatisms in our own century, the reformed liberalism of John Adams can, when it loses its head, descend from the lofty heights of a transcendent moral law to the depths of a rigid and mindless conformity.

On the other hand, the northern humanists who admired Jefferson espoused the sovereignty of individual preferences and thus a right to adopt whatever beliefs or folkways one finds appealing, although they scorned religious or ethnic prejudices. Attractive as this generous and tolerant pluralism can be, especially as we witness the efforts of blacks, ethnic minorities, women, and gays to achieve equal justice in our society, Jefferson's humanist liberalism can degenerate into little more than a crass defense of established privilege. For all its professions of respect for individuality and diversity, Jefferson's liberalism in fact capitulated to darkness in the name of balance and accommodation. It lost its heart if not its soul in the face of what must be regarded as the most monstrous evil in all our political history.

As Hannah Arendt once said of behaviorism in the social sciences, the problem with the standard theory of the liberal community is not that it is true, but that it may become true. It is in fact Jefferson's humanist liberalism that serves as a barrier against the monolithic consensus perceived by that theory, and through its concern with compromise and accommodation insists that our unity be a genuine political unity. And it is Adams's reformed liberalism that keeps Jef-
Jefferson's relativism and concern with private satisfactions from degenerating into mere individual and group selfishness. It continues to demand a shared moral vision that in some loose but vital way binds us all together.

NOTES


21. Miller, Wolf, p. 44.
25. Jefferson to Thomas Law, 13 June 1814, Koch and Peden, p. 638; Miller, Wolf, p. 94.
31. Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph, 30 May 1790, Koch and Peden, p. 496.
33. Inauguration Address, 4 March 1801, Koch and Peden, p. 322.
34. Miller, Wolf, p. 133.


43. Adams to Jefferson, 14-15 September 1813, Cappon, pp. 375-76.


63. By very different routes some of my colleagues have reached a similar conclusion. Whether we find radical, apolitical individualism to proceed ultimately from Jefferson, as Robert Bellah seems to hold (which would also be my view), from the protestant conscience, as Michael Walzer claims, or more immediately, as Robert Calvert holds, from the Progressive era, I sense an agreement that such a view is incapable of supporting either a democratic citizenship or a coherent political life.