The Learning of Liberty

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Washington is a daunting model. For a bold few he may provide a pattern to emulate directly, but for most of us he serves best as a kind of pole star—a reminder of much of what is highest in human nature and of potentialities within ourselves that should be encouraged. Just as Washington’s rather distant respect for learning made him a deeper and more dignified man, though he never became a scholar, so ordinary citizens who have none of his capacity for leadership may become more serious individuals by studying, reflecting upon, and honoring men like Washington. Less forbidding, and in his account of virtue more encouraging, was Thomas Jefferson. Whereas the dignity that made Washington inspiring to the whole nation kept him somewhat aloof from even his closest aides and protégés, Jefferson cultivated unusually warm and lasting ties with a large number of young relations and students. His rich correspondence with some of these individuals provides a model of the fatherly guidance that he thought was most effective, especially in moral education. And through his letters, Jefferson elaborates an understanding of virtue that fits with his trust in the common man.

The Moral "Sense" and the Clarity of Virtue

Like Washington, Jefferson presents morality as primarily a simple matter, requiring no special training or subtle reasoning. Indeed, the clarity and accessibility of morality is part of Jefferson’s fundamental creed.

He who made us would have been a pitiful bungler if he had made the rules of moral conduct a matter of science. For one man of science, there are thousands who are not. What would have become of them? . . . State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor. The former will decide it as
well, and often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules.”

Whereas Washington emphasizes the great self-overcoming needed to live according to what we know to be right, Jefferson stresses the natural foundation of virtue, in what he calls the “moral instinct.”

What exactly does Jefferson mean by the moral instinct, or sense, and how far does he suggest it is to be trusted? For Jefferson, morality comprises those principles of action that are necessary in order for human beings to live happily together in society. As he explains to his nephew Peter Carr in the same letter just quoted: “Man was destined for society. His morality therefore was to be formed to this object. He was endowed with a sense of right and wrong merely relative to this.” In a famous 1814 letter to Thomas Law, Jefferson gives his fullest analysis of the motives that impel men to follow the principles of morality or virtue. People do not do what is right out of respect for the truth (the truth, for instance, that the money one is tempted to steal does not belong to one), or out of a sense of the noble or beautiful—this, he argues, only governs matters of taste, not morals. Nor is the ultimate cause of virtue a love of God, for then “whence arises the morality of the atheist?” And neither, finally, is self-love the spur to morality. Jefferson concedes that we naturally take pleasure in being useful to others, especially when they are suffering. But he refuses to conclude that we perform moral acts for the sake of the pleasure that they bring us, for then we would really be acting selfishly. The key question, he argues, is why do good acts give us pleasure? The reason is, “because nature hath implanted in our breasts a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct, in short, which prompts us irresistibly to feel and to succor their distresses.”

In other words, man is a being who chooses to act not only to secure his own welfare and happiness but also to promote the welfare and happiness of others. A love for our fellows, or a sense of duty to them (which is not quite the same thing), is what allows us to go beyond the dictates of narrow self-interest, extending ourselves and even sacrificing ourselves in order to comfort, assist, and defend the rights of others. Jefferson maintains that the capacity to feel a bond with one’s fellows, and an instinctive knowledge of how they should be treated, is, like sight or hearing, naturally present in all men and in men of all races, with the exception of a misshapen few. He indicates that motives to virtue beyond the moral sense, including calculations of self-interest, a desire for love, and the fear of punishment in this world or in the next, are all incidental supports, which become essential only where the moral sense is absent or truncated. At the same time, he observes that the moral instinct, like the arm or the leg, can be strengthened through exercise or atrophied through disuse: hence the importance of a moral education that will support and exercise it.
Utility as the Guide of the Moral Sense

While he does not confront the difficulty involved in defining the moral sense as simultaneously both love or inclination and duty, Jefferson does go on, in the letter to Law, to address another far-reaching problem. Why, it may be objected, should a natural moral sense have produced such varied codes of conduct that "the same actions are deemed virtuous in one country and vicious in another"? Jefferson gives no examples, but presumably he has in mind such well-known oddities as the Spartans' rewarding young boys for theft if they get away uncaught. In reply Jefferson writes, "Nature has constituted utility to man the standard and test of virtue." Nature does not teach individuals to perform specific acts, but to love and promote the happiness of those around them. In a society dedicated to ceaseless warfare, stealth and cunning make one valuable to one's fellows. Jefferson thus recognizes a kernel of goodness at the core of even the strangest moral rules, and to this extent he makes allowance for cultural differences. But his understanding is that the differences among moral codes result in part from hard necessities—like the need to be always fighting, or the oppressions of a tyrannical government—and in part from fundamental disagreements about what constitutes human happiness—disagreements, for example, between those who see happiness as the salvation of the soul through repentance and those who identify it with the cultivation of a proud martial valor. Now on disputes about the nature of happiness, Jefferson is far from neutral. He therefore could never agree with the modern dictum that all cultures, and all cultures' moralities, are equal.

In particular, Jefferson excoriates the social and moral effects of an absolute monarchy like that of France, where, as he puts it in a letter to an American lady, "the people here are ground to powder by the vices of the form of government." This judgment does not prevent Jefferson from delighting in the smoothness and grace of French aristocratic manners, and he grants in the same letter that perhaps "their manners may be the best calculated for happiness to a people in their situation." Even if their "pursuits of happiness" are ultimately "fallacious," focusing as they do, not on virtuous independence, but on luxury, vanity, and sexual intrigue, yet "they seem on the whole to furnish the most effectual abstraction from a contemplation of the hardness of their government." Thus while French manners and morals are arguably the best that they can be under the circumstances, they are far from being the best simply: "Every step we take towards the adoption of their manners is a step to perfect misery." In monarchic France the moral sense might lead one to soothe the vanity of one's friends and to divert them from contemplating the oppression of a government they cannot change, but what may be relatively useful in a corrupt society is not
what will be most truly useful for people living as they were intended to live and can live under the best form of government.  

Jefferson's allowance for cultural differences, however, casts into question his claim that virtue is clear and simple. For if virtue means promoting the true happiness of others, and if nations have differed radically in their account of this happiness, then true virtue requires a deep probing into the nature of man and human happiness; or, at the least, the good fortune to chance upon teachers who possess a correct understanding of these deep matters. Accordingly, Jefferson lived and wrote as though the young did not know the nature of true happiness, but needed to be taught it.

The Problematic Relation Between the Moral Sense and Virtue Conceived as Self-Sufficiency

In a revealing statement of the function of the elementary schools, after discussing the importance of teaching history—and denying the appropriateness of Bible study—Jefferson continues:

The first elements of morality too may be instilled into their minds; such as, when further developed as their judgments advance in strength, may teach them how to work out their own greatest happiness, by shewing them that it does not depend on the condition of life in which chance has placed them, but is always the result of good conscience, good health, occupation, and freedom in all just pursuits.

Paradoxically, although the moral sense knits society together and makes people care about each others’ happiness, correct judgment would seem to teach that happiness is largely the result of self-sufficiency. Truly being of service to others would thus involve guiding them to live in a clear-sighted way, to rely on themselves, to cherish liberty as the greatest of goods, and not to be tempted to injustice by failing to see that the power to be happy lies within. Jefferson of course thought of utility largely in material terms and believed that an important means of promoting America’s happiness lay in making the country more prosperous. He even once wrote, with characteristic hyperbole, that “the greatest service which can be rendered any country is to add a useful plant to its culture.” Yet even here, the essential utility consists not so much in feeding mouths as in helping people of modest means to become more successfully self-reliant.

What are the practical consequences for moral education of Jefferson’s association of virtue with self-sufficiency? In the training that he in fact helps provide
for his young charges, the main thrust of his efforts appears to be aimed less at impressing them with a sense of duty, than at instilling in them a certain view of happiness and—despite his denial that morality involves taste—cultivating a relish or an inclination for the life of independence and industry. "The whole art of being happy consists in the art of finding employment," Jefferson writes to his daughter Martha. "I know of none so interesting, and which crowd upon us as much, as those of a domestic nature." Or, as he warns her in another typical passage:

It is your future happiness which interests me, and nothing can contribute more to it (moral rectitude always excepted) than the contracting a habit of industry and activity. Of all the cankers of human happiness, none corrodes it with so silent, yet so baneful a tooth as indolence. . . . If at any moment you catch yourself in idleness, my dear, start from it as you would from the precipice of a gulph.6

An idle person is dependent on others both for the comforts and necessities of life and for relief from ennui, Jefferson goes on to explain. But if his daughter learns industry and resourcefulness, she will be well prepared for life in America, where, remote from all other aid, "we are obliged to invent and to execute; to find means within ourselves, and not to lean on others." More important, she will be thereby prepared for a greater happiness: the solid happiness and self-esteem of one who has learned to amuse herself through music and drawing, learned to enjoy and profit from books, invention, and exercise, and above all learned the rewards of managing her household effectively and living harmoniously in her domestic circle. In seeking to make his children and grandchildren capable and industrious, Jefferson fills his letters with friendly cajoling—to work at everything from Latin to needlepoint, to control their tempers, to read Cervantes, to make puddings and to observe closely when the whippoorwills and peas first appear in spring. "It is wonderful how much may be done," he writes, "if we are always doing."

What is the precise relationship between the moral sense and the self-reliant happiness that is always the goal of Jefferson's moral instruction? Happiness, as Jefferson presents it, is close to Locke's understanding, which involves living in a rational, dignified way, being master of oneself, and enjoying the blessings of liberty and the free exercise of one's rights. But in Locke's philosophy, men's obligations to one another are defined by their rights; there is no teaching about a moral sense. Jefferson, following Shaftesbury and the Scottish enlightenment thinkers Shaftesbury influenced, apparently felt that in Locke's account there was something missing. On the one hand, Locke's philosophy did not seem to do justice to what Jefferson saw as the genuine benevolence that binds human-
ity together and that goes beyond calculations of mutual advantage. On the other hand, Locke's system, despite its carefully worked-out education in virtue, may not adequately explain why people should make difficult sacrifices for one another, as every society at times requires them to do. Jefferson thus supplements a fundamentally Lockean view of human nature with the idea of the moral sense, which may help to bridge the gap between the good of the individual and that of society.

Still, it is not clear that in Jefferson's understanding the moral sense will ever obligate people to forfeit their true good for that of others. Jefferson gives many reasons why moral action is good for the man who performs it: he will enjoy the pleasure that one naturally feels in exercising virtue and will win for himself love and gratitude, which are intrinsically precious to beings created to be social. Jefferson also insists that it is always most prudent in the long run to hold oneself to "truth, justice, and plain dealing." Following his argument, clear-sighted individuals will see that their own interests are served by promoting the liberty and prosperity of their nation and even of other nations.

Yet in Jefferson's most comprehensive and theoretical account of virtue—the letter to Law—he emphasizes that morality is directly opposed to selfishness. He maintains that for the person whose moral sense is not defective, virtuous action is first and foremost for the sake of others, rather than oneself, and only secondarily for the sake of the pleasure one derives from benefiting others.

Nevertheless, in writing to his young relations, Jefferson consistently extols virtue as the best means to their own happiness. One may wonder if Jefferson ever entirely made up his mind as to whether virtue is altogether for others, or really for oneself, or felicitously and almost miraculously for both at the same time.

*Protecting and Cultivating the Moral Sense*

This much is clear: in Jefferson's view, preserving and strengthening the moral sense in its natural purity is essential to living well, not only because of the joys of human fellowship but above all because moral corruption leads men to pursue an illusory happiness. Jefferson finds in the simplicity and ruggedness of life in the American countryside a great support for purity of morals as well as for self-reliant independence. Consequently, he argues for keeping American youths away from the vices of European cities. There, as he describes it, they will learn to be fascinated with the privileges of aristocracy, with luxury, and with sexual intrigue, and they will return home ignorant and contemptuous of the simple manners, the practical arts, the language, and the people that they need to know and respect in order to make their way.
This same concern not to corrupt the simple and therefore healthy taste of young Americans is seen in Jefferson’s desire—paradoxical in such a champion of enlightenment—to restrict his daughter’s reading of certain kinds of books, particularly novels.

A great obstacle to good education is the inordinate passion prevalent for novels, and the time lost in that reading which should be instructively employed. When this poison infects the mind, it destroys its tone and revolts it against wholesome reading. Reason and fact, plain and unadorned, are rejected. Nothing can engage attention unless dressed in all the figments of fancy, and nothing so bedecked comes amiss. The result is a bloated imagination, sickly judgment, and disgust towards all the real business of life.

According to Jefferson, the moral sense is a faculty that needs to be nurtured and exercised as well as shielded from corruption. Thus he instructs Peter Carr to “read good books, because they will encourage, as well as direct your feelings. The writings of Sterne, particularly, form the best course of morality that ever was written.” Laurence Sterne apparently wins such a high recommendation from Jefferson mainly on the strength of his published sermons. A popular and engaging but morally serious writer, Laurence Sterne portrays throughout his sermons the charms of virtue and the ugliness of vice. He puts charity or compassion at the very core of virtue, describing the pleasure of doing a charitable act as the greatest of pleasures, and the rewards of social intercourse as that which makes life worth living. Like Jefferson, he believes that an all-wise Creator “has implanted in mankind such appetites and inclinations . . . as would naturally lead him to the love of society and friendship.” Sterne is intent on vindicating human nature against those who would malign it by calling all people selfish, for “surely, ’tis one step towards acting well, to think worthily of our nature.”

Reading these sermons would remind the young person to respect and cherish that which Jefferson and Sterne agree is best in human nature and which Jefferson calls the moral sense. But Sterne interlaces this cheerful and encouraging view of mankind with expressions of the more ominous side of Christianity: reminders of the judgment day to come and admonitions that life on earth is fleeting and full of vanity and sorrow. While Sterne does appeal to the moral inclinations, then, suggesting at times that the virtuous will be happy, he elsewhere relies heavily upon hopes of divine reward and fears of divine punishment, and implies that little else matters. But Jefferson, in the same letter in which he recommends Sterne, urges the young Peter Carr to be fearless in questioning religion, arguing that he will find sufficient incentives to virtue “in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in it’s exercise, and the love of others which it will procure
you.” Jefferson’s referral to such a course of sermons, however, raises some question as to how clear he was in his own mind about jettisoning the support of faith altogether.

Jefferson also engages in his own exhortation to strengthen the moral sense. He calls on his daughter Martha to listen always to her conscience, to “lose no opportunity of exercising your heart in benevolence,” and to perform the good offices of teaching her small sister to be truthful, never angry, and constantly industrious. But in praising virtue and kindness to his daughters, he, like Sterne, invariably draws in other motives beyond the pure feelings of benevolence. Later, urging a now-married Martha not to desert her sister-in-law who has been accused of adultery, he appeals to her compassion: “Never throw off the best affections of nature in the moment when they become most precious to their object; nor fear to extend your hand to save another, lest you should sink yourself.” But right away he adds, “Your kindness will help her and count in your own favor also.” The tone of all his advice is summed up in this counsel to twelve-year-old Mary: “Be good my dear, as I have always found you, never be angry with any body, nor speak harm of them, try to let every body’s faults be forgotten, as you would wish yours to be; take more pleasure in giving what is best to another than in having it yourself, and then all the world will love you, and I more than all the world.” Here and elsewhere, Jefferson unabashedly holds out his love not only as a reward but as a crucial incentive for good behavior.

The Power of Examples

Jefferson urged his young charges to strengthen their moral sense through exercise, until they had acquired established habits of doing what is right. Yet his opportunities to oversee even his own children’s practice of virtue were limited, since his political duties allowed for intermittent contact at best. From a distance, he cajoled and demanded that the youngsters provide frequent accounts of themselves. He hoped that giving Martha the duty of instructing her younger sister in virtue would make Martha more careful about her own behavior. But ultimately Jefferson believed that the strongest influence on one’s habits lay in the examples one found to emulate.

Pointing youths who were far from home toward good models was a special concern for Jefferson. In a fatherly letter to his sixteen-year-old grandson, away at school for the first time, he holds up his own youth to the boy to illustrate the use that one should make of others’ examples.

When I recollect that at fourteen years of age, the whole care & direction of myself was thrown on myself entirely, without a relation or a friend quali-
fied to advise or guide me, and recollect the various sorts of bad company with which I associated from time to time, I am astonished I did not turn off with some of them, & become as worthless to society as they were. I had the good fortune to become acquainted very early with some characters of very high standing, and to feel the incessant wish that I could ever become what they were. Under temptations & difficulties, I would ask myself what would Dr. Small, Mr. Wythe, Peyton Randolph do in this situation? What course in it will insure me their approbation? I am certain that this mode of deciding on my conduct tended more to its correctness than any reasoning powers I possessed.

Jefferson goes on to describe the many types of men that he was occasionally captivated by as a boy, from horse-racers to clever lawyers to great statesmen, and he recounts how in moments of excitement he would regain perspective by asking himself which kind of reputation he would ultimately prefer. He urges the wisdom of "these little returns into ourselves," in which one takes time to envision a picture of the life that seems most admirable and uses this picture to inspire and steady oneself in pursuing the goal, particularly at moments when passions run high and threaten to subvert reason. In asking, "What would Wythe do?" or in considering his future reputation, then, Jefferson was not simply relying on others' opinions for moral guidance, nor was he appealing to his own vanity to the exclusion of his moral instinct. For without independent good judgment, he never could have singled out the most virtuous mentors or recognized the superior merit in being known as—and being—"the honest advocate of my country's rights." At the same time, Jefferson's letter shows that personal models are so powerful precisely because they do appeal to more than one motive. The image of a fine life captivates us and makes us want to be like the one we admire, but the knowledge that such a life would captivate others, bringing us a fine reputation, is itself a part of that life's charm.

Jefferson understood that inspiring exemplars are far more persuasive to the young than cold reasoning, an insight that has been shared by thoughtful individuals in every civilization: this is why storytelling and not philosophical argument has always been at the core of effective moral education. But Jefferson himself did not carry this awareness as far as he might have. Although in the letter to Law he calls the moral instinct "the brightest gem with which the human character is studded" and considers "the want of it as more degrading than the most hideous of the bodily deformities," he never stresses the connection between beauty or the arts and morality; as his remarks on novels attest, he is ambivalent about enlisting the imagination as an ally in moral education. Jefferson himself was able as a young man to win the friendship of leading Virginians, and he could recommend to Martha the company of David Rittenhouse, one of
the country's greatest living scientists, as a model of the "rational life." Yet ordinary citizens, lacking these personal contacts, may find their best inspiration in colorful stories about outstanding characters—stories that will capture the imagination at the same time that they lend support to living rationally. It is this crucial role of popular literature that Jefferson seems not to have sufficiently appreciated.14

The Difficulty in Jefferson's Moral Sense Teaching

Jefferson's use of a variety of motives in moral education leaves us wondering whether the moral sense alone is ever adequate to fill the function that he assigns to it. Does the moral sense in fact carry within it sufficient incentives to make men treat one another justly and generously? In the rather theoretical letter to Law, Jefferson suggests that motives beyond the love of others, and the natural inclination to be good to them, are really only needed in the worst cases. He implies that the main work of moral education will be to preserve, encourage, and exercise the child's natural benevolence. But his more practical family letters show a recognition that consistent appeals to further motives are indeed necessary. While Jefferson may find Locke's conception of morality too narrow, he never dispenses with the external sanctions Locke recommends, and in fact he follows Locke's educational advice rather closely. Both Jefferson and Locke seek to avoid the use of coercion, fear, and public humiliation. Both minimize the role of religion (or "superstition") in education, delaying the introduction of Bible study and keeping religious instruction as simple and rational as possible. Both rely heavily on the young person's desire to be loved and on the sense of shame that makes him crave the good opinion of those that matter to him. We are reminded again of Jefferson's call for moderation in governing students at the University of Virginia.

Pride of character, laudable ambition, and moral dispositions are innate correctives to the indiscretions of that lively age; and when strengthened by habitual appeal and exercise, have a happier effect on future character than the degrading motive of fear. Hardening them to disgrace, to corporal punishments, and servile humiliations cannot be the best process for producing erect character. The affectionate deportment between father and son, offers in truth the best example for that of tutor and pupil.15

Pride and ambition, not themselves moral dispositions, are needed to impel students to seek excellence and also to buttress their natural benevolence. Exhortation can provide a "habitual appeal" to the moral sense and to pride, honor, and other motives as well. But these techniques are unlikely to build a sterling char-
acter without something more: the affectionate bond between a youth and a fa­
thor or fatherly friend whom he can admire and copy and whose love and re­
spect he hungers for. We are reminded again of the young Juba in Addison's
Cato. Moral education is difficult or impossible without love.

Why does virtue require so much reinforcement if the moral sense is natural? Is it only because the passions of youth cloud one's vision? Are the incentives of winning love and reputation needed only by those who are immature and have not yet acquired habitual ascendancy over their impulses? Jefferson seems to in­
dicate that virtue can stand on its own once self-control becomes habitual, for then the individual will find confirmation for the claim that honoring one's na­
tural love for others will make one happy and fulfilled. Yet there remains in Jeffer­
sen's writing a shadow lingering over this sunny portrayal. The problem is that the convergence of virtue and happiness is not altogether clear. Although Jeffer­
sen criticizes the ancient philosophers' coldness in failing to teach peace, char­
ity, and love for all humanity, he elsewhere calls himself an Epicurean and sum­
marizes Epicurus's moral teachings as follows:

Happiness the aim of life.
Virtue the foundation of happiness.
Utility the test of virtue.
Pleasure active and In-do-lent.
Indolence is the absence of pain, the true felicity.
Active, consists in agreeable motion; it is not happiness, but the means to produce it.
The *summum bonum* is to be not pained in body, nor troubled in mind.¹⁶

The tension between the moral sense that prompts a person to generous action and the philosophy that counsels tranquil detachment is recalled in Jef­
\ferson's famous dialogue between the head and the heart. Addressing a married lady with whom he has fallen in love, Jefferson voices alternately the part of himself that reproaches his reckless proclivity for sentimental attachments and the part that finds in love and friendship the joy of life. The head declaims:

The most effectual means of being secure against pain is to retire within ourselves, and to suffice for our own happiness. Those, which depend on ourselves, are the only pleasures a wise man will count on; for nothing is ours which another may deprive us of. Hence the inestimable value of in­
tellectual pleasures. Friendship is but another name for an alliance with the follies and the misfortunes of others.

But the heart has the last word. Scorning the idea of self-sufficiency in a world so full of "want and accident," the heart knows the need for friends and reflects
Jefferson and the Natural Basis of Moral Education

that “nobody will care for him, who cares for nobody.” But further, “Friendship is precious, not only in the shade, but in the sunshine of life.” The heart closes by asserting its title to rule in the moral realm and by commanding the head to confine its claims of preeminence to matters of science.\footnote{17}

Throughout his life Jefferson lived with the tension that he here describes as a dichotomy between head and heart. At nearly every important juncture, he chose to act according to the “heart” and its social urgings, surrounding himself with company and devoting himself to public service. Yet again and again, he spoke and wrote in a way that denigrated public life. Not only does he characterize politics as a burden, and political honors as “splendid torments,” but he portrays the highest as well as the happiest life as one of quiet contemplation. In a remarkable letter to David Rittenhouse, he concedes the “obligation those are under” who are able to conduct government, but he puts Rittenhouse above this obligation: “Are those powers then, which being intended for the erudition of the world, like air and light, the world’s common property, to be taken from their proper pursuit to do the commonplace drudgery of governing a single state, a work which may be executed by men of an ordinary stature, such as are always and everywhere to be found?”\footnote{18} Presumably Rittenhouse escapes political duty only because he contributes something more valuable to the world; and to that extent, the letter does not simply support Jefferson’s Epicurean side. But by depicting the contemplative life so brightly and public life so darkly, Jefferson renders problematic his claims about political duty. Whence arises the “obligation” to “drudgery” in people of moderate talents? Jefferson does not explain this, and clearly if his heart teaches him that he has such an obligation, it does not teach him to enjoy fulfilling it.

After all, the teaching of the heart is deeply ambiguous. The heart is selfish as well as generous; that is why people must be commanded to love one another. As Jefferson puts it, self-love is “the antagonist of virtue.” Even when self-love is kept in check, the social instincts of the heart may lead only to close ties with a few and not to universal benevolence, service, or even minimal justice. Again addressing one of his daughters, he writes: “The circle of our nearest connections is the only one in which faithful and lasting affection can be found, one which will adhere to us under all changes and chances. It is therefore the only soil on which it is worth while to bestow much culture.”\footnote{19}

None of this is to deny that a child’s selfish urges may be countered by a concerted effort to encourage his or her benevolence, compassion, sensitivity to others’ feelings, and desire to win love. But constant reliance on such motives may well reduce the child’s moral impulse to a general obligingness that is not anchored in firm and clearly articulated principles and that therefore falls short of true virtue. For the problem is that virtuous action is at times neither comfortable nor pleasant nor useful to us nor endearing to those around us. Jeffer-
Education through Emulation

son's guidelines offer little support for one whose conscience tells one to take a lonely and unpopular stand, to remain honest when cheating would seem immune to discovery and harmful to no one, to shoulder responsibility for one's own actions even if great damage might result and a convenient scapegoat is ready at hand, or indeed to die for one's country. Considerations of reputation may help in the last case, but on the other hand, if one's country is fighting an unpopular war, they may not. By stressing the social nature and social rewards of virtue, Jefferson's system runs the risk of leaving people at the mercy of public opinion and their sense of shame, both of which may steer them amiss. And by emphasizing the utility of virtue, Jefferson may increase the temptation to see morality as a tool that may be set aside when its contribution to one's own happiness looks doubtful.

The Original, Aristotelian Teaching on the Moral "Sense"

At those moments when virtue is most difficult, the argument that it always promotes one's personal happiness, made in the way that Jefferson makes it, begins to ring hollow. But there is another way of understanding the connection between virtue and happiness that more successfully meets this problem. This understanding finds its clearest expression in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the work that is in fact the fountainhead of the idea of the moral "sense" (*aisthēsis*). Aristotle argues that virtue is, at root, not only a proper stance toward other people, as Jefferson claims, but even more a proper stance toward oneself. The moral sense of the truly virtuous man leads him to choose to be courageous and just, not primarily because of the benefits that will accrue to others, or because of the gains he may expect for himself in security or reputation or love, but above all because courageous and just deeds are in themselves noble, and because in performing them, he makes himself a nobler man. What characterizes virtue for Aristotle is its inherent beauty or nobility; the Greek word, *to kalon*, serves equally for both.

Aristotle contends that virtue brings happiness because it is the excellence or proper fulfillment of human nature—and not just of one instinct in human nature that is opposed by other instincts, as Jefferson seems to suggest. Long experience in life, or an upbringing by parents and civic leaders who have such experience, gives individuals a "perception" or "sense" of the moral and of the specific virtues that belong to it. These virtues must be applied with careful thought to circumstances, but in Aristotle's account, they have a validity that does not depend upon consistently useful outcomes and still less on the approbation of shifting public opinion. Aristotle thus provides moral strength in those situations where shame and considerations of utility can encourage moral
weakness. Aristotle goes so far as to deny that shame is compatible with a fully developed moral sense. Shame is appropriate for the young, not the mature moral person. Yet while Aristotle's system supports friendship and justice, it does not teach the universal benevolence that Christianity does. Indeed, in encouraging its followers to view virtue chiefly as a duty to themselves, it can leave them somewhat cold in its exercise, at times treating other men less as brothers to be loved than as objects upon which virtue may exercise and display itself. One may wonder whether Aristotle resolves, or only brings out and forces one to confront, the fundamental tension in moral life between duty to others and concern for the health of one's own soul.

The Uneasy Jeffersonian Compromise

Jefferson does occasionally speak of virtue in terms reminiscent of Aristotle. In an early letter to Peter Carr, he describes virtue as the greatest of goods and the source of "the most sublime comforts" throughout life. Although he never explains why virtue produces the highest or greatest comforts, it seems likely that he sees in a good conscience the core of self-respect. Given his deep concern with fostering independence and dignity in the individual, he might well have put more emphasis on self-respect as a motive to virtue, but at least it is implicit in this letter. Jefferson goes on to make the familiar argument that honesty is the best policy. He buttresses it, however, with reflections on how mean, pitiable, and contemptible the inveterate liar is, and how a habit of dishonesty corrupts the heart "and in time depraves it of all its good dispositions." To his fifteen-year-old nephew, then, Jefferson commends virtue as a fine thing in itself—good not only for the fortunes, but for the soul of the one who possesses it. Yet this characterization is rather at odds with Jefferson's argument that virtue is a social duty, performed for the sake of others. And the problem with Jefferson's rather easygoing eclecticism is that he rarely confronts and tries to resolve the tensions between the many threads of his thought. We are left with two predominant strands in his moral reasoning, which pull ultimately in different directions and which exhibit two dangerous proclivities. On the one hand, Jefferson's account of happiness focuses on independence, self-reliance, and the quiet but solid enjoyments of study and domestic life. Especially when there is little stress laid upon cultivating the excellence of a noble or beautiful soul, a pursuit of such happiness can degenerate into what Tocqueville describes as "individualism," a failure to care about anything beyond oneself and one's small circle of intimates. The other strand in Jefferson's thought is his teaching about the moral sense. This teaching is designed to promote harmony and respect for the feelings and opinions of others in a community of ordinary men, and hence
(unlike Aristotle's aristocratic and rather competitive virtue), it is suited to a democracy. Yet for the same reason, this conception of virtue tends to undermine that very spirit of personal independence that Jefferson cherishes and considers a bulwark of freedom. Tocqueville identifies this danger also, as one aspect of the "tyranny of the majority." And Tocqueville further reveals the connection between the two problems: The more individuals withdraw into themselves, the more isolated and insignificant they become, and the more easily they are overawed by the opinions of the mass of their fellows. Jefferson's community-oriented virtue is of course useful in checking the ambitions of dangerous leaders. But by encouraging individuals to be swayed by the crowd, it works to prevent the rise of the "great-souled man" whom Aristotle praises, the proud and independent spirit like Winston Churchill, who alone can steer a nation safely through its gravest crises.