

JOHN ADAMS: ON THE PRINCIPLES OF A POLITICAL SCIENCE

As a political writer, John Adams is most remembered today for the constitutional prescriptions by which he helped to solidify the American Revolution. His *Thoughts on Government* was widely circulated in 1776 and helped hasten and shape the formation of independent states out of former British colonies. His *Report of a Constitution . . . for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* was adopted with few changes, by that state, in 1780 and became the model for movements toward constitutional revision in other states.¹ Both writings—the first in outline and the second in detail—indicate Adams' view of the arrangement of political power which would best secure liberty. Neither work, however, elaborates Adams' understanding of *why* a certain arrangement of power is necessary to the securing of liberty. To uncover this reasoning, the student of Adams' thought must turn to his last published and least studied writings, the three volume *Defence of American Constitutions* and one volume of *Discourses on Davila*.² In these works, which Adams later grouped together as his "four volumes of 'Defence and Discourses on Davila,'" he set before his audience "fairly, fully and impartially" the true principles of republican government as he had come to understand them from careful study of "human nature, society, and universal history." The *Defence* and *Davila* are concerned less

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1 All of Adams' public writing can be found in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*. 10 vols., edited by Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1850-56), hereafter cited as Adams, *Works* and relevant volume. For *Thoughts*, see Adams, *Works*, IV, 189-200 and for *Report*, see *ibid.*, IV, 219-267. For the judgment of a leading student of the period regarding the influence of these writings, see Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), pp. 203 and: 435.

2 For these two works, see A. *Defence of the Constitutions of Governments of the United States of America, Against the Attack of M. Turgot, in his Letter to Dr. Price, Dated the Twenty-second Day of March, 1778 . . . in three volumes*, in Adams, *Works*, IV, 283-588, V, and VI, pp. 3-220; and *Discourses on Davila; A Series of Papers on Political History by an American Citizen*, in *ibid.*, VI, 223-399. The three volumes of the *Defence* were published in 1787-88. The *Davila* papers were published serially as newspaper articles in 1790-91 and were collected into one volume fifteen years later.

with detailed prescription than with a "rational theory" of republican politics out of which prescriptions can be drawn.³ Of all of Adams' published writings, then, these last works provide an especially fruitful resource for an inquiry into his deepest political reflection.

The nascent order of the *Defence* and *Davila*⁴ can be grasped most readily by reflecting on Adams' immediate purpose in these books. The particular occasion which spurred both works was the attack on American constitutions launched by French encyclopedists and economists, and especially by Turgot and Condorcet.⁵ Adams wrote to defend those American constitutions which most nearly embodied right principles of political construction.⁶ Turgot and Condorcet had argued that free government is possible only when the English model of balanced government is eschewed and all political authority is collected in a unicameral representative assembly; they had denied that distinct social orders exist naturally and that any effective government must involve some mixture of social orders. Adams countered by showing his readers that free govern-

³ *Ibid.*, X, 96 and VI, 482; letters to John Taylor, April 1814; VI, 416-17; IX, 573; letter to John Trumbull, 23 January 1791.

⁴ The reader who turns to the *Defence* and *Davila* for the first time is likely to react with dismay. These four volumes appear to be poorly organized compendia of historical and theoretical writings on politics by other authors, sometimes, dissected and analyzed by Adams but snore often quoted *verbatim* without comment. All clearly touch on politics, but they do not form a *treatise* on the theory of republican government. This is a defect for which Adams apologized to his readers at the end of the *Defence*. But it is a defect of "style" and "method" brought about by the circumstances of writing, not a defect in Adams' understanding of his subject. Our aim in this essay is to sketch that understanding systematically.

⁵ While Adams' immediate antagonists in the *Defence* and *Davila* were Turgot and Condorcet, his most important audience was American. There had been, "from the beginning of the revolution in America, a party in every State, who have entertained sentiments similar to those of M. Turgot." In two of the states, that party had managed to establish governments "upon his principle" of all authority in one centre. More recently, Shay's rebellion and similar movements elsewhere in Massachusetts had threatened to depose the Governor and Senate "as expensive, useless, and pernicious" branches of the constitution; See *ibid.*, IV, 299-300 and IX, 623; letter to Samuel Perley, 19 June 1809. Adams intended to correct "the mistakes of great men" so that those mistakes could no longer "countenance the prejudices of numbers of people, especially in a young country and under new governments" (*ibid.*, IV, 299-302).

⁶ The worst of the state constitutions, in Adams' view, were those of Pennsylvania and Georgia (*ibid.*, IV, 300 and VI, 274). The others all contained sufficient ingredients of balance to be defensible, although the best and most defensible was "my Constitution" of Massachusetts (*ibid.*, IX, 623; letter to Samuel Perley, 19 June 1809).

ment will endure only when political power is constituted as a "triple equipoise"; free government must consist of three equal, independent branches exactly balanced against one another, and those branches must correspond to social distinctions which arise naturally among men. The dispute between Adams and the French party thus proceeded on the basis of a basic agreement: all antagonists were friends of liberty; all agreed that free government is the only legitimate government. But the partisans of liberty disagreed on how best to secure liberty; they disputed the form of government best adapted to their shared purpose. As Adams put the dispute in a 1790 letter to his cousin, Samuel, the antagonists agreed on the *principles of liberty* but disagreed on the *principles of political architecture*. It is not surprising, then, that principles of liberty were taken up in the *Defence* and *Davila* only as a subordinate theme and occasionally; Adams considered them only when the means of government required illumination from the ends. His major subject in the two works was political architecture and especially its principles.

The rod which allows the reader to divine the order of the *Defence* and *Davila* is provided by Adams' intention to elaborate the subject of political architecture *in terms of principles*. Adams wanted to show his readers the "rational theory" of political construction rather than simply to indicate "the imperfection of M. Turgot's idea" of all authority in one center.⁸ This latter, narrower, and merely polemical purpose he could easily have achieved, he said, by recording the disastrous consequences for freedom which have invariably followed from actual efforts to collect all political authority into a unicameral representative assembly. But the historical analysis which would have disproved his French antagonists could not have established the necessity of three political orders and a balance between them. To accomplish this positive purpose of showing his readers the true and only reliable principles of political architecture, Adams had to engage in a more ambitious investigation: he had to take "the most extensive views of men and societies." For Adams, an extensive view entailed examination of all "writers of reputation" in the art of political construction and of the most celebrated actual political structures, "whether they remain

⁷ *Ibid.*, VI, 411-12: letter to Samuel Adams, 18 October 1790.

⁸ *Ibid.*, IV, 435.

⁹ *Ibid.*

entire or in ruins." Adams' intention was to see "how far both the theories and the [actual] models were founded in nature, or created in fancy."¹⁰ Only when he had shown that the triple equipoise is the one republican form solidly founded in nature, not "fancy," would he have adequately accomplished his larger task of setting forth invariable laws of political construction.

The *Defence* and *Davila* proceed in two ways to discover which political arrangements are "founded in nature." The two ways are separable but ultimately compatible. In fact, the distinction between the two methods indicates the major difference between the two works; the relation between the methods indicates the deepest unity of the books. In both ways, Adams proceeded as a modern scientist: he attempted to discern the invariable operation of efficient causes and their effects. For nearly all of the *Defence*, he examined *political constitutions* as proximate causes. He hoped to show that all governments which have lacked a perfect balance among three orders have resulted in either tyranny or anarchy, while all governments which have achieved such a balance have preserved the principles of liberty for their people.¹¹ Adams' review of constitutions showed to his satisfaction the dangerous effects of all unbalanced or imperfectly balanced governments. Moreover, he saw the historic short-lived triumphs of liberty as having occurred in many cases because of a government's approximation of balance. But his search for unequivocal positive evidence on the side of the triple equipoise encountered a difficulty: only one government outside the United States had reduced the requirements of balance to practice and that government could not stand as conclusive evidence for Adams' position. The government of England had embodied all of the components of a free constitution for fewer than two hundred years; it therefore could not be used to demonstrate the power of balance to preserve liberty for "thousands of years." Moreover, aside from the recently-created American constitutions, England stood alone in its commitment to balance; it therefore did not provide Adams with the comparative material needed to separate reliably the effects of

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, IV, 293.

¹¹ I have given a more extensive discussion of Adams' use of history in chapter II of my doctoral dissertation, "The Ethics of John Adams: Prolegomenon to a Science of Politics" (University of Chicago, 1974). The rigor of Adams' method is one reason for the initially confusing wealth of material in the *Defence* and *Davila*, for he examines all countries "where the governments may be called in any reasonable construction of the word, republican" (Adams, *Works*, IV, 379)

political form from the effects of peculiarly English circumstances.¹² The first way of demonstrating the principles of political architecture was consequently useful but insufficient for Adams' highest aim.

Adams' other way of assessing the utility of various constitutions for liberty was to discover the human "elements" on which any political form must work in order to endure. He likened the systems of legislators to "philosophers making experiments on the elements"; systems of government are "experiments made on human life and manners."¹³ Accordingly, history can be read for what it reveals not only about *political constitutions* as proximate causes, but also about *human nature* as a cause. The best historians help their readers "unravel the secret springs" of human action; they disclose the operation of those passions which move men in all times and places.¹⁴ Once identified and measured in terms of their natural tendency, these springs of action comprise a standard by which to predict the efficacy of any political proposal. For this reason, the most decisive inquiry for a science of political architecture concerns the question of "what kind of beings men are."¹⁵ Inattention to this inquiry had led the French party to faulty political prescriptions. Specifically, Adams' antagonists had ignored *the* spring of human action: the natural human passion for distinction. Consequently, they had failed to take into account the problem of the social orders which inevitably result from the workings of that passion and to consider how government could incorporate those orders so as to make the passion for distinction support the principles of liberty.

It is concerning the springs of human action that the *Davila* plays a special role in Adams' "four volumes." In the three volumes of the *Defence*, Adams devoted occasional brief passages to the inquiry regarding the natural foundation of government, but he did so only as his treatments of particular aspects of political construction required deeper illumination. While inquiry into human nature provides the final measure for his teaching on political forms, Adams wrote the *Defence* as if he could settle the issue of the proper political form without giving extended attention to the nature of the

12 For Adams' statement of the "discoveries in the constitution of a free government" which England had reduced to practice, see *ibid.*, IV, 284. He also suggested two *lines* of criticism of the English constitution, one at *ibid.*, IV, 284-85 and VI, 183 and the other at IV, 359 and 440.

¹³ *Ibid.*, IV, 297.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, VI, 365.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, IV, 406.

human elements. By the time he resumed the task of political teaching in *Davila*, however, he had clearly concluded that the inquiry into human nature requires its own exposition. He therefore ended his first *Davila* discourse by observing to his readers that "before we proceed . . . it will assist us, in comprehending (Davila's) narration, as well as in making useful reflections in morals and policy, to turn our thoughts for a few moments to the constitution of the human mind."¹⁶ In Discourses II–XIII he then explicated the standard to which he had made only occasional references in the *Defence*.¹⁷ The *Davila* can thus be viewed, not simply as the last of four volumes, but as a statement of the groundwork on which the political teaching of the other three volumes rests and in terms of which the soundness of that teaching must be judged. The *Davila* completes the *Defence* theoretically and therefore will receive special emphasis in the following exposition of Adams' political teaching.

The Principles of Liberty

In the *Defence* and *Davila*, as in all of Adams' writings, the reasoning for the principles of liberty received only brief attention. The principles and their natural source, Adams believed, had been adequately investigated as early as 1556, when John Poynt had published his *Shorte Treatise of Politicke Power*. That work had contained "all the essential principles of liberty" which "were afterwards dilated on" by "writers on the side of liberty" during the two periods marked by the Interregnum and the Revolution of 1688. Those writers, especially Locke, had taught Voltaire, Rousseau, and "their disciples" what they knew about liberty, so that the principles of liberty were "becoming universal" and needed no further defense.¹⁸

Adam's sense of satisfaction with the English theorists of liberty, however, did not prevent him from suggesting his own understanding of the source and substance of the principles of liberty. The principles of liberty have their foundation in natural law, which human reason is in principle capable of discerning and which ought

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, VI, 232.

¹⁷ See especially *ibid.*, IV, 387, 391–98, 406–10; V, 40, 488; VI, 8–9, 57, 94–5, 114–15, 141, 182 and 205–211.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, VI, 4–5, 412 and 160.

to govern all men.¹⁰ Following his English predecessors, Adams identified the natural laws as two: the law of self-preservation and the law of respecting "the rights of others as much as [one's] own." As these statements of the law indicate, Adams' understanding of natural law was thoroughly modern.²⁰ The good which reason discerns is primarily the existence of rights in each individual, possessed by him by virtue of his constitution as a human being. The two natural laws are inferences or "reflections" about the proper ordering of human conduct entailed by those rights. Since the rights concern the things or goods which are proper to an individual as a solitary being, the first law simply states the necessity that each man preserve himself. Since each man is equal to every other with respect to his natural rights, however, the second law indicates the implication of natural rights for human relationships: each man should treat every other human being as equally a rights-bearing individual.²¹

In Adams' analysis, natural law has two direct implications for political legitimacy. First, since each man is equal to every other with respect to his right of disposing of "his own," *only a man's consent* can legitimately place him under the power or rule of another. It was just this understanding which made Marchmont Nedham's book, in spite of its faults, "so ancient a monument of liberty and political knowledge in England." Nedham had asserted the "most excellent maxim" which later Englishmen had "englarged on, with great success": that "the original and fountain of all just power and government is in the people." A hallmark of the American Revolution was its success in fully demonstrating and exemplifying among men this maxim, for in the Revolution Americans had exhibited to the world for the first time in human history an exam-

¹⁰ Adams seems to have accepted the existence of a separate moral faculty without having been concerned to identify precisely the nature of that faculty. Compare note 46 below.

zo Ibid., VI, 234. I mean the term "modern" here as do such diverse scholars as C.B. MacPherson and Leo Strauss when they interpret the turn in political theory which occurred at least as early as Thomas Hobbes and achieved its "liberal" form with John Locke. The older tradition had made the duties of human beings its primary concern and had understood those duties in terms of the proper ends of human life. The new view emphasized the claims which each man could legitimately make for himself against others and justified those claims in terms of the natural beginnings of human action in the passions. Under the modern view, then, natural law does not state positive obligations to benefit others but only the limits to which self-claims can go; we are bound not to hurt others, at least when our own preservation is not at stake.

²¹ Ibid., VI, 234.

ple of governments "founded on the natural authority of the people, without a pretense of miracle or mystery."²²

One of the weaknesses of Nedham's reasoning about the political implications of the principle of consent was his mistaken inference that only simple democracy could satisfy its requirements. Adams readily agreed with Nedham that "a *free* government is most natural, and only suitable to the reason of mankind," but he disputed Nedham's contention that only a democracy can be accurately denoted free. As Adams understood the principle of consent, it means two things about the forms which governments can legitimately take. First, since the origin of all just power is in the people, they have a right to erect whatever form of government they consider best suited "for their liberty, happiness, and prosperity." The people may choose to retain power in their own hands, in which case they have constituted themselves as a simple democracy, in which the vote of the greater number is decisive. But simple monarchy or aristocracy or some mixture of the three simple forms of government is no less compatible with the principle of consent than is simple democracy, since that principle merely specifies that the people are the origin of just government, not that they must exercise government themselves. The people must *constitute* government; they need not actually run government.²³

In an important respect, however, the principle of consent does alter the traditional meaning of the non-democratic forms of government. By deriving government from the consent of men who are by nature equal in rights, Adams identified a power in the people which they can never fully relinquish. As he later said to John Taylor, "the *summa potestatis*, the supreme, sovereign, absolute, and uncontrollable power, is placed by God and nature in the people, and they can never divest themselves of it."²⁴ Under any form of government, the people retain a legitimate power of judging

²² *Ibid.*, VI, 160, 116, 292-93. Adams devoted the last half of volume III of the *Defence* to a critique of Nedham's book, *The Excellency of a Free Government*, published in 1656.

²³ Adams, *Works*, VI, 114 and 117 (italics mine).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, VI, 469: letter to John Taylor of Caroline, April 1814 (italics mine). Adams' series of thirty—two letters to Taylor, all written during April of 1814, are his only extended response to criticisms of the *Defence*. They were induced by Taylor's attack on the *Defence* in his *An Inquiry into the Principles and Policy of the Government of the United States* (Fredericksburg, Va.: Green and Cady, 1814).

whether the governors are in fact securing their liberty, happiness, and property. The same people who erect a particular government "have at all times a right to interpose, and to depose for mal-administration—to appoint anew." This right in fact exists even under the traditional form of hereditary monarchy, for while the people have "a right to appoint a first magistrate . . . for perpetuity in his descendents," no appointment of a king "can be, in the nature of things, for a longer period than *quam diu se bene gesserit*, the whole nation being judge." The clear implication of the people's power is that all legitimate forms of government other than simple democracy are *representative* government, in which the governors, even if appointed for life or perpetuity, hold office only "until further order" as that order is given by the nation. Even an hereditary monarch, to be legitimate, must be viewed as "the representative of the whole nation," and his possession of office is finally subject to the judgment of those he represents regarding the adequacy of his performance.²⁵

While the people possess ultimate sovereignty, however, legiti-

²⁵ Adams, *Works*, VI, 117. See also *ibid.*, VI, 469: letter to John Taylor of Caroline, April, 1814. Adams' use of "the people" in this context was made possible by that same shift in political theory which had transformed the meaning of natural law. The modern meaning of "the people" is directly linked to the emergence of the distinction between *sovereign* people and *representative* government. In the above discussion, "the people" designates the fundamental unity of the political community as consisting of the *will* of equal individuals to live together; the government which they bring into being merely implements—in this sense "re-presents" in action—the intention of each individual to have a cooperative existence. Traditionally, however, "the people" referred, not to the whole, but only to the many or majority (and usually the poor majority) and the problem of political unity was treated, not in terms of "sovereignty" and "representation," but with sole attention to "ruling" the city. Aristotle, for instance, viewed the city as a composite of qualitatively diverse classes, of which "the people" was only one ("DEMOS" or "PLETHOS"). The several classes, on their own terms, had nothing in common; each made an exclusive claim to rule based on its own vision of justice absolutized. The only semblance of unity which could be attained between such conflicting classes occurred when one class successfully imposed its rule on the others and thereby determined the direction which the life of the composite would take. In this older view, then, the assertion that "the people" had constituted a government could only have the restricted meaning that the many had successfully established their rule over other classes. Such an assertion had no necessary connection with legitimate or good government.

While Adams occasionally used "the people" in other contexts to designate the social order of the many, this more restricted usage was for him governed by the modern doctrine of popular sovereignty: the acts of the many can be legitimate only as they aid the intention of the people *as a whole* to live together securely.

mate government is not simply identical with popularly willed government, but has a second requirement imposed by natural law. The very equality which yields consent as one of the principles of political legitimacy also specifies *the ends that government is to serve*. Men are equal, not in all ways, but only with respect to certain natural rights of private possession. Adams generally adopted the traditional English formulation of those rights as "life, liberty, and property" or "liberty, property, and safety."²⁶ The only cause which could have "prevailed upon reasonable creatures" to consent to government was the discovery by experience that government is necessary "to the preservation of their lives, liberties and properties, from the injustice of another." Again Nedham was correct in asserting that "the end of all government is the good and ease of the people, *in a secure enjoyment of their rights*, without oppression." The proper standard for good government is the Golden Rule transformed by the theorists of modern natural law: government should ensure that we "do to others as we would have others do to us" in the sense that each man should be made to respect the *rights* of others as much as his own. Thus formulated so as to accord with nature, the Golden Rule forms a perfect statement of the principle of justice, "applicable at all times, in all places, among all persons, in all circumstances." just government is characterized by "a constant and perpetual disposition and determination to render to everyone his right," which it does by compelling each man to respect the legitimate private possessions of others. In other words, *justice* is the proper end of government, and justice was understood by Adams to mean securing to each man those things to which he has a right by nature.²⁷

²⁶ *Ibid.*, IV, p. 300. For typical enumerations of the natural rights in the *Defence* and *Davila*, see also *ibid.*, IV, pp. 304, 407, 415, 444, 462-63, 466-68, 557 and 579; V, pp. 115, 288, 453f, 457, 494-96; VI, pp. 65-6, 88-9, 96, 117, 158 (where Adams adds honor and reputation to the list), 242 (where he adds fame), 277-78, 280, 300 (where he adds tranquillity), 395 (where he adds our conveniences, comforts and pleasures) and 399.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, VI, 65 (italics mine) and 475. Adams' understanding of justice as the end of government is of a piece with his adoption of the modern view of politics in other respects. The sovereign people do not simply will to live together, but will to cooperate for the purpose of making their equal natural rights secure against outsiders and each other. On this one purpose they can unanimously agree, but on no other, for they do not all naturally or necessarily have any other purpose in common. The end of government, then, is to ensure that no man's rights are invaded, and to achieve this purpose, government must treat all men under its jurisdiction as equally entitled to protection.

In contrast, Aristotle viewed political justice as the distribution of equal

As elaborated thus far, natural law teaches that legitimate government is circumscribed by liberty in a dual sense: it derives from the consent of equally free individuals, and it aims at securing the natural rights which comprise the independence of the individuals. But while natural law circumscribes legitimate government, it does not indicate the *necessity* of government. Indeed, men could live without government "if they would consult their reason, and obey their consciences," for reason and the conscience dictate justice.²⁸ Why, then, can men not live together "naturally" at peace, with the justice of their relations emerging immediately from the operation of reason in each individual? The answer, according to Adams, lies in the fact that "passions and appetites are parts of human nature, as well as reason and the moral sense."²⁸ And the natural tendency of the passions is to dominate reason. They "are all unlimited; nature has left them so. . . . They certainly increase too, by exercise, like the body." Against reason's dictate of justice, then, the passionate preference for self rules action like "a usurping domineering, cruel tyrant."³⁰ Since men are dominated by passion, they cannot be trusted to direct their own lives according to the demands of reason. The passions will conform to nature's laws only if compelled to do so by some force other than the reason of the individual. Government is the agency which can accomplish the task of bringing the passions into conformity with reason, provided that government is properly constructed to meet the requirements of the task.

things to equals, and unequal things to unequals. The determination of who is equal and who unequal depends, he said, on the contribution which each makes to the proper end of politics. That end is not solely or primarily security; it is preeminently a good quality of life. To this end the contributions from the several classes will by nature be unequal and the classes should be treated accordingly, with their benefit from politics being determined by the degree of importance of their contribution. Since "the people" (the many), for instance, can contribute necessary conditions for the good life, they must be recognized as having some legitimate claims on politics. But since the people can contribute only necessary and not sufficient conditions for such a life, their claim is not the preeminent one in the best city and the members of that class ought not be treated by government as equal to those whose contribution to a good way of life is greater.

Adams did not deny that human excellence is a proper concern of government, but he treated excellence as a necessary means to just government in the modern sense, not as the primary end of government.

²⁸ Adams, *Works*, VI, 141. Cf. IV, 407 and VI, 114.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, VI, 115.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, IV, 406-07.

It is against this background of Adams' understanding of natural law and its natural weakness that we should view his assertions about the nature of republican government. Adams used the term "republic" to denote "the best of government," but he was acutely aware of the tendency of men of education to abuse that term and thereby confuse the science of politics.³¹ Some men used the word to denote all governments, including the most tyrannical; for these men, "republic" could mean only "public affairs" or the political *per se* and was robbed of any utility for distinguishing the public good from the public evil. Others, like Montesquieu, used the term to identify any government in which rule is vested in more than one person. This usage has the advantage of distinguishing despotism from all other forms of government, but its emphasis on the number or class of men who rule obscures the "true and only true definition of a republic." That true definition, which men have in mind when they use the term republic "more rationally," is a government "in which *all* men, rich and poor, magistrates and subjects, officers and people, masters and servants, the first citizen and the last, are *equally subject to the laws*." A republic, then, is a government distinguished by the fact that the laws rule. The importance of this rule of civil law can be seen if we recall our previous discussion of natural law. Good civil laws stand in the place of natural law. The two kinds of law dictate the same actions, but their mode of operation differs in a decisive respect. Natural law could be said to rule directly only where each man's reflection on the requirements of natural rights governs his action, and this direct rule of reflection, as we have seen, is not to be expected of most men. Civil law, in contrast, uses external mechanisms to move men's passions, which in turn impel men to act as the law requires. Civil laws are thus in one sense an improvement on natural law, for they *effectively* constrain men to act as natural law requires in vain. Given the passionate "weakness" of men's nature, this civil substitute for the direct rule of natural law is "the greatest blessing which mortals can aspire to."³²

But what are good civil laws? Adams' most explicit answer to this question is presented in the first volume of the *Defence* as a response to Turgot and, incidentally, to Richard Price. The Frenchman had written Price, commending him as "the first of his countrymen who has given a just idea of liberty, and shown the falsity, so

³¹ *Ibid.*, V, 452-53.

³² *Ibid.*, IV, 370.

often repeated by almost all republican writers, that liberty consists in being subject only to the laws." In the work which had elicited Turgot's letter of praise, Price had argued:

Liberty is too imperfectly defined when it is said to be 'a Government of LAWS ind not of MEN'. If the laws are made by one man, or a junto of men in a state . . . a government by them is not different from slavery.

Price had attempted, with only partial success, to go beyond this imperfect description of free government by identifying the nature of the law which should rule in a republic. Specifically, Price had insisted that legitimate government "consists only in the dominion of *equal laws* made with *common consent*, and not in the dominion of any man over other men." Adams readily concurred with the added criterion of good law, though he pointed out that republican writers "have always explained their meaning" when they discussed the rule of law to be "*equal laws* made by *common consent* or the *general will*." That criterion is necessary but still does not complete the notion of just law.

Turgot seemed to have understood the shortcoming of Price's effort, for immediately after commending Price, he had observed that liberty would not consist of being subject only to laws, "even if we suppose all laws to be the work of the entire nation assembled, because, in fact, the individual has certain rights which the nation cannot take from him, but by violence and an illegal use of force." Adams was quick to "cheerfully agree" with Turgot on the need for a second criterion of just law. Indeed, Adams put forward a bold case to emphasize Turgot's point:

. . . a- nation may be unanimous in consenting to a law restraining its natural liberty, property, and commerce, and its moral and religious liberties too, to a degree that may be prejudicial to the nation and to every individual in it.

These, he said, "would be all equal laws made with *common consent*." To accommodate Turgot's correct observation, then, "we must add to Dr. Price's ideas of *equal laws* made by *common consent*, this other—for the *general interest* or the *public good*." In the passage under consideration, Adams' treatment of the general interest seems at first almost flippant: "it is generally supposed," he said, "that nations understand their own interest better than another; and,

therefore, they may be trusted to judge the public good."³³ We are left with no indication of how the general interest differs from common consent.

Later in the *Defence* Adams returned to the subject of the rule of law and focused especially on the question of the public good or general interest. The passage deserves to be quoted in full, for it gives Adams' most extended statement of the "true and only true definition of a republic."

The word *res*, everyone knows, signified in the Roman language wealth, riches, property; the word *publicus*, quasi populus, and per syncope populus, signified public, common, belonging to the people; *res publica*, therefore, was publica res, the wealth, riches, or property of the people. *Res populi*, and the original meaning of the word *republic* could be no other than a government in which the property of the people predominated and governed; and it had more relation to property than liberty. It signified a government, in which the property of the public, or people, and of every one of them, was secured and protected by law. This idea, indeed, implies liberty: because property cannot be secure unless the man be at liberty to acquire, use, or part with it, at his discretion, and unless he have his personal liberty of life and limb, motion and rest for that purpose. It implies, moreover, that the property and liberty of all men, not merely of a majority, should be safe: for the people or public, comprehends more than a majority, it comprehends all and every individual; and the property of every citizen is a part of the public property, as each citizen is a part of the public, people, or community. The property, therefore, of every man has a share in government, and is more powerful than any citizen, or party of citizens; it is governed only by the laws.³⁴

In Adams' careful formulation a republic is "a government in which the property of the people predominated and governed." "The people" and "property" now figured as the decisive terms in his statement of what he meant by the rule of law. By "the people" he clearly continued to mean "all and every individual," not merely a majority. The passage on *res publica* thus incorporated a crucial part of Adams' earlier discussion of law: the law which should rule is equal law made by common consent. But Adams here went on to refine the other major term of good law: that it serves the public good or general interest. The public good is identical with the property of the people, which should be the object of the law. This proposition warrants elaboration.

³³ *Ibid.*, IV, 401-03.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, V, 453-54.

We may take for granted that when Adams used the term property, his meaning included the whole range of things which human beings can possess. The striking thing about the passage on *res publica*, however, is that Adams meant more than simple possession. Property, he said, "implies liberty." One does not securely possess a thing unless he is "at liberty to acquire, use, or part with it, at his discretion." Property, then, implies the opportunity to use one's possessions to acquire more property; property in general is secure only if *capital* is included among protected things. Moreover, property can be disposed of at will only if the owner is himself at liberty. Property, then, also implies that one's life and one's capacity to "move" under his own determination are protected by government; property in general is secure only if the *rudimentary civil liberties* are maintained, especially the liberties which consist in the ability to appeal to the law for protection in one's own case. Adams thus used an expansive understanding of property to set forth a particular articulation of natural rights. He avoided any cleavage between "property rights" and "human rights" by taking property as the central human right and connecting the other rights to it. He indicated by this articulation that good law is to have one primary object—what we might call "liberal" property—because by pursuing that object fully, government will encompass all of its proper objects. It is with this meaning in mind that he says elsewhere in the *Defence* that in a republic "the property of the people should . . . decide the rule of justice."³⁵

Adams' characterization of the law which should rule man brings us to the point at which an inquiry into principles of liberty must give way to an investigation of principles of political architecture. A republic is a government in which law rules in the place of men, and the only law which can truly be said to rule *in the place* of men (i.e., instead of the personal preferences of some men) is the law which is equally determined by both the will and the interest of all men. Put differently, civil rules most fully approximate reason or natural law when both their origin and their end are determined by what all men have in common by nature. But as Adams has told us, men are moved by passion and "laws are neither made by angels, nor by horses, but by men."³⁶ How, then, can good civil laws be created and enforced by passionate men?

³³ *Ibid.*, IV, 295, discussing Cicero.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, IV, 404, discussing James Harrington.

The Principles of Political Architecture

Adams' major task in the *Defence* and *Davila* was to present and correctly settle the problem of constructing effective government, Having identified the constituents of the law which should rule. Adams turned to the "great question":

. . . what combination of powers in society, or what form of government, will compel the formation, impartial execution, and faithful interpretation of good and equal laws, so that the citizens may enjoy the benefit of them, and may be sure of their continuance?

The laws will rule only if men can find a method of *compelling* the formation, impartial execution, and faithful interpretation of them. In order to discover that method of compelling, the political architect must take "an extensive view of the subject; and the first inquiry should be, what kind of beings men are?" An adequate science of political architecture thus requires a prior inquiry into the elements of man's nature which can be made to support the rule of law. Only by understanding these elements and their operations can we adequately address the question of how to arrange political power so that men are made to act in favor of just law.³⁷

In his attempt to identify the relevant elements of human nature, Adams found most of his modern predecessors in political science singularly misguided. On the one hand stood the French circle of Turgot, Condorcet, and their disciples, all deriving their understanding of man from Voltaire and Rousseau. These men based their dangerous political prescriptions on a false hope that "knowledge and benevolence" would spread universally among mankind and would incline men toward just actions.³⁸ On the other hand stood the great English defenders of the principles of liberty, like Locke, whose political prescriptions were erroneously grounded on the view that man is naturally asocial and that human nature, moved solely by the concern with self-preservation, is devoid of supports for man's unselfish obligations.³⁹ Both strands of modern political sci-

³⁷ *Ibid.*, IV, 406.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, VI, 414-15; letter to Samuel Adams, 18 October 1790.

³⁹ Adams praised Locke's investigation of the human understanding and his defense of the principles of liberty; on both these matters, Adams was deeply indebted to him. But on the principles of political architecture, Adams once said to Jefferson, "I did say in my *Defence* and my *Discourses on Davila*, though in an uncouth Style, what was new to Lock [*sic*], to Harrington, to Milton, to Hume, to Montesquieu, to Reauseau [*sic*], to Turgot, Condorcet, to Rochefaucault, to Price, to Franklin and to yourself; and at that time to almost all Europe and

ence had given insufficient attention to the "first inquiry" and had consequently drawn mistaken conclusions about human nature,⁴⁰ The French overestimated the power of human benevolence, while the English underestimated the possibility of finding a substitute for benevolence. Adams' task was to correct the French view by showing the power of human passion over benevolence but also to correct the English view by delineating the true nature of human passion.

Adams described men, not as asocial, but as naturally gregarious. Their gregariousness consists of various "passions, appetites, and propensities, as well as a variety of other faculties," but in Adams' view the key elements of human gregariousness are two. First, nature has added to the second law of nature (respecting the rights of others) "simple *Benevolence*, or an affection for the good of others." That is, just as nature supports the first law (preserve self) by providing men with inclinations toward their own good, so she lends support to the second law by including in man's nature a desire or passion for the good of others.⁴¹ Benevolence, however, is only "in some degree" a support for the second law of nature for two reasons. First, the scope of benevolence in most men does not encompass society; rather, most men "confine their benevolence to their families, relations, personal friends, parish, village, city, county, province" but seldom "extend it impartially to the whole community." Second, benevolence is not an adequate support for the second natural law because "alone it is not a balance for the selfish affections." Unlike the selfish affections, which provide sufficient support for the law of self preservation, the benevolent affections themselves require further support in order to "make us good members of society." Nature has, therefore, "not confided wholly in [man's] laudable improvement of these divine gifts" of conscience and benevolence, but has "kindly added to benevolence, the desire of reputation. *Spectemur agendo* expresses the great principle of activity for the good of others," for by that desire nature has attached effective rewards and punishments to men's unselfish obligations.⁴²

America." See *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*. Ed. by Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959) 2 vols., hereafter cited as *Adams—Jefferson Letters* and relevant volume; the present quotation occurs at IL 357: letter to Thomas Jefferson, 15 July 1813. For Adams' specific criticism of Locke's legislative proposals, see Adams, *Works*, IV, 463-64.

⁴⁰ Adams, IV, 406.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, VI, 234.

⁴² *Ibid.*, VI, 8,234 and 246.

Nature has ordained it, as a constant incentive to activity and industry, that, to acquire the attention and complacency, the approbation and admiration of their fellows, men might be urged to constant exertions of beneficence. By this destination of their natures, men of all sorts, even those who have the least of reason, virtue or benevolence, are chained clown to an incessant servitude to their fellow creatures; laboring without intermission to produce something which shall contribute to the comfort, convenience, pleasure, profit, or utility of some or other of the species, they are really thus constituted by their own vanity, slaves to mankind 43

Adams used the word "slave" advisedly: under the irresistible stimulus of the passion for distinction, men are, to recall the words of one of Adams' favorite authors, "instruments in the hands of another, in the hands of 'Providence, to carry on ends . . . , which they themselves have not in their view.'" ⁴³ Nature has thus not only "intended [men] for society," but has "furnished them with passions, appetites, and propensities . . . calculated . . . to render them useful to each other in their social connections."⁴⁵

One might well raise the question of whether the passion for distinction is not itself a part of the "selfish system," since, unlike benevolence, it does not move men toward the good of others as its *primary* object. There is, however, a key difference between *spectemur agendo* and selfishness as it had been understood in the Lockean perspective. In the latter, the natural human goods are solely individual and private; men may well be led by their "selfish" desires to relate peacefully to each other, but such relationships are calculated instruments for the attainment of essentially solitary goods. In contrast, the passion for distinction constitutes a sphere of human good which depends essentially on human relatedness; men can have the pleasure of notice only when they live with others and act in ways which induce their attention.

Political Architecture: The Natural Order of the Few

Within his general view of man as naturally social, Adams explored the nature of the passion for distinction. To speak of man as gregarious is merely to identify a human inclination to "go in

⁴³ *Ibid.*, VI, 245.

⁴⁴ The quotation is from the first of fifteen sermons by Joseph Butler which are appended to many editions of his *Analogy of Religion*. Adams read Butler and copied parts of Butler's works into his commonplace book shortly after graduation from Harvard.

⁴⁵ Adams, *Works*, VI, 232.

flocks or herds, like sheep or partridges."⁴⁶ But Adams went beyond that mere assertion and identified the nature of the inclination which takes men into relationships with one another, and which largely determines the character of those relationships. The core of the passion for distinction is suggested in the literal meaning of the Latin, *spectemur agendo*: "we are watched" or "we are seen acting." This human concern with the mere fact of others' seeing us becomes clear in Adams' characterization of the plight of the poor man. Relying on a passage in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*,⁴⁷ he suggested that at bottom the poor man's response to his actual poverty, like the rich man's response to the prospect of poverty, is not simply an abhorrence of physical want, or a fear that he will not be able to preserve himself; it is a sense of shame. Adams then asked the question, "Why . . . should any man be ashamed to make known his poverty?" The answer of "nature, experience, and mankind" is that he feels shame because men "take no notice of him."

He feels himself out of the sight of others, groping in the dark. Mankind takes no notice of him. He rambles and wanders unheeded. In the midst of a crowd, at church, in the market, at a play, at an execution, or coronation, he is in as much obscurity as he would be in a garret or a cellar. He is not disapproved, censured, or reproached; *he is only not seen*. This total inattention is to him mortifying, painful and cruel. . . . To be wholly overlooked and to know it, are intolerable.

46 Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language in which the words are deduced from their Originals, Illustrated in their Different Significations by Examples from the Best Writers*, 2 vols. (London: W. Straham for J. and P. Knapton, 1755). The quote is from volume I; neither of the volumes of the folio first edition is paged.

47 In his *Davila* essays, Adams relied heavily on Adam Smith, *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*. To my knowledge, Adams nowhere discussed his indebtedness to Smith, but his practice in the *Davila* indicates that for him Smith stood as the single great exception to Adams' indictment of his predecessors concerning their knowledge of the springs of human action. Others had seen the importance of the passions (see Adams, *Works*, IV, 408-09), but only Smith had correctly identified and dissected the leading passion of the soul. For Adams' reliance on Smith, compare *Davila* discourses VI, VII and especially VIII with Smith, *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part I and especially the third section, second chapter of that Part.

Adams' use of Smith presupposed that "great writer's" understanding of sympathy as a crucial mechanism in man's gregariousness. But Adams continued to view moral judgments themselves as made by reason, conscience, or the moral sense, and did not take up Smith's discussion of sympathy as a way of accounting for moral approbation and disapprobation without positing any separate faculty of moral judgment.

At a minimum, then, man desires to be seen by his kind, and abhors neglect or obscurity.⁴⁵

Yet mere concern for notice, while at the root of the passion for distinction, seldom constitutes the whole desire. The ordinary usage of *spectemur agendo* suggests the more common nature of the desire: we are not simply "watched" or "seen acting," but are "looked at for the purpose of testing" or "considered critically." Thus when one follows even the poor "into their scenes of life," there is "a kind of figure which the meanest of them all attempts to make; a kind of little grandeur and respect, which the most insignificant study and labour to procure in the small circle of their acquaintances." Mere attention from others is seldom adequate for most men. Humans seek not simply attention and consideration, but "congratulation," which involves a positive conclusion to the act of others when they critically judge or test us. We want to be approved, and it is this desire which is the "key to the human heart; to the history of human life and manners; and to the rise and fall of empires." Specifically, men desire that kind of approval which is an acknowledgement of the "superiority which [men] have or fancy they have over some others."⁴⁹ The approval which is akin to congratulation or admiration singles a man out and sets him apart from others.

For a science of politics, of course, it is crucial to know not only that men desire to be approved as superior but by what means they attempt to satisfy the desire. Adams' treatment of that question began by expressing a moral perplexity. He distinguished three qualities of excelling: blessings of fortune ("birth, riches, and honors"), qualities of body ("beauty in the face, elegance of figure, grace of attitude") and qualities of mind ("discretion, wit, sense, and many virtues").⁵⁰ These qualities, according to Adams, are not equally effective as resources for gaining the attention of others. The blessings of fortune have the greatest power to "surprise" and "astonish" others. Qualities of body are less effective than are wealth, nobility, or honors but nevertheless outrank intellectual and moral excellence in the power to excite admiration in others.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Adams, *Works*; VI, 239.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, VI, 239 and 248.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, VI, 234-35. Compare IV, 392-397. The immediate source of Adams' distinction was almost certainly James Harrington's "Oceana." See *The Political Writings of James Harrington*, ed. Charles Blitzer (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1955), 43-44.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, VI, 235-40.

Having described these qualities as efficient causes, Adams then noted that the same qualities rank differently when considered as "final causes" or in terms of their capacity to contribute to genuine human happiness. Indeed, experience reveals that the hierarchy of qualities viewed as true excellences is exactly the reverse of their ranking as means of excelling. Viewed as final causes, the "intellectual and moral qualities" rank the highest, for they are "most within our power, and undoubtedly the most essential to our happiness." Next in importance come "the personal qualities of health, strength, and agility," while lowest in their contribution to genuine happiness are the qualities of fortune. A man "has less reason to esteem himself for these than for those of his mind or body." But reason is lost upon mankind. "There is less disposition to congratulation with genius, talents, or virtue, than there is with beauty, strength, and elegance of person; and less with these than with the gifts of fortune and birth, wealth and fame." To these last qualities "the homage of the world is devoted . . . in a remarkable manner." They are "everywhere acknowledged to glitter with the brightest lustre in the eyes of the world."⁵²

This primacy of the qualities of fortune over those of the mind and body is directly related to the character of the passion for distinction as *spectemur agendo*. The passion has as its elemental object being seen, and makes of man what Adams was later to call a "stareing [*sic*] animal."⁵³ Those things will elicit attention which are "more level to the capacities, and more obvious to the notice of mankind in general." The more apparent or visible a good, the more readily men are able to respond to it, and the goods which are most apparent are those which are external to a man, those things that are "without him, as place, riches, favor, Prizes of accident." In contrast, the qualities of mind and body, and especially the former, are hidden. At best, a man's intellectual and moral excellence would have to be judged from his deeds rather than from his "condition" or "situation," and even his deeds would be an uncertain guide to his inner qualities.⁵⁴ In the actual process of judging by most men, the inner qualities are almost always eclipsed by the glitter of external things. Consequently, the disproportionate possession of the blessings of fortune will give some men in every society "a natural and inevitable influence" over others. Since this disproportionate pos-

⁵² *Ibid.*, VI, 241-42 and 253.

⁵³ *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, II, 438.

⁵⁴ *Adams, Works*, VI, 253 and 265.

session is in part ordained by nature and can never be obliterated, an order of the few will naturally arise in every society and will almost invariably be characterized by those qualities that rank lowest as final causes.⁵⁵ Adams' inquiry into human gregariousness as a possible support for our unselfish obligations thus seems to have reached an impasse: the core of gregariousness seems to attach us to those very things that are the antithesis of genuine excellence.

Adams dealt with this apparent impasse by making a series of judgments about the likelihood that merit, either of character or act, would be connected with the various "influential" qualities of fortune. Taken together, the key passages on this subject in the *Defence* and *Davila*⁵⁶ indicate Adams' view that the several blessings of fortune are not equally disjunctive with merit. Of the three natural sources of influence, two have no necessary connection even with "talents," let alone with "virtue." Men may acquire wealth "by descent from their ancestors" rather than "from greater skill, industry, and success in business." Illustrious birth may indicate nothing whatsoever about the capacities of descendants, for "we cannot presume that a man is good or bad, merely because his father was one or the other." But reputation or fame, considered apart from birth or wealth, can only be based on deeds and therefore must be connected with talent.

Some, in a long course of service in an army, have devoted their time, health, and fortunes, signalized their courage and address, exposed themselves to hardships and dangers, lost their limbs, and shed their blood, for the people. Others have displayed their wisdom, learning, and eloquence in council, and in various other ways acquired the confidence and affection of their fellow-citizens to such a degree, that the public have settled into a kind of habit of following their example and taking their advice 57

As Adams explained in *Davila*, relying again on Adam Smith, such services are essential for the man of inferior rank "if he hopes to distinguish himself."

He must acquire superior knowledge in his profession, and superior industry in the exercise of it; he must be patient in labor, resolute in danger, and firm in distress. These talents he must bring into public view, by the difficulty, importance, and at the same time,

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, IV, 392 and VI, 285-86 and 271-72.

⁵⁶ For Adams' major discussions of the natural *aristoi* in the *Defence* and *Davila*, see *ibid.*, Works, IV, 391-97 and *ibid.*; VI, 239-40, 259-62 and 270-71.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, IV, 392, 396 and 397.

good judgment, of his undertakings, and by the severe and unrelenting application with which he pursues them. Probity and prudence, generosity and frankness, must characterize his behavior upon all ordinary occasions; and he must at the same time, be forward to engage in all those situations, in which it requires the greatest talents and virtues to act with propriety; but in which the greatest applause is to be acquired by those who can acquit themselves with honor.⁵⁸

Not surprisingly, the quality of fortune which is most likely to be akin to the qualities of mind is also generally the least efficacious in attracting the attention of mankind. Reputation, which a man earns solely by "the labor of his body, and the activity of his mind," usually comes only with "long service" or "continual and long exertion."⁵⁹ As a consequence, such reputation is acquired slowly and is often no match for the "glitter" of birth and wealth as sources of attention." As Adams later commented to Jefferson, "What chance have Talents and Virtues in competition with Wealth and Birth? and Beauty?" His answer reflects the difficulty which he had identified in *Davila*: "Birth and Wealth have prevailed over Virtue and Talents in all ages. The Many will acknowledge no other *'aristoi*.'" Thus to Jefferson's question, "who are the *aristoi*?," Adams responded:

Philosophy may Answer "The Wise and Good." But the World, Mankind, have by their practice always answered, "the rich, the beautiful and well born."⁶¹

The difficulty which deeds encounter when pitted against wealth and birth as sources of attention can actually transform reputation. from the quality of fortune most akin to merit into the quality of fortune which is politically the most dangerous. Ambition may sup-

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* VI, 260. It is presumably this link between reputation and deeds based on the "more important virtues" that occasionally led Adams to equate reputation and merit in his enumeration of the qualities of fortune. See, for instance, *ibid.*, 397.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, VI, 240, IV, 397 and VI, 261.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, VI, 237, 248 and 260.

⁶¹ Adams-Jefferson Letters, II, 371 and 352. Adams attempted to correct the false optimism of Jefferson by showing how the various qualities of fortune must be used to induce a semblance of genuine merit. Jefferson hoped that in a republic a natural *aristoi* of virtue and talents would find its merit spontaneously acknowledged by the many and would therefore be able to exercise leadership without the trappings of the qualities of fortune. Adams saw that, even in the best republic, the most powerful sources of influence are not identical with merit; he therefore pursued the question of which sources of influence are most likely to be connected with merit or to embody a semblance of merit.

port and encourage the cultivation of the most important virtues in the first stages of a man's rise to fame. But he constantly faces the possibility that a mere "severe and unrelenting application" of such virtues may not be sufficient to bring him into "public view." Adams quoted Adam Smith's astute observations on the "man of spirit and ambition, who is depressed by his situation":

With what impatience does [he] . . . look around for some great opportunity to distinguish himself? No circumstances which can afford this appear to him undesirable; he even looks forward with satisfaction to the prospect of foreign war, or civil dissension; and with secret transport and delight, sees through all the confusion and bloodshed which attend them, the probability of those wished-for occasions presenting themselves, in which he may draw upon himself the attention and admiration of mankind.⁶²

The uncommon weight of birth and wealth as objects of attention thus may lead the ambitious man who can rely on neither of these sources of influence to escalate the deeds by which he seeks the admiration of mankind. It is such escalation that creates the "tribe out of which proceed your patriots and heroes, and most of the great benefactors to mankind." But it is also that escalation which led Adams to add the warning that "for our humiliation, we must still remember, that even in these esteemed, beloved, and adored characters, the passion of ambition although refined by the purest moral sentiments, and intended to be governed by the best principles, is a passion still; and, therefore, like all other human desires, unlimited and insatiable. No man was ever contented with any given share of . . . human adoration."⁶³ In short, the more competitive reputation is with birth and wealth as an effective status resource, the greater are the deeds required to support it, but the more likely are those deeds to turn against the public welfare.

The crucial passages in the *Defence* and *Davila* on aristocracy and the standards of excelling also indicate that, in Adams' understanding, illustrious descent is more likely to be in harmony with genuine merit than is wealth. As indicated earlier, neither wealth nor birth, in contrast to reputation, is necessarily connected with the talents of a man; yet both of the former qualities of fortune may reflect superior capacities in an individual. Wealth may be gained "from greater skill, industry, and success in business." Illustrious

⁶² Adams, *Works*, VI, 260, quoting from Adam Smith, *Theory*, Part I, Section I, Chapter II.

⁶³ Adams, *Works*, VI, 24849.

descent may carry with it the talents which characterized the ancestors.⁶⁴ In Adams' judgment, however, even when wealth and noble birth are connected with talents, the two sets of talents differ, and those possessed by the nobleman are likely to be of greater worth than are those possessed by the man of wealth. The skills of the latter are invariably tied to "business," and men who cultivate business skills are generally moved by avarice, which spawns "treachery, cowardice, and a selfish, unsocial meanness." Pride in mere wealth does not incline men to rise above this level. In contrast, the pride of noble descent at its best looks back to the "talents and virtues, which first produced illustration to ancestors."⁶⁵ Those original talents are close to the "more important virtues" which are cultivated by the man who seeks attention solely by the route of reputation: i.e., the family has at its beginning a "wise and virtuous father" or is initially characterized by men of "virtue and honor" who have earned the gratitude and esteem of the many because they have been "benefactors to the country." Pride of birth can thus incline descendants to "support the reputation of the [family] name" by replicating one or more of the talents and virtues which "first produced illustration to ancestors."⁶⁶

A critical practical question, of course, is whether the possible superior merit of illustrious descent is likely to be actualized in those of noble birth. Adams' answer was affirmative, but included a distinction between two kinds of merit which may attach to illustrious descent. The highest merit occurs when the original virtues and talents of ancestors are inherited by their descendants because of "birth, nurture, and education."⁶⁷ This excellence, however, is displaced in many noblemen by a second and lesser merit. Most young noblemen learn to support the dignity of their rank, not by cultivating the original excellence of their ancestors, but by developing certain arts of appearance.

As all his works, as all his motions are attended to, he learns an habitual regard to every circumstance of ordinary behavior, and studies to perform all those small duties, with the most exact propriety. As he is conscious how much he is observed, and how much mankind are disposed to favor all his inclinations, he acts, upon the most indifferent occasions, with that freedom and elegance

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, IV, 392 and 396.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, VI, 271.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, IV, 394 and 393; VI, 505 and 271.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, IV, 394.

which the thought of this naturally inspires. His air, his manner, his deportment, all mark that elegant and graceful sense of his own superiority, which those who are born to inferior station can hardly ever arrive at. These are the arts, by which he proposes to make mankind more easily submit to his authority, and to govern their inclinations according to his own pleasure; and in this he is seldom disappointed. These arts, supported by rank and preeminence, are, upon ordinary occasions, sufficient to govern the world.⁶⁸

While there is no denying that Adams despised these arts, he did not wholly condemn them, for they are superior to the characteristics which typify the man of wealth. The critical point is that the young nobleman *is* instructed "to support the dignity of his rank." Even when his whole glory as a nobleman consists in the "propriety of his ordinary behavior," his merit still surpasses the "meanness of sentiment and . . . sordid scramble for money" which characterize the man of wealth. Furthermore, the avarice of the merely wealthy is likely to be accompanied by treachery and cowardice, while the nobleman is "seldom defective" in courage, for he must "be willing to expose himself to some little danger, and to make a campaign, when it happens to be the fashion."⁶⁹ In Adams' analysis, the defects of merit in the nobleman appear, not when he is compared to the man of business, but when he is measured against the man who must rely solely on the "more important virtues" in order to gain a reputation.

These reflections on the natural bases of distinction had two political implications for Adams. First, since the rise of an influential few in any society is inevitable, a policy aimed against all distinctions of rank is foolish. Adams understood the French National Assembly to be attempting just such a policy, and in the *Davila* he cautioned Frenchmen that if they continued to be at variance with nature, "the world would soon see which is the most powerful."⁷⁰ But Adams went further: while the rise of an influential few is inevitable, the particular human qualities which are most influential among the few can be affected by politics. Public office is attended by a "complacency and admiration" which is "so sweet and delightful to the human heart" that few can resist its lure. The distribution of offices can therefore be used to increase the influence of some social groups and diminish the weight of others. Specifically, the

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, VI, 259.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, VI, 271 and 260-61.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, VI, 272.

"wisdom of nations" has noted the relative merit of wealth, noble birth, and reputation and has attempted to distribute political honors to men of talents and noble birth in order to offset the influence of the "selfish, unsocial" men of wealth. This in fact was the policy of all Europe prior to the French Revolution, a policy which Adams applauded, though he insisted that it could be improved as an instrument in the defense of liberty.⁷¹

Political Architecture: The Natural Order of the Many

A full understanding of the passion for distinction requires that we look at man not only as the *object* of attention but also as the *agent* of notice, as he responds to other men who excel him in any of the qualities of fortune. Viewing men in this perspective, Adams observed two quite different kinds of human response to the spectacle of superiority in others. Some men react to the glitter of others with envy. The sight of others who excel induces in these men a state of mortification at their own lower status and a desire to bring every outstanding individual down to their level, or to depress him below them. This response, Adams suggested, is especially likely in men who have known higher status but have fallen from it. Such a man experiences most keenly "the awful feeling of mortified emulation."

His desire is disappointed; the pain of a want unsatisfied, is increased by a resentment of an injustice, as he thinks it. He accuses his rival of a theft or robbery, and the public of taking away what was his property, and giving it to another. These feelings and resentments are but other names for jealousy and envy; and altogether, they produce some of the keenest and most tormenting of all sentiments.⁷²

The pain of such a fall from superiority, whether that fall is now real or only apprehended, is a major cause of combativeness and rivalry in society.

While apprehension and rivalry may be the responses of a man to the prospect of another's superiority, they are not necessary responses. The passion for distinction can be successfully pursued only if those who possess disproportionately few of the blessings of fortune do not invariably view their condition as unjust. Indeed, the natural rise of the distinction of ranks depends not only on the

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, VI, 247, 249-51 and 275.

⁷² *Ibid.*, VI, 247 and 249.

absence of resentment but on the positive capability in most men of seeing superiority with *admiration*; they must be able to respond to another's excelling with approbation, congratulation, and wonder. By implication, Adams suggested that such an admiring response is most likely to occur in those who have not yet tasted greatness. His fullest discussion of the response occurs in a passage characterizing the attitude of "the people" toward "the great." The desire for distinction gives the many a "peculiar sympathy" with the satisfactions enjoyed by the great. The explanation for that sympathy can be stated as follows: All men desire to better their condition, not for the sake of ease or pleasure, but for the sake of vanity. When the many view the condition of the few who are great, they see it as "almost the abstract idea of a perfect and happy state." As Adam Smith had said of that state, in the passage on which Adams relied so heavily in *Davila*:

It is the very state which, in all our waking dreams and idle reveries, *we* had sketched out to ourselves as the final object of all *our* desires.⁷³

That is, the people view the condition of the great as the perfection of that condition which is the object of their own efforts. The possibility that the great might actually be less happy than the common people is lost upon mankind, for when they view the condition of the great, the many consider it "in all those delusive colors, in which imagination can paint and guild it."⁷⁴ It is the fact that the joys or presumed joys of the great are the objects of our own aspirations, but are elevated by imagination far above our actual powers of acquisition, that gives emulation the form of admiration rather than envy. Instead of causing us to view the possessions of the great as "theft and robbery," our peculiar sympathy with their condition leads us to "favor all their inclinations and forward all their wishes."

What pity, we think, that any thing should spoil and corrupt so agreeable a situation! We could even wish them immortal; and it seems hard to us, that death should at last put an end to such perfect enjoyment. It is cruel, we think, in nature to compel them from their exalted stations to that humble, but hospitable, home, which she has provided for all her children. . . . To disturb, or to put an

⁷³ Smith, *Theory*, Part I, Section I, Chapter II. Italics mine. Compare Adams at *Works*, VI, 237-38 and 257.

⁷⁴ Adams, *Work*, VI, 257-57.

end to, such perfect enjoyment, seems to be the most atrocious of all injuries.⁷⁵

A politically crucial corollary of the "disposition of mankind, to go along with all the passions of the rich and powerful" is the deference and subordination of the many to the few. What Adams referred to as "our obsequiousness to our superiors" does not arise out of considerations of utility, either private or social. Utilitarian considerations could, of course, lead to a calculated deference or obedience, but in such deference our reasoning about our own or the public's interest would set limits to our submissiveness. But our deference to the great is so far from simply utilitarian that we "desire to serve them for their own sake, without any other recompense but the vanity or honor of obliging them." We are eager to "assist them in completing a system of happiness that approaches so near to perfection" even though "their benefits can extend but to a few" and we may have little or no hope of being included in that number. Through the passion for distinction, then, "nature would teach us to submit to them [the great] for their own sake, to tremble and bow down before their exalted station." Such submission forms the basis or underpinning for "the distinction of ranks and the order of society."⁷⁶ Properly connected with political offices, the deference of the many to the few is also the only adequate support for law-abidingness; it "alone commands effectual obedience to the laws, since without it neither human reason, nor standing armies, would ever produce that great effect."⁷⁷

A second politically significant corollary of admiration is the imitation of the few by the many. "It is commonly said, everything is *regis ad exemplum*; that the lower ranks imitate the higher; and it is true." The power of example which parents exercise on children is replicated socially between the great and the populace. Politically, that imitation is the key instrument by which leaders activate the citizenry; it is the motive which, properly manipulated, excites "the ardor and virtuous emulation of the citizens." But while the imitation itself is natural, the proper manipulation is not. "The wisdom of nations," said Adams, "has taken note of the universal consideration paid to wealth"; but that wisdom has also discerned the tendency of such consideration to excite the passion of avarice in its

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, VI, 257.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, VI, 259.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, VI, 234.

citizens. Avarice has not produced "those virtues of patience, courage, fortitude, honor, or patriotism, which the service of the public required in their citizens in peace and war." On the contrary, it tends to produce in the citizens, as in the wealthy themselves, treachery and cowardice. In fact, imitation of the wealthy ultimately leads the many to resent the moneyed few rather than to defer to it: attention to wealth produces a "selfish, unsocial meanness" which puts the claim of the avaricious first and transforms all social relations into rivalry for monetary gain.⁷⁸ The relation of the laboring many to the few wealthy thus involves "imitation and something more—a desire not only to resemble, but to excel." By contrast, nations have observed that "the general attention paid to birth has produced a different kind of sentiments,—those of pride in the maxims and principles of religion, morals, and government, as well as in the talents and virtues, which first produced illustration to ancestors."⁷⁹ The nobility's distinctive claim to notice directs the attention of the many, not to the quantity of things possessed, but toward the qualities which have earned "national veneration for their names." The nobility is thus removed "farther from vulgar jealousy and popular envy" than are the merely wealthy and is able to elicit from the many "some degree of emulation in knowledge and virtue." Sound politics takes advantage of these imitative tendencies by employing one prejudice to counteract another: "the prejudice in favor of birth, to moderate, correct, and restrain the prejudice in favor of wealth." To ignore all attention to noble families and set all the passions on the pursuit of gain would have a disastrous effect on the moral character and on the unity of a nation.⁸⁰ Adams thus found in the natural tendency of the human mind both a reason and a method for opposing the domination of the nation by the commercial spirit.

Political Architecture: The Problem of the One

In his discussion of the passion of emulation, Adams has given a partial account of the origin of the distinction of ranks in society. The distinctions, considered apart from legal titles, have a common root in the universal desire of man "to be observed, considered, esteemed, praised, beloved, and admired by his fellows." That cora-

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, VI, 95, 244 and 270-71.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, VI, 267 and 271.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, IV, 393 and VI, 271.

mon root has two different manifestations. Men are moved by this passion to accumulate those qualities of fortune which are the most effective means of attracting the notice of others; consequently, men engage in a constant process of comparison and competition as they attempt to distinguish themselves from their peers. Since "nature . . . has ordained that . . . no two men are perfectly equal in person, property, understanding, activity, and virtue, or ever can be made so," men have unequal "means and opportunities" of gratifying their desire to be acknowledged as superior. Thus some men will inevitably be more successful than others in attracting the attention of mankind, and will be driven to even greater efforts to separate themselves from their peers as their passion for distinction increases with exercise.⁸¹

In Adams' view, however, it is equally important to an understanding of the natural rise of the distinction of ranks to consider the fact that those who are poor in the gifts of fortune are not invariably led by the passion for distinction to view their condition as unjust and to react with resentment toward those who are more favored by nature. Men are often moved by this passion to sympathize with the joys of those whose condition represents the ideal to which they aspire; consequently, men frequently express deference toward those who have already attracted the attention of mankind. Only when this second aspect of the passion for distinction is taken together with the first does one have an accurate account of the natural rise of the distinction of ranks. Pride and popularity are the twin bases of social rank; the two have a common ground in the passion for distinction.

This discussion of social orders, however, is incomplete. It has proceeded as if the orders were two in number, while Adams in his political prescriptions almost invariably spoke of *three* rather than two social orders, usually denoting them "the one, the few, and the many" and describing them as "the *natural* division of mankind in society."⁸² Only when all three orders are properly incorporated into government can a sound political structure be maintained. We must therefore confront the issue of whether there is, in Adams' analysis of man's gregariousness, any natural basis for the third order, the order of "the one."

The Adams scholar who examined this question most carefully

⁸¹ Ibid., VI, 232, 285-86 and 271-72.

⁸² Ibid., VI, 428. Italics mine.

came to the conclusion that there is *no* natural basis for the third order. Correa M. Walsh argued that the notion of "the one" was employed by Adams "almost always in connection with government" and was used interchangeably with the notion of king. The king, "while he is the one among the governors, has no class to represent, unless it be some special adherents and partisans or king's friends," who may be drawn from any of the classes; which makes a break in the arrangement." Thus only when Adams desired "to provide an arbiter" between the two basic natural orders and therefore "needed a three-sided arrangement, so as to obtain a balance and an equilibrium," did he speak "of the old threefold divisions, and was not scrupulous how he took them."⁸³

In two important respects Walsh's conclusion regarding Adams' understanding of "the one" is sound. First, while Adams attempted to provide an explicit analysis of the natural basis of the few and the many as social orders, he gave no comparable analysis of the natural basis of "the one" as a special class. Second, Adams almost always discussed "the one" in the context of governing, and frequently suggested that "the one" is a creation of politics rather than an inclusion in politics of an already-existing social order. Yet Walsh went too far in suggesting that there is no natural basis for "the one" and that the existence of the king or executive in politics is *purely* a result of human contrivance. There are at least two natural tendencies which support and even help create kingly power, although those tendencies do not yield a social order of "the one" distinct from government. First, Adams asserted that it "is strictly true, that there is a strong and continual effort in every society of men, *arising from the constitution of their minds*, towards a kingly power."⁸¹ That effort usually grows out of the conflict between the few and many, in which the many seek and support one man as a source of protection. But once the people have found their protector, their passions are quickly and easily transformed from feelings for their own utility to feelings of adulation. The "eternal fault" of the people is "too much gratitude to those who study their humors, flatter their passions, and become their favorites." Moved initially by fear for their own safety, the people thus choose a protector and then transform him into a "golden idol" whom they

⁸³ Correa Moylan Walsh, *The Political Science of John Adams*, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915), 50-51 and 54-55.

⁸⁸ Adams, *Works*, VI, 165. Italics mine.

"adore."⁸⁵ Adams' description of the general disposition of mankind to go along with all the passions of the rich and powerful thus becomes especially applicable to the relation of the many to the one.

A second natural source of kingly power is the increasingly "furious" drive for superiority among those who are disproportionately in possession of the qualities of fortune. As indicated earlier, a major characteristic of emulation is the desire to be acknowledged by others as superior. That passion, like all passions, is by nature unlimited and even grows with exercise or use. Since the particular object of the passion for distinction is admiration, growth of the passion involves an escalation of the efforts by which one attempts to "draw the attention of more eyes." Among most men, that escalation occurs within a comparative framework provided by the scale of social rank. But implicit in men's desire for superiority, and the comparison and competition which it generates, is the longing to "stand in that situation which sets them most in the view of general sympathy and attention." That implicit thrust toward superlative rather than comparative superiority becomes explicit among the few men who constitute "the tribe out of which proceed your patriots and heroes."⁸⁶ These few have ascended the scale of comparative superiority, but their passion for distinction, growing with each success, now presses them to claim the one rank above all others. Their effort necessarily contains the seeds of kingly power in its most absolute form, for the desire of the man who aspires to the superlative rank is to have no rivals for the attention of the world, and the banishment of rivals requires absolute rule over others. The second natural source of kingly power is thus ultimately a second source of tyranny.

Walsh's understanding of Adams' analysis of the natural basis of social orders was therefore only partially correct. The natural workings of the passion for distinction, coupled with natural inequalities of fortune, lead to an actual distinction between two social groupings in every society, independent of politics. The same passion, however, contains the basis for a third order, preeminently political in its actualization. That basis lies in the passion as it operates in both the many and the few: in the former, as a tendency toward adoration of one "golden idol" above all other men; in the few, as the press toward superlative rather than comparative rank.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, VI, 123 and 130.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, VI, 240, 262 and 248.

Adams' social analysis laid a part of the basis for his understanding of the political importance of the monarchic element in government. Since there are strong natural tendencies which support the emergence of one preeminent man, every stable government will make a place for such an individual; any attempt by law to exclude such a person from preeminence would simply invite him to overthrow the established political order. Indeed, one of the major problems for political science is to stabilize the monarchic office in government so that the intense rivalry for that position among the few will not unsettle the whole political apparatus. This difficulty was at the root of Adams' reservations about a popularly elected executive.⁸⁷ But Adams also saw that the "one" can serve a positive and necessary function in the regulation of the emulative passion. In order to bring unity out of the potential collision of many men who are all seeking distinction, the gradations of rank must be reduced to some order in society. This ordering can be effectively accomplished only if honors are distributed by one individual.

This is the true reason, why all civilized free nations have found, by experience, the necessity of separating from the body of the people, and even from the legislature, the distribution of honors, and conferring it on the executive authority of government. When the emulation of all the citizens looks up to one point, like the rays of a circle from all parts of the circumference, meeting and uniting in the centre, you may hope for uniformity, consistency, and subordination; but when they look up to different individuals, or assemblies, or councils, you may expect all the deformities, eccentricities, and confusion, of the Polemic system.⁸⁸

The Task of Political Architecture

Adams' constructive understanding of the task of political architecture can now be formulated in terms of his analysis of human nature. A well-ordered commonwealth is one which establishes a method of enacting and enforcing laws that must "of necessity be wise and equal." That necessity depends on an arrangement of powers by which men are *compelled* "at all times to be real guardians of the laws."⁸⁹ The central problem of the science of political

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, VI, 165. See also 56-7, 118, 124-25, 183, 249 and 255-56.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, VI, 242 and 256. This was the deepest reason for Adams' much maligned concern in the U.S. Senate that the President should not be addressed merely as "George Washington, President of the United States."

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, IV, 413 and 462. Italics mine.

architecture, then, is to discover those mechanisms of compulsion which are consistent with the criteria of legitimate or republican government, and so order the mechanisms of compulsion that they necessarily or inevitably yield republican results. Adams' analysis of the "constitution of the human mind" provided him with the insight that the primary mechanism of human compulsion lies in the dominant human passion. The very passion on which most actual and proposed political solutions had foundered is in fact "a principal means of government"; indeed, in Adams' view, it is the only adequate instrument of government, or the only workable method consistent with republican principles. That passion is ambition or the desire for distinction, which nature has "wrought . . . into the texture and essence of the soul" in such a way that it holds the place of the "great leading passion" in man. The passion for distinction is an irresistible goad which *compels* men to act in ways which transcend mere selfishness and can be directed toward a semblance of genuine virtue. The entire science of government may in fact be "all comprehended in the knowledge of the means of actively conducting, controlling, and regulating the emulation of the citizens." In other words, the science of republican government is the knowledge of how to manipulate a natural and powerful movement of the soul so that it has the consequence of supporting rather than destroying republican principles. In terms of the preceding analysis, the task of political construction is to utilize natural human gregariousness so that it supports the dictates of natural law and thereby gives "authority to reason."⁹⁰

The first task of the wise legislator in his effort to regulate emulation is to actively conduct the passion toward politically useful objects and thereby place the passion "on the side of virtue."⁹¹ The attempt to direct the passion to right objects involves the legislator in manipulating the order of ranks and offices. It is by means of the subordination of ranks that a republic can secure *obedience to the law*. According to Adams, "all governments, even the most democratical, are supported by a subordination of office, and of ranks too"; without such subordination, no government "ever existed . . . but in a state of anarchy and outrage, in a contempt of law and justice, no better than no government." Adams' reasoning was that in order for law to rule, every citizen "must look up to the laws, as

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, VI, 234, 246, 248 and 399.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, VI, 241, 246 and 248.

his masters, his guardians, and his friend." Yet that "looking up to" or reverence for the law itself, considered solely as respect for the public good, is not to be expected of men. In its place, a semblance of reverence for law can be created in the citizen by connecting his natural, pre-political tendency "to go along with all the passions of the rich and powerful" to the political offices of the republic "according to their rank, station, and importance in the state."⁹² Ordered subordination in society "alone commands effectual obedience to laws" because it utilizes one of the most powerful internal compulsions in men to guide them to such obedience. Reliance on such subordination is, in fact, "in the true spirit of republics," for to "such means as these, or to force and a standing army, recourse must be had for the guardianship of the laws."⁹³

Attachment and deference to political officers will, of course, simulate reverence for the laws only if the officers are seen as responsible to the laws or as spokesmen of the laws. Emulation as expressed through the subordination of ranks also contains the possibility of dealing with this problem by *connecting merit with political office*. Just as men ought to revere the law as their master, guardian and friend, so "real merit should govern the world; and . . . men ought to be respected only in proportion to their talents, virtues and services." The difficulty "always has been, how can this arrangement be accomplished," especially when "real merit is confined to a very few" but "the numbers who thirst for respect, are out of all proportion to those who seek it only by merit." In Adams' view, the wise legislator can at least approximate a solution to the difficulty. First, he must make political offices into "honors" which are worth human striving. He can accomplish this first task because "such frivolities" as marks, signs, a ribbon, a garter and a marshall's staff all "bewitch mankind" and "attract the attention of mankind more than parts or learning, virtue or religion."

They [these frivolities] are, therefore, sought with ardor, very often, by men possessed in the most eminent degree, of all the more solid advantages of birth and fortune, merit and services, with the best faculties of the head, and the most engaging recommendations of the heart.

"Trifling distinctions" will make offices "contended for with . . . eagerness in commonwealths and kingdoms." But this is only a necessary and not sufficient condition for connecting merit with political office. In addition, the legislator must give "an intimation"

⁹² *Ibid.*, VI, 288; IV, 462; VI, 258 and 243.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, VI, 234 and 243.

in the titles which he establishes as marks of order and subordination, "not of personal qualities, nor of the qualities of fortune; but of some particular virtues, more especially becoming men in the high stations they possess."⁹¹ The stations themselves are honors which induce human striving, and the "designation" of those honors, or the intimation of the particular virtues which should attach to the stations, shapes the way in which men seek and exercise office, or the standards of normalcy and astonishment by which they attempt to distinguish themselves. The proper designation of political honors can thereby direct into politically useful channels man's natural desire to excel others.

The regulation of the passion for distinction cannot, however, consist solely of actively conducting the passion toward political objects. As a passion, emulation is without any reliable limit internal to the actor. Indeed, the passion grows more furious with exercise, and that exercise is encouraged, not only by the world in general, but by the wise legislator. As it grows more furious, emulation generates rivalries which threaten society with anarchy on the one side or despotism on the other. The passion for distinction must therefore be *controlled* as well as actively conducted, and that control or check "must be in the form of government," which is "intended to set bounds to passions which nature has not limited."⁹⁵

According to Adams, an accurate assessment of the passion for distinction not only points out the need for external checks on men, but also indicates those elements which can compose a form of government adequate to the task of restraining emulation within the bounds of good and equal laws.⁹⁶ Emulation is the basis for the fundamental division of society into "orders," especially the division between the many, the few, and the one man of superlative rank. The second political task is not to eliminate the rivalries among these orders, but to embody the orders, with their rivalries, in government in such a way that they form a perfect balance.⁹⁷ Only when the three natural orders are balanced in government will the laws rule, for only then will men "compel *each other* at all times to be perfect guardians of the laws."⁹⁸ Such a mixed government "produces and necessitates constancy in all its parts."

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, VI, 249-50 and 241-42.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, VI, 263 and 276.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, VI, 91 and 208.

⁹⁷ See, for instance, *ibid.*, IV, p. 354, where Adams speaks of three *orders* and a balance between them. Elsewhere he speaks interchangeably of three branches and a balance. See, for instance, *ibid.*, IV, 284.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, IV, 482.

. . . the king must be constant to preserve his prerogatives; the senate must be constant to preserve their share; and the house theirs. Neither can go beyond its line, without being called back by the other. The legislative must be constant to preserve its rights, and the executive for the same end. . . . It is to this universal vigilance and constancy, which such a constitution renders *necessary and unavoidable*, that the laws owe their perpetual superiority, and are able to make kings, nobles, and commoners, ministers of state and religion, and judges too, *bow with reverence to its decisions*. To this constancy, therefore, is due that delightful tranquillity of mind, arising from a sense of perfect security in the protection of known laws for the enjoyment of life, liberty, honor, reputation, and property.⁹⁹

The great danger, in Adams' view, was that those committed to liberty would refuse to adapt "necessary means to necessary ends" or to use the human passions for republican purposes. After the American and especially the French revolutions, Adams saw many of the self-declared friends of liberty launch attacks on all distinctions of rank and propose to place all political authority in one representative assembly. Such efforts reminded him of a comparison made by Dr. Johnson:

Some philosophers have been foolish enough to imagine, that improvements might be made in the system of the universe, by a different arrangement of the orbs of heaven; and politicians, equally ignorant, and equally presumptuous, may easily be led to suppose, that the happiness of our world would be promoted by a different tendency of the human mind.

The modern champions of liberty were like Johnson's fantastic astronomers, with this difference: fantastic astronomers are only foolish; fantastic politicians are pernicious.¹⁰⁰

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⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, VI, 157-58. Italics mine. Since the element in the balance with the weakest natural basis is "the one," and since that element plays a special role in arbitrating conflict between the few and the many, Adams argued that the kingly power in government needs artificial strengthening. This view underlay his major criticism of American constitutions, that they did not attain an exact balance of the three branches because they did not give the executive an absolute veto on legislation. See, for instance, *ibid.*, IV, 358-59 and VI, 430-31. Generally, on the issue of "perfect balance," see chapter III of my doctoral dissertation, cited above.

no Adams, *Works*, V, 333. The quote, from Johnson's *Adventurer*, No. 45, was used as an epigraph to the third volume of the *Defence*.