

A New Virtue for a New Republic:
Thomas Jefferson's Embrace of Reason and Sentiment

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The impact of the American Revolution, and the republican rhetoric that narrated its many and diverse ideals, led to significant changes in American society. Not only did the founders of the new United States successfully form a large-scale republic, but their civic discourse on liberty in speeches, pamphlets, and other written proclamations reveals the degree to which their understandings of Enlightenment republicanism drove the Revolution. Yet this antiquated discourse would become infused with new ideas of liberty and democracy based on liberal and Lockean theories. Thomas Jefferson played an integral role in this transformation. While the founders' generation was at heart republican, Jefferson's notions of virtue deviated from classical discourse. By studying Jefferson's writings a picture of virtue rooted in both sentiment and reason emerges. This essay uncovers a Jeffersonian understanding of virtue that resists classical republican interpretations and indicates that one's heart and mind both produced a truly virtuous citizen. In doing so, it seeks to portray Jefferson less as the believer in the efficacy of a purely male reason, and to relocate his sense of virtue as something that grows out of domestic relations as much as in the public sphere of politics.

i.

Jefferson's autobiography reveals much about his notions of virtue and the importance that this positive character trait has in a republic. However, it is not statements about Jefferson's own virtue that are remarkable, but rather his opinion of James Madison's character that expose the attributes reflecting truly virtuous men. Madison joined the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1776, but Jefferson noted that the statesman did not engage in debates due to his young age and "extreme modesty."¹

¹ Thomas Jefferson, "Autobiography," in *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch & William Peden (New York: The Modern Library, 1993), 42.

These characteristics prevented him from fully engaging in his republican duty, a duty upon which a representative government devoted to principles of democratic discourse relied in order to thrive. Part of this duty was to engage in debate over legislation and hammer out a consensus, or at least a majority, thereby allowing legislatures to make decisions. In contrast to Madison's early meekness, George Mason, another Virginian, was described in *The Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson* as "cogent in argument" whose "elocution was neither flowing nor smooth; but his language was strong, his manner most impressive, and strengthened by a dash of biting cynicism, when provocation made it seasonable."² Mason had the appropriate, masculine wherewithal to engage in democratic debate which his young counterpart was lacking. Madison's meekness would not last long. By the time he reached the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Madison earned Jefferson's respect and would overshadow even George Mason in displays of virtue.

What had changed Madison by 1787 in the mind of Jefferson was his participation in the realm of republican politics. After a few years of republican seasoning and participation in the House of Burgesses and the Council of State that honed the junior statesman's skills, Jefferson wrote that Madison "acquired a habit of self-possession, which placed at ready command the rich resources of his luminous and discriminating mind." Jefferson acknowledged that Madison had a naturally gifted mind, but it was not until he overcame his youth, inexperience, and modesty that those talents could flourish and become virtuous. Madison's oratorical prowess is exalted by Jefferson as he was described as "never wandering from his subject in vain declamation, but pursuing it closely, in language pure, classical and copious, soothing always the feelings

² Ibid., 42.

of his adversaries by civilities and softness of expression.”³ Where Mason would at times rely on cynicism, implied by Jefferson as being appropriate on rare occasions, Madison was more revered because he abstained from offensive language and displayed a more virtuous bearing. A humble softness and civil tongue therefore becomes a necessary component to Jeffersonian virtue.

In the lexicon of republicanism nothing exemplifies the character of a responsible citizen like the word virtue.⁴ Virtue is the compass that guides a leader as he sets out to protect a republic from corruption. Republics, having no monarchy to govern, rely on its citizens for rule, and many revolutionaries in early America believed only those capable of true virtue rose to the top. The classical rhetoric of republicanism defined the virtuous in terms of their ability to put their self-interested needs on hold to serve a nation; it was a severe, patriarchal model that was not applied to large groups of people. Behavior in public was more important for men serving society. The way a man conducted himself in the private, domestic sphere was not considered to be an important gauge of whether a republican could perform his civic duties. The private and public spheres were severed in the classical republican vision of virtue.

Elitist classical republicanism dominated views of virtue prior to the American Revolution. Historian Gordon Wood writes that “disinterested leadership could only be located among the landed gentry whose income from the rents of tenants came to them ...

³ Ibid., 42.

⁴ Republican language was understood by many Americans during the 18th and 19th centuries, and was not just the rhetoric of the founders. There were, as historian Nathan Hatch writes, “contagious new democratic vocabularies and impulses that swept through American popular cultures.” Hatch believes that the republican rhetoric of virtue and liberty helped to bring about greater democracy as greater numbers of American citizens assumed that freedom, when championed by Jefferson, Washington, and other revolutionaries, was meant for them. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 7.

without their exertion or direct involvement in the interests of the marketplace.”⁵

Relationships in America, prior to the Revolution, had been previously characterized by traditional, English forms. Men who led were looked to as paternalistic fathers. These patrons, in the tradition of deference, knew what was best for those in their care and expected their inferiors to respect their superior reason, knowledge, and intellect. Virtue was seen as a trait of a select group of men; virtuous men had the leisure to pursue the academic study of classical history, and could develop their reason free from the burdens of economic pursuit that characterized the lives of most Americans. After the Revolution this paternalistic, elitist concept of the virtuous, so rooted in classical forms did not completely disappear.

Alexander Hamilton, and many of the founders, wanted a new republic free from monarchy but he did not want to lose the paternalistic characteristics of colonial society that allowed decisions to be made for the whole by men of superior reason and wealth. He wrote, “In republics, persons elevated from the mass of the community, by the suffrages of their fellow-citizens, to stations of great pre-eminence and power, may find compensations for betraying their trust, which, to any but minds animated and actuated by superior virtue, may appear to exceed the proportion of interest they have in the common stock, and to overbalance the obligations of duty.”⁶ Not only was virtue achieved by a minority who could act dispassionately for the good of the new nation, but most of the citizenry could not comprehend the decisions made for them in their own interest. This belief of virtue is indicative of a British republicanism rooted in deference

⁵ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 106.

⁶ Alexander Hamilton, “The Federalist No. 22,” in *The Federalist*, ed. Robert Scigliano (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 136.

and class-consciousness; it is a display of classical notions of virtue unaffected by the forces of democracy and liberty, forces that Jefferson would come to embrace.

The new republic of America would need a virtue that worked, a virtue that could be relied upon to keep its society from fragmenting and ultimately reverting to a monarchical system, but even virtue had its limits. Jefferson wrote, “The fantastical idea of virtue & the public good being a sufficient security to the state against the commission of crimes ... I assure you was never mine.”⁷ The “fantastical idea” was the classical understanding that men could put aside their own self-interest and serve the public as detached, reasonable gentlemen unfettered by sentimental attachment. One had to look no further than the failure of the Roman Republic, in Jefferson’s mind, to prove that this notion of virtue was “fantastical.”

ii.

Thomas Jefferson’s philosophy embraced new ideas that allowed for broader interests in citizenship and virtue. Historian Joyce Appleby describes Jefferson operating in a cultural milieu where “Self-interest – reconceived – turned out to be a mighty leveler, raising ordinary people to the level of competence and autonomy while reducing the rich, the able, and the well-born to equality.”⁸ Jefferson was operating with these understandings, allowing for a broader inclusion into the political process by larger segments of the American population. For Appleby, Jefferson’s republicanism is filtered through liberal assumptions about the rationality and equality of white men. However, this was just one aspect of Jeffersonian virtue and some historians have failed to see the full intricacies of Jefferson’s assumptions. Historian Winthrop D. Jordan believed that it

⁷ Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to Edmund Pendleton, August 26, 1776,” in *Thomas Jefferson Writings*, ed. Merrill Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 756.

⁸ Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 97.

was possible to argue that Jefferson's "'head' was permanently in control of his 'heart,'" indicating that reason dominated Jefferson's views on virtue.⁹ He believed that Jefferson understood women to be "threats to masculinity" and "dangerously powerful sexual aggressors."¹⁰ This simplistic view of Jefferson ignores important role that domesticity and sentiment played in Jefferson's ideas. It also does not attribute a view of the positive, feminizing role of women in society that Jefferson actually held.

Historian Lee Quinby, in "Thomas Jefferson The Virtue of Aesthetics and the Aesthetics of Virtue," writes that the "traditional interpretation [among historians] presents a Jefferson whom reason holds sway over an obedient sentiment."¹¹ Quinby uncovered a feeling, emotional Jefferson whose virtue was an aesthetic enjoyment of one's own inner passions *and* reason. His virtue is portrayed as a sublime state of mind and not some dispassionate, political stance. Quinby states that "Jefferson adumbrated what I call an aesthetics of virtue, a fusion of art and morals, whereby reflective beings are capable of discerning the path to virtue through aesthetic experience."¹² A connection with nature is revealed throughout Jefferson's writings on what constitutes virtue; it is not a complete reliance on the reasoning expressed through scientific thought that kept a citizen without corruption.

Quinby however fails to place Jefferson within a radical, American political realm that embraced many aspects of classical republican assumptions. It is not enough to characterize Jeffersonian virtue as having an aesthetic approach to the world. His beliefs

⁹ Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black American Attitudes Toward the Negro 1550-1812* (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc, 1968), 467.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 464.

¹¹ Lee Quinby, "Thomas Jefferson The Virtue of Aesthetics and the Aesthetics of Virtue," *American Historical Review* 87 (1982): 337.

¹² *Ibid.*, 338.

of what made men virtuous were multi-dimensional and resist reductions that label them simply as being republican or liberal. Jefferson's attempts at clarifying what type of citizen was needed to keep the young republic from corruption, evidence of classical ideas still remaining vital in eighteenth and nineteenth-century American politics, remained a core feature of Jefferson's understandings. For Jefferson, virtue provided not only benefits in the home, but also to the nation and society as a whole.

In his article "Serving God and Mammon: The Lockean Sympathy in Early American Political Thought," Joshua Foa Dienstag attempts to dispel myths that the founders of the American Revolution were operating under purely republican assumptions in their philosophies. Dienstag's thesis is that "it is still more correct to call the political theory of the founders Lockean rather than republican."¹³ Nevertheless, the American Revolution was steeped in republican discourse even though notions of virtue had moved on from its English republican discourse for founders like Jefferson. Dienstag understands that republicanism *and* liberal assumptions guided the founders. In his essay he avoids a complete reduction of the founder's philosophy to merely republican or Lockean principles. He cautions his audience to refrain from wholeheartedly characterizing the founders as classical republicans, a recent trend in American history, and in doing that, expresses the proper approach any analysis of Thomas Jefferson's writings must take. His words reveal that an assembly of many influences took place within Jefferson's public and private philosophies. The founders were motivated deeply by Lockean philosophy, first-and-foremost because they had engaged in a revolution, although some, as evidenced by Hamilton's views of virtue, still retained aspects of

¹³ Joshua Foa Dienstag, "Serving God and Mammon: The Lockean Sympathy in Early American Political Thought," *American Political Science Review* 90 (1996): 497.

classical understandings. Jefferson himself was able to combine aspects of classical republicanism and Enlightenment theories, coupled with a clear notion of the importance of American domestic life, for the formation of his philosophy of virtue. Sentiment and reason combined to produce a truly virtuous person in the mind of Thomas Jefferson, and any full understanding of his philosophy needs to embrace both of these aspects of the proper citizen.

iii.

The republican tradition had long viewed wealth as an avenue by which one developed the proper character to benefit a representative system of government. Jefferson not only departed from this ancient philosophy by embracing sentiment, but his departure from the notion that only the wealthy can possess virtue is similarly striking. In late August of 1776, while Virginia was developing its new state constitution, Jefferson wrote:

my observations do not enable me to say I think integrity the characteristic of wealth. In general I believe the decisions of the people, in a body, will be more honest & more disinterested than those of wealthy men: & I can never doubt an attachment to his country in any man who has his family & peculium in it.¹⁴

This passage from his vast correspondence helps to show that Jefferson embraced a more democratic vision of American politics and a more egalitarian view of its citizenry. The fact that sentiment, evidenced through a man's attachment to his family by the bonds of the heart, creates enough motivation for the kind of participation in politics that republicanism needed to survive was embraced by Jefferson indicates a multi-faceted understanding of virtue. The juxtaposition of family and property versus wealth as being

¹⁴ Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to Edmund Pendleton, August 26, 1776," in *Thomas Jefferson Writings*, ed. Merrill Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 756.

the grand motivator is not surprising considering Jefferson's appreciation of yeomen farmers. What shines through in Jefferson's philosophy is an exaltation of the abilities of those whose labor produced wealth not only for their immediate families, but for the nation-at-large. Financial wealth is rejected as an inadequate prerequisite for disinterested, public service while the true wealth that Jefferson applauded sprang from immediate, personal attachments to one's own small properties that provided food on the table at home and a surplus to meet the demands of an American economy.

Thomas Jefferson's idea of who were the virtuous contained an aspect of classical republicanism that was common to republicans in the 18th century, even though his philosophy expanded on previous themes. It was the notion of scientific reason playing a large role in the minds of the virtuous that tied Jefferson to classical forms. Education was important to Jefferson in order for citizens to develop virtue. Those who did not possess enough reason or education were considered inferior, and in Jeffersonian philosophy, American slaves did not have virtue.

Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* reveals his racist understanding of the black character and his thoughts on the importance of reason. Blacks were portrayed as having no reason and unable to develop rational thought. He wrote that slaves had been "confined to tillage, to their own homes, and their own societies: yet many have been so situated, that they might have availed themselves of the conversation of their masters; many have been brought up to the handicraft arts, and from that circumstance have always been associated with the whites."¹⁵ Fundamental in Jefferson's racist attitudes is a white, cultural superiority that surrounds slaves serving on plantations or in domestic

¹⁵ Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia," in *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: The Modern Library, 1998), 239.

settings. The fact that, according to Jefferson, they did not attempt to learn the ways of white society was ample proof for him that virtue did not reside in this segment of the American people. His lament that they had not “availed themselves of the conversation of their masters” reveals that it was not due to the conditions of slavery that prevented reason from being developed, but an inability to rise up from what Jefferson considered an inferior mentality.

Arts and letters were available to slaves, but blacks did not have virtue in Jefferson’s eyes because “never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture.”¹⁶ Jefferson took his racial bias one step further and implied that it was not only the inability of blacks to embrace and learn from what he considered the superior culture of their masters, but a suggestion that blacks did not have the mental capacity for reason. “Plain narration” was not enough to warrant the title of virtuous; the reasoned must be able to engage in learned discourse and creativity. Not only did he portray slaves as not being artistic or learned, he questioned their ability to make music. He wrote that “In music they are more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time,” but he wonders “whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony.”¹⁷ He saw blacks as incapable of having the logic to develop grand compositions. Native-Americans too were portrayed as deficient when it came to full virtue. He wrote that although they were not surrounded by white culture, as slaves were, Native-Americans “will crayon out an animal, a plant, or a country, so as to

¹⁶ Ibid., 240.

¹⁷ Ibid., 240.

prove the existence of a germ in their minds which only wants cultivation.”¹⁸ This cultivating element of virtue that was so integral to Jefferson’s philosophy is present in Native-Americans, but, like slaves, they were portrayed as lacking the fully developed characters of white culture. The difference, as Jefferson saw it, was that blacks were incapable of developing scientific reason, while at the same time, Native-American’s did have that seed of reason if only to leave it undeveloped.

Jefferson’s understanding of the importance of reason in evaluating whether one was virtuous or not is seen by his refusal to grant non-white Americans this characteristic. Scientific reason plays an important role in any understanding of Jeffersonian virtue. That blacks, in Jefferson’s words, are “in reason much inferior,” and “could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid,” lack virtue is indicative of the understandings shared by the founders.¹⁹ In this vein Jefferson shares some of the ideas behind Hamilton’s assumptions about the need for a minority of educated elites to govern American society, and this helps to establish the limits of Jefferson’s philosophy, but Jefferson departed from previous understandings as assessments of his correspondence reveals. Reason played an important role in virtue, but the capability to reason was only part of Jefferson’s notions of what characterized virtue.

There are a few letters where Jefferson makes suggestions as to what books are to be read. These lists provide insight in to what ideas motivated Jefferson and are exceptional resources for Jeffersonian studies. His nephew Peter Carr received two such lists and Robert Skipwith received a very detailed list of recommended reading in

¹⁸ Ibid., 239.

¹⁹ Ibid., 239.

1771. A liberal, classical education that included Greek and Roman languages, history, science, and literature was one of the hallmarks of a republican gentleman in the eighteenth century. In the letter to Skipwith Jefferson reveals his disdain for the virtue of the classical world. He wrote, regarding apocryphal tales, that “everything is useful which contributes to fix in the principles and practices of virtue,” and “Of those recorded by historians few incidents have been attended with such circumstances as to excite in any high degree this sympathetic emotion of virtue.”²⁰ In Jefferson’s understanding, classical republicanism did not produce enough examples of virtuous men. The failure of the Roman Republic indicated that men did not properly act in accordance with their own political principles and were ultimately unable to fend off the corruptive influence of power.

Learning developed one’s mind, but it was the rewards of learning that seem to interest Jefferson the most. In a letter discussing the importance of studying the divinity of Jesus, Jefferson wrote that Carr may come to the conclusion that there is no God. He wanted Carr “not to be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of it’s [sic] consequences. If it ends in a belief that there is no god, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort & pleasantness you feel in its exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you.”²¹ Individuals used their logic and reason to deconstruct stories and explanations of the world and its history, and the exercise of reason could produce positive sentiment, as evidenced by the affection of those who saw Carr’s attempts at self-growth. Jefferson assures his nephew that even if he can no longer take solace in the idea of an afterlife

²⁰ Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to Robert Skipwith, August 3, 1771,” in *Thomas Jefferson Writings*, ed. Merrill Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 741-42.

²¹ Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to Peter Carr, August 10, 1787,” in *Thomas Jefferson Writings*, ed. Merrill Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 903.

after his studies, indicated by Jefferson's own observation that the story of Jesus' divine birth would have "suspended & reversed the laws of nature," the young Carr would benefit from the appreciation of his efforts by others.²² Jefferson believed that platonic love can provide fulfillment; that the love of others is reward enough rather than just the simple development of one's reasoning through logic and study.

Musing on the disadvantages of a European education Jefferson wrote, "If he [a young student] goes to England, he learns drinking, horse racing, and boxing...He acquires a fondness of European luxury and dissipation, and a contempt for the simplicity of his own country."²³ Jefferson's disdain of non-domestic pursuits is evident as he affirms an understanding of American domestic life that was rooted in familial ties. "Drinking, horse racing, and boxing" were antithetical to the ideals of an educated family man. Luxury, portrayed as the vice of aristocratic elites who were unconcerned with thrift in economy, are also cautioned against. Jefferson painted a picture of American life that was rustic in its republican simplicity. All these things were seen as counteracting the development of proper virtue.

An improper European education also tainted one's vision of American egalitarianism as a student returning to the United States from Europe "is fascinated with the privileges of the European aristocrats, and sees, with abhorrence, the lovely equality which the poor enjoy with the rich" in America.²⁴ An improper understanding of the importance of domestic ties as expressed through the lives of the most virtuous of American citizens, according to Jefferson, could even skew one's view of democracy and

²² Ibid., 903.

²³ Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to J. Bannister, Junior, October 15, 1785," in *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: The Modern Library, 1998), 359.

²⁴ Ibid., 359.

allow its ways to be abhorred rather than embraced. Jefferson's belief that a domestic sentiment was vital for the virtuous is expressed when he wrote that a European education would allow a student to form "foreign friendships which will never be useful to him, and loses the seasons of life for forming, in his own country, those friendships which, of all others, are the most faithful and permanent."²⁵ Friendships form a valued aspect of sentiment, providing ties to help and motivate a young man to become an outstanding citizen.

Domestic life was important because a student in Europe, unable to learn American values, could find himself, as Jefferson wrote,

Led ... into a spirit for female intrigue, destructive of his own and others' happiness, or a passion for whores, destructive of his health, and, in both cases, learns to consider fidelity to the marriage bed as an ungentlemanly practice, and inconsistent with happiness.²⁶

This letter written from Paris a year before the widowed Thomas Jefferson would meet Maria Cosway, is full of musings on the advantages that domesticity provides. Single men could perhaps avoid these European intrigues by receiving an American education. Jefferson described American women as owning "chaste affections and simplicity," and an American lifestyle that provided young men with "the practices of domestic economy necessary to preserve him from ruin"; a ruin of virtue that could be prevented in America by a superior educational system and domestic way of life.²⁷

The philosophy of sentiment and reason, operating together in the character of the virtuous, pushes against prior notions that only the wealthy, educated elites of society contained true virtue. In Jefferson's correspondence there are many instances where he

²⁵ Ibid., 359.

²⁶ Ibid., 359.

²⁷ Ibid., 359.

questions this long-established notion of wealth being indicative of the ability to lead. Jefferson's views in 1776 on who deserved the right to vote, previously a privilege of wealthy property holders, gets to the heart of why American democracy was such a striking development in world politics. He believed that suffrage could be extended to men who previously had been overlooked in republican politics. However, this does not indicate that Jefferson was operating outside of his own republican cultural milieu; after all, the mentality of mob rule was antithetical to that tradition. Jefferson wrote that "I have ever observed that a choice by the people themselves is not generally distinguished for it's [sic] wisdom. This first secretion from them is usually crude and heterogeneous."²⁸ He believed that the representatives to Virginia's lower house would come from this larger mob vote, but from that body men would be chosen who had a more developed virtue. He also wrote unfavorably of urban mobs when he stated that the "mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body."²⁹ Jefferson talks about "the people" in his writings, while one group is the mob, those who "secrete" decisions, the other is the "more honest & more disinterested." Given Jefferson's complete embrace of the virtue of the yeomen farmer and his disdain for the choices of the mob it is possible to see that Jefferson's mob are those who lived in cities and lacked the attachment to domesticity that the virtuous yeomen and educated classes enjoyed. City dwellers did not enjoy the benefits of plots of land by which a farmer could be independent by growing food for his family.

²⁸ Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to Edmund Pendleton, August 26, 1776," in *Thomas Jefferson Writings*, ed. Merrill Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 755.

²⁹ Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia," in *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: The Modern Library, 1998), 260.

Even though Jefferson did not fully appreciate the decision-making capacities of all of its citizens he did not hold this first group in complete disdain. The mob could vote for the lower assemblies and thus enjoy “the rights of a citizen” because those who intend “on living in a country must wish that country well, & has a natural right of assisting in the preservation of it.”³⁰ Sentimental attachments, in this case the desire to see a citizen’s chosen society flourish, could provide adequate civic-mindedness. For Jefferson though, those who invested time in developing their reason coupled with a firm embrace of attachment to family would enjoy the fruits of American life fully and contain the proper virtue.

Sentiment was antithetical to traditional notions of virtue because those serving the public good were supposed to keep their private attachments out of decisions made in public office. Attachment to family was to be put aside in republican service and those holding representative positions were to be reasoned gentlemen. Jefferson’s writings indicate that sentiment was no longer something to be avoided, but instead became an important aspect of the Enlightened public servant or citizen. Here Jefferson departs from his contemporaries like Hamilton and embraces different notions and assigns virtue to larger segments of the population than mere educated elites.

Jefferson’s ideas on the importance of having a stately bearing and reasonable mind, bolstered by the ability to advantageously develop sentiment are displayed in a letter written to his nephew Peter Carr in 1785. Jefferson writes:

I trust, that with your dispositions, even the acquisition of science is a pleasuring employment. I can assure you, that the possession of it is, what (*next to an honest heart*) will above all things render you dear to your friends, and give you fame and promotion in your own country. When your mind shall be well improved with science, nothing will be necessary

³⁰ Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to Edmund Pendleton, August 26, 1776,” 756.

to place you in the highest points of view, but to pursue the interests of your country, the interests of your friends, and your own interests also, with the purest integrity, the most chaste honor.³¹

Evidenced here is Jefferson's idea of classical virtue that did rely *in part* on reason, but the heart, analogous with sentiment, plays an important role. Science and sentiment are irreducibly intertwined and science helps one aspect of an individual's character while an "honest heart" is also essential. In fact, Jefferson does at times place sentiment above reason. He wrote further in his letter that his nephew was to "Give up money, give up fame, give up science, give up the earth itself and all that it contains, rather than do an immoral act."³² The heart was portrayed as containing the seat of morality, the proper place of honest sentiment. Reason alone was not enough to guard against corruption. Jefferson extolled Carr to be honest in all of his dealings and that the "falsehood of the tongue leads to that of the heart, and in time depraves all its good dispositions."³³ The heart is affected by immoral actions and non-virtuous acts leads to its corruption, indicating that at the core of the virtuous lies one's heart rather than scientific reason.

Jefferson's desire for his nephew to pursue the "interests of your country" does imply a classical understanding of virtue, but new attitudes about self-interest are also revealed in Jefferson's correspondence.³⁴ Where in classical republicanism self-interest was to be avoided in the make-up of a statesman's character, Jefferson's statements reveal a different understanding of where public life and private life began. Integrity and honor allowed a person to embrace interest, furthering Jefferson's departure from

³¹ Jefferson, "Letter to Peter Carr," 347. Emphasis added by author.

³² Ibid., 347.

³³ Ibid., 348.

³⁴ Historian Joyce Appleby believes that the acceptance of some forms of individual self-interest arose from the development of a capitalist economy in early America. Appleby writes that capitalism was important to early Americans "less as a system for producing and distributing good and more as an intellectual stimulus to men and women trying to come to terms with the forces for change in their world." Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), ix.

classical virtue, and the implication is that the public interest can be served not only by accepting public office, but also by bettering one's own situation. Armed with a developed heart and mind, the proper citizen's actions affected society in concentric circles radiating outward from the home, a notion of interest alien to classical, republican understandings.

To serve a republic, in classical republican discourse, a man serving in public office could not bring his own self-interest into decisions made. In this milieu self-interest was analogous with passion or sentiment; the antithesis of reason. But the radical change in the world of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century philosophies of government was evidenced in the growth of American democracy and the emergence of populist politics where the participation of larger segments of the population was proof of the social change brought about by the Revolution, and theories on the behavior of individuals participating in markets large and small contributed to the freeing of individual self-interest. Jefferson's revealing comments to his nephew, extolling him to act on "your own interests," portray notions of virtue that allowed for this new, Enlightenment-driven embrace of self-interest. Those advocating capitalism and its insistence on little governmental interference, if any, believed that individuals acting to better themselves in public by participating in the market-place would ultimately benefit large segments of society.

Although Jefferson no longer considered self-interest antithetical to virtue, there were limitations and considerations that he felt needed to be addressed. Jefferson extolled his nephew to pursue his own interests with integrity and honor. It was not appropriate to unleash, with no restraint whatsoever, one's desires. Jefferson believed in

an inherent morality that tied men to their society. Gordon Wood describes this natural inclination as a manifestation of Enlightenment understandings. He writes that “the Enlightenment came to believe that there was ‘a natural principle of attraction in man towards man,’ and that those natural affinities were by themselves capable of holding the society together.”³⁵ This attraction allowed for forms of sentiment in public service and was contained in the breast of the virtuous. Jefferson understood that this attraction created bonds of sentiment in the heart that, beyond only the ties to one’s family, protected the republic from the freeing of self-interest that would allow men to be in competition with each other, competition that could result in the downfall of American republicanism and a return to tyrannical monarchy.

Jefferson embraced liberal, platonic assumptions of the nature of men’s hearts, favoring a virtue that relied upon reason *and* sentiment. Sentiment, in Jefferson’s philosophy embraced desires to provide a stable economic life for the family and feelings of bonds between citizens sharing the responsibilities of republican citizenship. In a letter written from 1814, he wrote that “nature hath implanted in our breasts a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct, in short, which prompts us irresistibly to feel and succor their distresses.”³⁶ Jefferson shares with his audience, as he did with his nephew, the idea that natural empathy can hold a society together, and is a reflection of an aspect of Lockean theory popular with the American Revolutionaries. Those who display the proper virtue become necessary as a republic relied on its citizens for harmony. The proper virtue cannot be displayed by setting aside attachments to family and friends, thus ignoring natural affinities and domestic attachments that, as shown in

³⁵ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 215.

³⁶ Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to Thomas Law, Esq., June 13, 1814,” in *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: The Modern Library, 1998), 584.

the letter to Carr, provided success. Sentiment therefore becomes synonymous with self-interest when that interest is serving the needs of one's family rather than a citizen being purely concerned with the affairs of state. Once republican understandings allow for the inclusion of self-interest they no longer can be considered to be classical.

According to Wood, in classical republican understandings "man was by nature a political being, a citizen who achieved his greatest moral fulfillment by participating in a self-governing republic."³⁷ Jefferson had a different understanding of man's ultimate fulfillment of virtue. Jefferson wrote in 1781 that "Those who labor the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue."³⁸ Small farmers provided an example of the truly virtuous when Jefferson took up his pen for correspondence. His statements do not reflect antiquated notions of republican virtue because here he saw the small farmer as not engaging in the political arena or guarding against political tyranny by public debates, though he trusted them to do so, but rather, diligently working a plot of land to feed his family.³⁹

Domesticity and the attachments to friends and family that provided sentiment, dominates the core of Jefferson's philosophy. Jefferson, in a letter to prominent New Yorker John Jay in 1785, reiterated his belief that the yeomen farmer's heart was full of virtue. He wrote, "Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their

³⁷ Wood, 104.

³⁸ Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia," 259.

³⁹ It's important to note that American colonial society was predominately rural. Historian David Hackett writes that although historians like Gary Nash are correct when they theorize that liberal developments like capitalism happen first in, and radiate outward from, cities, "only one in twenty colonists lived in them in 1775." David G. Hackett, *The Rude Hand of Innovation Religion and Social Order in Albany, New York 1652-1836* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 13.

country, and wedded to its liberty and interests, by the most lasting bonds.”⁴⁰ These bonds were the bonds of domesticity, the desire to provide for one’s family. Virtue benefited all of those around the proper citizen as his gifts to the nation extended in an ever-expanding ripple from the hearth of the family home to the halls of Congress. Dienstag also points to this passage in Jefferson’s writings as revealing of the departure from classical republican virtue. He writes that Jefferson’s virtuous farmer “bears only a faint resemblance to the civic-minded man of republican virtue...He is primarily concerned not with the virtue or common good of the state but with his own.”⁴¹ Jefferson was tied to an American, revolutionary sense of the strictures of republicanism, but his understandings of virtue incorporated more than dispassionate, public service. The success of the virtuous was irreducibly tied to their participation in American, domestic life and exemplifies Jefferson’s ideas of the power of sentiment. This exaltation of the farmer therefore fits within the larger framework of Jeffersonian sentiment rather than just simple economics or republican simplicity.

Jefferson embraced a virtue that did not divorce one’s passions, hearts, and morals from reason, it took the combination of the two in order to develop the proper American character. In 1778, he wrote a letter to his friend, Giovanni Fabbroni living in France, that music was “the favorite passion of my soul.”⁴² He mourned the fact that in America the ability to enjoy music was not an abundant pastime. In a letter to Maria Cosway, the wife of an English artist Jefferson had met and ostensibly fell in love with while serving as Ambassador to France, he wrote that “I am but a son of nature, loving what I see &

⁴⁰ Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to John Jay (Private), August 23, 1785,” in *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: The Modern Library, 1998), 351.

⁴¹ Dienstag, 507.

⁴² Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to Giovanni Fabbroni, June 8, 1778,” in *Thomas Jefferson Writings*, ed. Merrill Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 761.

feel, without being able to give a reason, nor caring much whether there be one.”⁴³ This an embrace of emotions, or sentiments, unfettered by the bonds of calculating reason. Passions can even dominate was motivates and satisfies a citizen.

In another letter to Cosway, containing Jefferson’s famous dialogue between his head and his heart, the heart gets the last word. Jefferson writes the heart saying “But friendship is precious, not only in the shade but in the sunshine of life; & thanks to a benevolent arrangement of things, the greater part of life is sunshine.”⁴⁴ Far from being disinterested, driven by logic and reason Jefferson truly embraced and is mostly motivated by sentiment. For him, passions and reason combined to create a fully virtuous, well-rounded individual.

The language found in his correspondence reveals that Jefferson would at times even stress sentiment over reason. He writes the heart saying to the head,

In denying you the feelings of sympathy, of benevolence, of gratitude, of justice, of love, of friendship, she has excluded you from their controul [sic]. To these she [nature] has adapted the mechanism of the heart. Morals were too essential to the happiness of man to be risked on the uncertain combinations of the head.⁴⁵

Jefferson fully embraced a combination of these two attributes in defining who was virtuous and in so doing rejected classical examples of virtuous men, but it is interesting that the heart seems to win out in this dialogue. It is the heart that governs what is truly enjoyed by mankind, including love and friendship, both things firmly rooted in sentiment. Where reason had been portrayed as the governing force behind one’s virtue

⁴³ Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to Maria Cosway, April 24, 1788,” in *Thomas Jefferson Writings*, ed. Merrill Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 921. Jefferson Biographer Alf J. Mapp, Jr. writes that Jefferson had, in 1786, “fallen in love with the beautiful Maria Cosway.” Alf J. Mapp, Jr., *Thomas Jefferson Passionate Pilgrim* (Lanham: Madison Books, 1991), 166.

⁴⁴ Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to Maria Cosway, October 12, 1786,” in *Thomas Jefferson Writings*, ed. Merrill Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 873.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 874.

in the republican tradition, it is actually the heart that factors strongly in the character of man. The heart is even scornful of the “incertain combinations” that the reasoned mind and produce. Jefferson may have been writing a love letter, expressing his pining away over the loneliness that he felt being away from Cosway, but he revealed a much larger philosophy at work that characterized much of his correspondence. By the end of the letter Jefferson gives his heart the last word over his head, indicating the importance of sentiment to the virtuous.

Throughout Jefferson’s writings there is the theme that through the development of reason, bonds of sentiment emerges. Reason and sentiment are not as much seen as separate categories, but rather two characteristics of the virtuous that cannot exist without the other. In a letter to his daughter Martha dated 1787, Jefferson detailed to her the rewards of study. He wrote, “Idleness begets ennui, ennui the hypochondria, and that a diseased body,” and further that “No laborious person was ever yet hysterical.”⁴⁶ Jefferson elaborated a sense of the Protestant work ethic that could produce a well-rounded woman and man. Historian Jan Lewis writes that “Revolutionary-era writers held up the loving partnership of man and wife in opposition to patriarchal dominion as the republican model for social and political relationships.”⁴⁷

The aspect of the virtuous, the ability to develop the mind, is pursued in his attempts to persuade Martha that she could understand the “ancient print of your Livy,” and to do so without the help of a tutor.⁴⁸ He believed that she was fully capable of the intellect to understand republican discourse as he wrote, “We are always equal to what

⁴⁶ Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to Martha Jefferson, March 28, 1787,” in *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: The Modern Library, 1998), 386.

⁴⁷ Jan Lewis, “The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 44 (1987): 689.

⁴⁸ Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to Martha Jefferson, March 28, 1787,” 386-87.

we undertake with resolution,” and furthermore that it was “part of the American character to consider nothing as desperate.”⁴⁹ This insight into his belief that women possessed what blacks did not is different in some regards to his extolling the virtues of an American education to combat the influences of a corrupt European way of life. This also is a less gendered understanding of Jefferson’s philosophy. He exhibited less of the separation of the roles of the sexes in developing virtue. White women, as well as white men, had the power within to become well-rounded, virtuous individuals. Temptations to idleness, sloth, and the ways of European, monarchical societies could corrupt both women and men equally. It is less of a gendered understanding of virtue than has been portrayed by historians such as Jordan who fail to see Jefferson’s full views.

Martha was to study and develop her reason to combat the viewpoint of men who saw uneducated women as “a very helpless animal, and less esteemed.”⁵⁰ It is also helpful to remember that uneducated, urban men were viewed with less esteem in the Jeffersonian vision of virtue; this is not a gendered argument. In this regard, Martha’s main impetus is like the one he gave to his nephew: by developing one’s reason a citizen can be revered in the eyes of those closest to him or her. These rewards of education, the adoration of others, form the bonds of friendship and familial life so important to sentiment, while the development of female and male reason seems necessary for a good marriage. Outward acceptance by those who matter most in one’s life, friends and family, is the reward of hard work while the development of reason alone is not enough to produce the fruits of happiness.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 387.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 387.

Jefferson wanted his daughter to also focus on other aspects of American domesticity in order for her virtue to shine through. He wrote,

In the country life of America there are many moments when a woman can have recourse to nothing but her needle for employment...Besides, without knowing how to use it herself, how can the mistress of a family direct the works of her servants?⁵¹

Combined with the knowledge of literature and the minutiae of domestic life a woman could procure for herself an esteemed place in the heart of friends and family just as a young man could through his own pursuits. The Jeffersons' of course owned slaves, and the reasoning here is that Martha could not properly instruct others in the ways of domestic life without learning all aspects of household production herself. The fact that these pursuits could overlap, in the case of education in the classics, shows a side to Jefferson that indicates he attributed much to the capabilities of a woman's mind. Jefferson would also later in life write that the "order and economy of a house are as honorable to the mistress as those of the farm to the master, and if either be neglected, ruin follows."⁵² He characterizes the role of women and men as equally important when it comes to American domesticity and this focus on one's immediate family needs was enough to procure a sense of virtue. Jefferson was aware that the role of women was limited when it came to participation in public office, but, owing to the importance of a developed sense of American domesticity, both sexes could enjoy success in developing virtue.

Domesticity played an important role in the development of the virtuous. Jefferson's advice to one of his nephews Randolph, who would later marry Jefferson's

⁵¹ Ibid., 387.

⁵² Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to Nathaniel Burwell, March 14, 1818," in *Thomas Jefferson Writings*, ed. Merrill Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1413.

daughter Martha, a marriage of second-cousins, contains much about this importance. Jefferson wrote for Randolph, as he set off for study in France, to “fix yourself in some family where there are women and children.”⁵³ The reasoning behind Jefferson’s advice was that Randolph would “learn to speak better from women and children in three months, then from men in a year.”⁵⁴ Advice that is hardly surprising considering Jefferson’s favorable opinions of James Madison’s civil tongue during public debate. There is a sense of feminization that domesticity provided to those who developed virtuous character. Randolph would also benefit from a domestic setting because it would “render more easy a due attention to economy of time and money.”⁵⁵ The Protestant work ethic here relied on domestication to advance the ideas of thrift, combat notions of elitist, wasteful luxury, and would provide Jefferson’s nephew with the tools for independence as he grew to become the patriarch of his own family in the future as Jefferson saw it.

Randolph had an eye toward American politics and it was this domestic-centered advice that Jefferson gave to his young nephew. Having a virtuous character developed through education and a civility tempered by a domestic environment, Randolph could return to the United States “ready to enter the public stage, with superior advantages.”⁵⁶ These superior advantages would be provided by the civilizing effect that domestic life in the home could have. Randolph’s only hope in guarding against the uncouth ways of men in public politics was to seek out a sentimental attachment to domestic life while he

⁵³ Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to T.M. Randolph, July 6, 1787,” in *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: The Modern Library, 1998), 393.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 393.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 394.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 394.

was studying abroad. American domesticity is portrayed as having the power to prevent the moral deterioration of young men in Europe.

Jefferson's definitions of proper morality also indicate that sentimental attachment to others provides one with the proper virtue. In 1814, Jefferson wrote that "I consider our relations with others as constituting the boundaries of morality."⁵⁷ It was not religion that gave one the proper virtuous morality, but rather, the sentimental ties of one human to another. "Self-love," he wrote, "is the sole antagonist of virtue."⁵⁸ The truly virtuous were to "subdue those [selfish] propensities by education, instruction, or restraint, and virtue remains without a competitor."⁵⁹ Sentiment, expressed through human relationships, played such an important role that without it a citizen would fall into corruption, with reason unable to provide the necessary bulwark against failure. Jefferson believed that "the love, or the hatred, or rejection of those among whom he lives, and whose society is necessary to his happiness," could motivate a citizen to proper action.⁶⁰ Thus the use of the sentiment, whether it be the giving or the removal of personal attachments, played an important role in morality as Jefferson saw it. Emotional relationships and attachments to friends and family could provide the impetus that reason alone was unable to give.

Jefferson believed that he had a duty to uphold republican principles, but his primary enjoyment in life was in the domestic setting. In 1813, he wrote about public service and the true desires of his heart. Jefferson wrote,

⁵⁷ Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to Thomas Law, June 13, 1814," in *Thomas Jefferson Writings*, ed. Merrill Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1336.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1336.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1337.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1338.

after an intimacy of forty years with the public councils and characters...An honest man can feel no pleasure in the exercise of power over his fellow citizens...had it been a mere contest who should be permitted to administer the government according to its genuine republican principles, there has never been a moment of my life in which I should have relinquished for it the enjoyments of my family, my farm, my friends and books.⁶¹

The beginning and the end to the development of those genuine republican principles were expressed by Jefferson in his enjoyment of hearth and home. The truly virtuous desired no power, desired no wealth; the only manifestation appropriate was perhaps the call to protect the republic, otherwise, the truly virtuous man would be at home. Also this illustrates that Jefferson saw himself sacrificing many enjoyable, domestic times to do the necessary tasks asked of him for the survival of American republicanism.

iv.

Jefferson, while he did have a non-classical republican understanding of virtue and a classical understanding that all citizens were not necessarily virtuous, was never able to fully embrace notions of equality that the American Revolution unleashed. In the case of African-Americans some Americans were portrayed by Jefferson as incapable of reason, but having developed passions. This has perhaps led to the false assumptions that Jefferson's virtue was solely based on one's mental capacity for reason. He was not operating outside of a republican tradition that abhorred dependency and therefore subsequently limited definitions of the virtuous to a minority of the American population. But he did embrace new notions within it. Evidence that classical republicanism had evolved and been adapted to fit different cultural assumptions during the Revolutionary generation abounds in Jefferson's writings and speeches. His embrace of sentiment pulls

⁶¹ Ibid., 1270.

against notions that Jefferson was solely a politician acting with scientific reason as he participated in changing and shaping a new nation. This understanding that one's heart participated in the formation of a virtuous citizen help historians to see Jefferson as a passionate historical figure, aware of the depths of the human heart.

v.

Returning to Jefferson's glowing descriptions of Madison we see a case of the exemplary behavior of a virtuous statesman, revealing an understanding of virtue that had moved on from classical forms. These older notions of virtue, Jefferson studied through his readings of Herodotus, Virgil, Homer, and Plato, reflected a harsher form of self-sacrifice that did not contain Enlightenment understandings of a natural goodness of mankind and subsequent natural empathy.⁶² The ability to remain independent and put needs aside when serving for the public good remained a cornerstone of republican virtue to the founders of the American Revolution. Reason was an important trait in the republican virtue of the late eighteenth century, but to ignore Jefferson's attachment to the "civilities and softness of expression" that he so favored in Madison leads to false conclusions about the many dimensions of Jefferson's understandings.

Jefferson held in lower esteem those men whose public discourse did not have Madison's civility. Jefferson thought Madison's public behavior a cut above other Virginians debating the merits of adopting a new, federal constitution in 1787. Madison had "sustained the new constitution in all its parts, bearing off the palm against the logic

⁶² Jefferson's reading list, sent in a letter to his nephew Peter Carr, contains books of ancient and Roman history, Greek poetry, Milton, and Shakespeare, and can be found in: Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to Peter Carr, August, 19, 1785," in *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: The Modern Library, 1998), 349. A letter from Jefferson to Carr two years later also contains a reading list that includes references to James Madison as being able to point the young Carr in the direction of appropriate reading for the subjects of astronomy and mathematics.

of George Mason, and the fervid declamation of Mr. [Patrick] Henry.”⁶³ Henry’s orations were of a passionate nature; while useful for revolutionary oration, Henry’s style is less exalted in comparison to Madison’s more coolheaded approach. Mason’s method of debate is seen by Jefferson as being spearheaded by logic. Logic, while it plays a positive role in the oratory style of republican statesmen, does not earn the full esteem that Madison’s style receives in Jeffersonian glowing remarks. Jefferson wrote that with Madison’s “consummate powers, were united a pure and spotless virtue, which no calumny has ever attempted to sully.”⁶⁴ Classical virtue, with its stress on dispassionate public service, failed to meet the requirements of a republican discourse affected by liberal Enlightenment philosophy, American notions of liberty, and Jefferson’s embrace of sentiment, civility, and reason.

⁶³ Jefferson, *Autobiography*, 42.

⁶⁴ Jefferson, *Autobiography*, 42-43.

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