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JAMES MADISON AND THE NATURE OF MAN

By Ralph L. Ketcham

In the first book of his *Politics* Aristotle stated that "what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature," and then added his famous dictum that "man is by nature a political animal."[1] Once Aristotle has asserted that man can realize the full potentiality of his humanness only when participating in the social (political) life of a civilized state (city), it is not difficult to imagine some of the broad principles of his political philosophy. The place of man in the community will receive more attention than the delineation of individual rights. Concepts of moderation and lawfulness essential to civilized social intercourse will be emphasized. The obligations of the good citizen will be pre-eminent over the duties and privileges of the good man. Indeed, once a philosopher has divulged what sort of creature he takes man to be, both in fact and in potentiality, his arguments in other fields of inquiry are often readily anticipated. The view which James Madison had of human nature offers such insight into the theories and policies which he developed and followed throughout his long career, and is important in understanding his overall philosophy.

The task, however, is not an easy one. There is no recorded evidence that Madison ever spelled out in systematic detail his thoughts on the nature of man. Yet, his writings are full of reflections and comments on the subject. A further complication is introduced by the indiscriminate mixing of statements of fact and observations about human motivation and action with injunctions about the way men could or should act. Finally, throughout Madison's writings about human character there is an ambivalence which at first glance appears contradictory.

The picture, as it emerges from letters, speeches, and notes covering the sixty-five years of Madison's adult life, is a fascinating one, and contains every shade of opinion from optimism to despair concerning the nature of man. That mankind ought to be free, and indeed *had* to be free if life was to be human rather than brutish, was an unquestionable axiom to Madison, student of Locke and friend of Jefferson. On this point Madison accepted the faith of the Age of Reason to which he was heir. On another great ideal of the day he stood four-square: "The perfect equality of mankind . . . is an absolute truth."[2] Late in life he wrote that the distinction between

[1] Jowett translation (Modern Library ed., N.Y., 1943), Bk. I, ch. 2: 1252b and 1253a, 54.

[2] Gaillard Hunt, ed., *The Writings of James Madison,* 9 vols. (New York, 1904), V, 381.

the Republican and Federalist Parties "had its origin in the confidence of the former in the capacity of mankind for self-government, and in the distrust of it by the other . . . and is the key to many of the phenomena presented by our political history." [3] In a eulogy of his associates at the Federal Convention of 1787, he wrote that "there never was an assembly of men . . . who were more pure in their motives, or more exclusively or anxiously devoted to the object committed to them [of] devising and proposing a constitutional system . . . to best secure the permanent liberty and happiness of their country." [4] Clearly, Madison believed that men of right ought to be free and equal, and that both individually and collectively they possessed faculties which enabled them to lead lives of independence and justice.

His application of this faith to the fundamentals of government was explicit. Madison stated many times that the vital republican principles were those of "numerical equality" and "the will of the majority," and asked "if the will of the majority cannot be trusted," what can? [5] These principles he carried into practice in favoring the election of the president by the people at large, arguing that such an election "would be as likely as any that could be devised to produce an Executive Magistrate of distinguished character." [6] In 1800 at the height of the uproar over the Alien and Sedition Acts, Madison wrote Jefferson that he was confident "a demonstration of the rectitude and efficacy of popular sentiment would rescue the republican principle from the imputation brought on it by the degeneracy of the public Councils." During the embargo crisis in 1808–1809, he praised the "spirit of ardent and determined patriotism" in the nation, and trusted "the well-tried intelligence and virtue of my fellow citizens." [7]

Throughout, Madison's faith in the virtue and intelligence of man and his consequent ability to govern his own affairs, is sober but unwavering. From his earliest public act in writing a more liberal and trusting law regulating road repair in Orange County (1772), until his days of proud, confident reflection on the record of nearly fifty

[3] Letter to William Eustis, May 22, 1823, *ibid.*, IX, 136.

[4] Manuscript dated 1835 on the "Origin of the Constitutional Convention" printed with the posthumous publication of his Convention Journal. *Ibid.*, II, 411–412.

[5] See, for example, a letter to George Hay, August 23, 1823, and an essay on "Majority Governments," 1833, *ibid.*, IX, 151, 528.

[6] Speeches in the Federal Convention, Thurs., July 19, 1787, *ibid.*, IV, 8, 62.

[7] Letter to Jefferson, March 15, 1800; letter to James Armstrong and James Bowdoin, July 15, 1807; and First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1809; *ibid.*, VI, 408; VII, 462; VIII, 50.

years of free government under the Constitution, the sage of Montpelier was steadfast in his adherence to *the* republican principle that men could be entrusted with carefully constructed mechanisms of self-government. Although the ecstasy of a Paine or Condorcet is notably absent, his calm, practical confidence in human nature is unmistakable, and a fact of the utmost significance in understanding the mind of James Madison.

On the other hand, there is an equally constant strain of skepticism and even pessimism about human nature that runs like a stream of grandfatherly advice through his writings. In a famous passage from the fifty-first *Federalist Paper,* Madison stated most bluntly his skepticism:

> What is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.[8]

In a speech to the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1829, as he approached his eightieth birthday, Madison applied this pessimism more directly to human motives:

> In republics, the great danger is, that the majority may not sufficiently respect the rights of the minority. Some gentlemen, consulting the purity and generosity of their own minds, without averting to the lessons of experience, would find a security against that danger in our social feelings; in a respect for character; in the dictates of the monitor within. . . . But man is known to be a selfish, as well as a social being. Respect for character, though often a salutary restraint, is but too often overruled by other motives. . . . We all know that conscience itself may be deluded; may be misled . . . into acts which an enlightened conscience would forbid. . . . These favorable attributes of the human character are all valuable, as auxiliaries; but they will not serve as a substitute for the coercive provisions belonging to Government and Law.[9]

It is significant that in support of this sober view Madison joined with ex-President James Monroe and Chief Justice John Marshall in backing property qualifications for suffrage at the 1829 Convention.

Almost random comments from Madison's letters and speeches reflect a realism about the frailties of mankind. He wrote James Maury that however valid his ideas on tobacco culture were, nothing would

[8] Henry Cabot Lodge, ed., *The Federalist Papers* (New York, 1900), No. 51, 323.
[9] Hunt, *Writings,* IX, 361.

come of them " because good advice is apt to be disregarded." [10] During the ratifying debates of 1788 he remarked that " there can be no doubt that there are subjects to which the capacities of the bulk of mankind are unequal." [11] Madison ridiculed Rousseau's plan for universal peace arguing that such a plan was one which "in the catalogue of events, will never exist but in the imagination of visionary philosophers, or in the breasts of benevolent enthusiasts." [12] During the War of 1812 he asked for higher pay for volunteers since " patriotism alone " would not produce a sufficient number of soldiers.[13] Two years later he complained that the " leaders and priests " of New England had brought the people " under a delusion scarcely exceeded by that recorded in the period of witchcraft." [14]

In an almost Hobbesian comment deploring the evils of war during the crisis of 1793, Madison wrote that " the strongest passions and most dangerous weaknesses of the human breast; ambition, avarice, vanity, the honorable or venial love of fame, are all in conspiracy against the desire and duty of peace." [15] In 1820, he noted that "nothing has been found more difficult in practice than to guard charitable institutions against mismanagement fatal to their original objects," and three years later just before a presidential election he reported without displeasure or alarm that, " what most nearly concerns the mass of the people is the state of the crops and the prospect of prices." [16] Finally while being pestered by James Callender for political spoils following Jefferson's election in 1800, Madison impatiently wrote Monroe that " besides his [Callender's] other passions, he is under the tyranny of that of *love*." [17]

Two items illustrate more systematically Madison's skepticism about human nature, and indicate an important positive aspect of his concept of man. First was his attitude toward utopian schemes for improving the lot of mankind. In commenting on Robert Owen's New Harmony Community, Madison observed that

Mr. Owen's remedy for [all] vicissitudes implies that labour will be relished without the ordinary impulses to it; that the love of equality will supersede

[10] *The Letters and other Writings of James Madison,* 4 vols., published by order of Congress (New York, 1865), IV, 1–2.

[11] Letter to Edmund Randolph, January 10, 1788, Hunt, *Writings,* V, 81.

[12] Essay on " Perpetual Peace," Feb. 2, 1792, *ibid.,* VI, 88.

[13] Fourth Annual Message, Nov. 4, 1812, *ibid.,* VIII, 227.

[14] Letter to Wilson Cary Nicholas, Nov. 26, 1814, *ibid.,* VIII, 319.

[15] " Letters of Helvidius," No. 4, Sept. 14, 1793, *ibid.,* VI, 174.

[16] Letters to Joel K. Meade, Oct. 16, 1820, and to Richard Rush, July 22, 1823, Congress Ed., *Works,* III, 183, 331.

[17] Letter to James Monroe, June 1, 1801, Hunt, *Writings,* VI, 421.

the desire of distinction, and that increasing leisure . . . will promote intellectual cultivation, moral enjoyment and innocent amusements, without any of the vicious resorts, for the ennui of idleness. Custom is properly called second nature; Mr. Owen makes it nature itself.

After comparing Owen's scheme to "Helvetius' attempt to show that all men come from the hand of nature perfectly equal," Madison asserted that evil and diseases are "too deeply rooted in human society to admit of more than great palliatives." [18] At another point he stated that "a Utopia exhibiting a perfect homogeneousness of interests, opinions and feelings [is] nowhere yet found in civilized communities." [19] Clearly, Madison felt that evil in human nature and in world affairs was indelible, and that the hardships of life spring from "basic nature," not from custom or "second nature." Furthermore, he saw the hopes of those who would "plan" the end of human suffering foundering on the fact of the heterogeneity of mankind.

This crucial diversity of human beings was the essential factor beneath the brilliant logic of the tenth *Federalist Paper* which T. V. Smith has called "a studied and profound view of human nature itself." [20]

As long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed. . . . The diversity in the faculties of men, from which the rights of property originate, is not less an insuperable obstacle to a uniformity of interests. . . .

The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man; and we can see them everywhere brought into different degrees of activity. . . . A zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points; an attachment to different leaders ambitiously contending for pre-eminence and power . . . have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common good.[21]

In a letter to Jefferson written at the same time he was turning out the *Federalist Papers,* Madison was more explicit:

Those who contend for a simple Democracy, or a pure republic, actuated by the sense of the majority . . . assume or suppose a case which is altogether fictitious. They found their reasoning on the idea, that the people composing the society, enjoy not only an equality of political rights; but that they have all precisely the same interests, and the same feelings in every respect.

[18] Letter to Nicholas P. Trist, April 1827, Congress Ed., *Works,* III, 576–7.

[19] "Majority Governments," 1833, Hunt, *Writings,* IX, 526.

[20] T. V. Smith, "Saints, Secular and Sacerdotal—James Madison and Mahatma Gandhi," *Ethics,* LIX (Oct. 1948), 59.

[21] Lodge, ed., *The Federalist,* No. 10, 53–54.

. . . We know however that no society ever did or can consist of so homogeneous a mass of citizens. . . . In all civilized societies, distinctions are various and unavoidable. A distinction of property results from that very protection which a free government gives to unequal faculties of acquiring it. There will be rich and poor; creditors and debtors; a landed interest, a monied interest, a merchantile interest, a manufacturing interest. . . . In addition to these natural distinctions, artificial ones will be founded, on accidental differences in political, religious, or other opinions. . . . However erroneous or ridiculous these grounds of dissention and faction may appear to the enlightened statesman or the benevolent philosopher, the bulk of mankind, who are neither statesmen nor philosophers, will continue to view them in a different light.[22]

This emphasis on the diversity of human talents and the multiplicity of human desires and interests is the key to the resolution of Madison's ambivalence on the strength or frailty of human character. Obviously, Madison felt that some men were good and others were bad, and indeed, individuals had within themselves varying amounts of honor and perversity. Without a doubt he counted Alexander Hamilton among the "pure and devoted" men assembled at Philadelphia during the summer of 1787, while this same gentleman was the monster who led the "stockjobbers" in reaping the profits of debt assumption in 1790–91, and who clamored for war with Republican France during the decade of Federalist power.

In short, Madison was on the whole less inspired by the past performance of mankind than he was about his hopes for the future, especially the future of a land blessed with the free Constitution of the United States of America. Concerning questions, what had men been like, and how had he generally observed them to be, Madison was almost Hobbesian. Life was usually guided by avarice, vanity, cruelty, and depravity, but there was a reasonable hope that free institutions would brighten the future in some cases. In fact, his views were close to what one would expect from a philosopher of the Enlightenment. Yet, Madison refused to take the next step and envision the end of human suffering and strife once the chains of the past had been undone. What he conceded, and patiently hoped for, was that the lot of mankind could be improved, especially in the presence of the greatest possible amount of freedom for individuals, and that there was enough virtue, honor, and intelligence distributed in the human race to make republican government at least a viable alternative to the twin evils of tyranny and anarchy. To concede or hope for more, according to the Father of the Constitution, would have been to build on the sands of human weakness and in blindness to the lessons of human history.

[22] Letter to Jefferson, Oct. 24, 1787, Hunt, *Writings*, V, 28–29.

On the whole, Madison was inclined to center his attention on the observable facts of human nature, and leave the moralizing and speculating to less sober and less realistic minds. His commentary on the potentiality of human nature would have been confined, in the Aristotelian fashion, to a statement that "man is by nature a *free* animal." To say more would run the risk of ignoring or prejudging the diversities which so impressed Madison as he observed and read about his fellow creatures. Over and over again, it is possible to see Madison's probing mind start from the conditional propositions "if men are heterogeneous in their talents and virtue" and "if men must be free to be human," then such-and-such will or should follow in politics or economics or religion or any other field of endeavor.

If to assert that men are both good and bad and that they are both frail and free involved taking notice of contradictions and complicating the understanding and regulation of human society, one would simply have to learn to live with contradictions and face with humility the fact that the problems of men might not admit of complete or final solution or even resolution. This was, in fact, the point of view from which James Madison dealt with private and public affairs during the eighty-five years of his life.

At this point, one would almost be justified in raising doubts as to the adequacy or rigorousness of Madison's education on the question of human nature. Whence came this apparently paradoxical view which equivocated on the goodness or badness of mankind? Although it is not possible to assemble anything resembling proof on the origins of Madison's ideas on this subject,[23] it is possible, and highly instructive, to examine some of the obvious sources available to him and see what thoughts are there that correspond with ideas expressed by Madison.

Madison's relationship to Enlightenment learning has already been suggested. That he owed a huge intellectual debt to such figures as Locke, Hume, Montesquieu, Addison, Pope, and Voltaire is unquestionable. What has been often overlooked is that in the eighteenth century, before young scholars read the great contemporaries, they read the classics: Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, Tacitus, Homer, Virgil, and Cicero. Since explicit reference to these authors

[23] Curiously enough, there is less evidence on the source of Madison's ideas on an important subject such as his view of human nature than on some lesser topics like finance and international law. He never wrote a footnoted treatise on the subject, and treated it as something tacitly assumed, not painstakingly explained. Furthermore, since there are no explicit references in his writings to the origins of these ideas, the influence of such factors as friends, family, and community are in the final analysis imponderable. What follows, then, suggests what might have been in the line of intellectual origins, and does not pretend to "prove" that Madison got his ideas from the suggested sources.

was exceedingly rare, even though all educated men of the day had studied them, their precise impact is difficult to evaluate. In Madison's case, however, it must at least be attempted since it suggests an answer to the riddle of Madison's ambivalence regarding the nature of man. Many of the ancients, especially the historical philosopher Aristotle and the philosophic historian Thucydides, were not heirs to the concepts of rationalism, progress, and perfectibility which permeated the Age of Reason. Their writings study the past and seek lessons in the observable actions of men in society, rather than start in a more abstract way and then follow reason wherever it led in establishing the truths of human nature. If the wisdom of Aristotle and Thucydides is added to the later philosophy and history of Locke and Hume, an interesting and almost strikingly obvious pattern of thought, closely akin to that of Madison's, emerges.[24]

One of the most stirring and graphic episodes in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* is the description of the Corcyrean Revolution in the fifth year of the war. In the wake of some local victories by the Corinthians, allies of the Spartans, a group of intriguers attempted to detach Corcyra from her Athenian alliance. After the Corcyreans had voted to continue the Athenian connection, the conspirators assassinated the leaders of those who favored the alliance. The enraged " commons," as Thucydides called the populace of Corcyra, rose, rioted in the city, and

> engaged in butchering those of their fellow citizens whom they regarded as their enemies: and although the crime imputed was that of attempting to put down the democracy, some were slain also for private hatred, others by their debtors because of monies owed them. Death thus raged in every shape; and as usually happens at such times, there was no length to which violence did not go; sons were killed by their fathers, and suppliants dragged from the altar or slain upon it; while some were even walled up in the temple of Dionysus and died there.[25]

In commenting on the results of this bloody revolution, Thucydides made eminently clear what he thought of human nature:

[24] The specific relevance of ancient writers was suggested to me by Douglass Adair's unpublished doctoral dissertation " The Intellectual Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy," Yale, 1944. Adair points out the existence of physiocratic ideas in Aristotle and balance-of-power concepts in Polybius, for example. My own studies have confirmed Adair's emphasis on the importance of classical traditions, especially on such a basic concept as that of the nature of man. Cf. G. Chinard, " Polybius and the American Constitution," this *Journal,* I (1940), 38–58; also Charles F. Mullett, " Classical Influences on the American Revolution," *Classical Journal,* XXXV (Nov. 1939), 92–104.

[25] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War,* translated by Crawley (Modern Library ed., N.Y., 1934), Bk. III, Ch. 10, 184–9.

The sufferings which revolution entailed upon the cities were many and terrible, such as have occurred and always will occur, as long as the nature of mankind remains the same. . . . Places where [the revolution] arrived last . . . carried to still greater excess . . . the cunning of their enterprises and the atrocity of their reprisals. . . . Prudent hesitation came to be considered specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness. . . . Frantic violence became the attribute of manliness; cautious plotting, a justifiable means of self-defense. . . .

Thus every form of iniquity took root in the Hellenic countries by reason of the troubles. The ancient simplicity into which honor so largely entered was laughed down and disappeared; and society became divided into camps in which no man trusted his fellow. . . .

In the confusion into which life was now thrown in the cities, human nature, always rebelling against the law and now its master, gladly showed itself ungoverned in passion, above respect for justice, and the enemy of all superiority. . . .[26]

These accounts of the excesses and evils of revolution, and the depravities of human nature attending it, were essentially reflected in the discussions of revolution in the eighth book of Plato's *Republic* and the fifth book of the *Politics* of Aristotle. It is not difficult to picture the images which might have come to the minds of men like James Madison, students of the classical writers, as they heard of the uprising of Daniel Shays in the winter of 1786–87.

In the second book of the *Politics,* in the course of his criticism of the ideal and communal aspect of Plato's *Republic,* Aristotle made some sober comments on the nature of man:

The error of Socrates [Plato] must be attributed to the false notion of unity [about human nature] from which he starts.

It is said that the evils now existing in states, suits about contracts, convictions for perjury, flatteries of rich men and the like . . . arise out of the possession of private property. These evils, however, are due to a very different cause—the wickedness of human nature.

The avarice of mankind is insatiable. . . . It is not the possessions but the desires of mankind which require to be equalized, and this is impossible, unless a sufficient education is provided by the laws.

. . . want is not the sole incentive to crime; men also wish to enjoy themselves and not be in a state of desire. . . . The greatest of crimes are caused by excess and not by necessity. Men do not become tyrants in order that they may not suffer cold. . . .

Let us remember that we should not disregard the experience of ages. . . . The habit of lightly changing laws is an evil, and, when the advantage is small, some error both of lawgivers and rulers had better be left; the citizen will not gain so much by making the change as he will lose by the habit of disobedience.[27]

[26] *Ibid.*, 189–191.

[27] Aristotle, *Politics* (ed. cit. f.n. 1), 88, 89, 90, 99, 100, 101, 106, Bk. II, chs. 5, 7, 9.

The lessons and impressions Madison might have gained from this kind of commentary are obvious. In addition, the familiar assumptions and tenets of Greek political philosophy, found in such standard works as Thucydides' account of Pericles' funeral oration, Plato's *Republic,* and Aristotle's *Politics,* of the social obligations of citizens, the importance of rule by the wise and able, and the necessity for stable continuity, equilibrium, and moderation in government, should be taken into account in assessing the impact of classical traditions on one who was trained rigorously in the ancient learning. Although there is but one direct reference to Aristotle and Thucydides in all of Madison's extant writings,[28] it is very likely that he was well acquainted with the ancient authors. His tutors, notably Donald Robertson and John Witherspoon, were learned classical scholars, and made innumerable references to that learning in the conduct of their instruction.[29] Although there is no direct proof of Madison's debt to the ancient authors, the ideas they expressed fill out an otherwise poorly explained facet of Madison's recorded attitude on the nature of man.

The debt which nearly all the Founding Fathers owed to the political philosophy of John Locke has long been acknowledged. That Madison shared this heritage is clear, both from the principles he espoused and his reference to Locke as an author "admirably calculated to impress on young minds the right of Nations to establish their own governments, and to inspire a love of free ones."[30] The familiar assumptions regarding human rationality and the need for and right of individual freedom in the *Second Treatise,* impressed Madison just as they did Jefferson, Franklin, the Adamses and all the others. For a more detailed account of Locke's view of the nature of man, however, it is necessary to turn to his great philosophic work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding.*[31]

[28] In his essay on "Government," January 2, 1792, Hunt, *Writings,* VI, 81.

[29] See Irving Brant, *The Life of James Madison,* 4 vols., (Indianapolis, 1941–1954), I, 58–60, 76–78 for detailed accounts of Madison's schooling under Robertson (1763-1767) and Witherspoon (1769–1772). The notes taken by Witherspoon's students at Princeton are full of citations of the classical authors, and Witherspoon's own treatment of political theory is taken straight from the *Politics.* See John E. Calhoun's copy of Witherspoon's "Lecture on Moral Philosophy" (1774), William Bradford's copy of "Lectures on Eloquence" (1772), and Andrew S. Hunter's copy of "Lectures on Oratory" (1772), for examples of Witherspoon's devotion to the classics. All notes deposited in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division of the Firestone Library, Princeton University.

[30] Letter to Jefferson, Feb. 8, 1825, Hunt, *Writings,* IX, 218–219.

[31] There is no explicit reference to the *Essay* in Madison's extant writings. In a private letter, however, Irving Brant wrote that "it would be incredible if Madison did not have every work of Locke that was extant." There is evidence that the *Essay* was used at Donald Robertson's school, and the controversy over its psy-

In Chapter 21, Book II of the *Essay,* entitled " On Power," Locke entered the great debate on the freedom of the will, in the course of which he explained how men came to have the thoughts and wills they had. He took the firm ground to begin with that liberty meant the choice open to a man to do or not to do something, depending on what his preference was. The rest of the complex debate over whether man was free to prefer what he wanted, was related to the fundamental motivation of human life which Locke defined vaguely as " happiness." The path toward this " happiness " was guided by a variety of anxieties and desires that motivated men in many different ways. In answering the question how these various desires and motivations could be explained and evaluated, Locke made some profound observations on man's nature:

> the various and contrary choices that men make in the world do not argue that they do not all pursue good: but that the same thing is not good to every man alike. This variety of pursuits shows that everyone does not place his happiness in the same thing, or choose the same way to it. . . .
>
> Hence it was, I think, that the philosophers of old did in vain inquire, whether *summum bonum* consisted in riches, or bodily delights, or virtue, or contemplation: and they might have as reasonably disputed whether the best relish were to be found in apples, plums, or nuts, and have divided themselves into sects upon it. . . . It is not strange nor unreasonable that men should seek their happiness by avoiding all things that disease them, and by pursuing all that delight them; wherein it will be no wonder to find variety and difference. . . . Though all men's desires tend to happiness, yet they are not moved by the same object. Men may choose different things, and yet all choose right. . . .[32]

Locke concluded the chapter " On Power " by asserting that within each man there were conflicting desires that competed with one another, and that the essence of human rationality was the ability of conscience and judgment to sort these desires and move the will to act in pursuit of some conscious objective.

Although Madison would probably have been less confident about the amount of rational judgment exercised by human beings, and would have been less willing to find the source of human conduct in sensory impressions than Locke was, the similarity on the subject of human diversity is striking. In fact, Locke's analysis of the origin

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chology was at the core of the debates at Edinburgh among the Scottish " Common Sense " philosophers with whom Witherspoon studied in the years immediately before his coming to Princeton in 1768. See Brant, *Madison,* I, 61 and 73–74. That Madison had studied and discussed the *Essay* is therefore fairly certain.

[32] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Philadelphia, James Kay, Jr. and Co., no date), Bk. II, Ch. 21, Sect. 54, 168–169.

and resolution of individual motivation is a neat microcosm of Madison's famous doctrine of controling factions by extending the republic. The humility and toleration required for a man to believe that "men may choose different things, and yet all choose right," was typical of Madison, and perhaps indicated a more fundamental debt owed John Locke than the one readily conceded in the matter of basic political propositions. Once the pluralism of the passage quoted above is accepted, it would be difficult to justify political axioms much different from those found in the *Second Treatise on Civil Government* or in the tenth and thirty-ninth *Federalist Papers,* for that matter.

Of all the philosophers of the eighteenth century, the one who was in many respects closest to the edge of Madison's mind was the sophisticated and skeptical David Hume. That is to say, whereas the impressions of Aristotle and Locke were so deep and basic as to call forth no particular acknowledgment, Hume was contemporary enough to be the subject of controversy and hence more likely to elicit specific reference. There are half-a-dozen references to Hume's *Essays* and *History of England* in Madison's correspondence and speeches. Furthermore, and perhaps of more significance, Hume's writings and ideas were much on the mind of the Rev. John Witherspoon as he began his presidency of Princeton in 1768. He had known and studied with Hume in Edinburgh, where the famous skeptical philosopher was one of the intellectual giants of the day. Witherspoon used Hume as a whipping boy in moral philosophy, exorcising him for his utilitarian ethics, applying such epithets to him as " skeptical " and "infidel." [33] On the other hand, in his lectures on eloquence, Witherspoon referred to Hume as being " of great reach and accuracy of judgment in matters of criticism," and changed his adjective to " sagacious " in describing the infidel! [34] In many respects, some of Witherspoon's classes must have been a kind of running debate between the orthodox Presbyterian's views and the noxious and nettlesome ideas of the skeptical philosopher.

Because of the freshness of Hume's thought, and its probing, questioning, yet urbane quality, one can imagine its peculiar attractiveness to a person of Madison's analytical turn of mind. Hume's willingness to balance probabilities and distinguish empirical factors, regardless of systems or dogma, also would have appealed to Madison. The affinity between the two men is neatly illustrated in Hume's short essay on " The Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature."

In this essay, Hume undertook to examine just exactly what was meant when men made comments about human nature, since it was

[33] Calhoun's notes, " Lectures on Moral Philosophy," 36, 56.

[34] Bradford's notes, " Lectures on Eloquence," 208.

" a point that seems to have divided philosophers and poets, as well as divines, from the beginning of the world to this day." Contrary to the attitude of his optimistic contemporaries, Hume admitted that he was " sensible that a delicate sense of morals, especially when attended with a splenetic temper, is apt to give a man a disgust of the world." Having conceded this regrettable but nevertheless true observation about mankind, he proceeded to find considerable grounds for avoiding despair. In the first place, Hume observed that the goodness or badness of human nature depended upon the standard of comparison. If compared to animals, men appeared wise and virtuous, but if compared to angels, men certainly seemed mean and lowly. Secondly, " it is usual to compare one man with another; and finding very few whom we can call wise or virtuous, we are apt to entertain a contemptible notion of our species in general." Hume softened this judgment by pointing out that the terms " wise " and " virtuous " were comparative, since, " were the lowest of our species as wise as Tully or Lord Bacon, we should still have reason to say that there are few wise men."

Hume's final observation on human nature was a direct attack on the Hobbesian contention that all human motivation was basically selfish.

> In my opinion, there are two things which have led astray those philosophers, that have insisted so much on the selfishness of men.
>
> I. They found, that every act of virtue or friendship was attended with a secret pleasure; whence they concluded that, friendship and virtue could not be disinterested. But the fallacy of this is obvious. The virtuous sentiment or passion produces the pleasure, and does not arise from it. . . .
>
> II. It has always been found, that the virtuous are far from being indifferent to praise; and therefore they have been represented as a set of vainglorious men, who have nothing in view but the applause of others. But this is also a fallacy. . . . Vanity is so closely allied with virtue, and to love the fame of laudable actions approaches so near the love of laudable actions for their own sake . . . it is almost impossible to have the latter without some degree of the former. . . . Nero had the same vanity in driving a chariot that Trajan had in governing the empire with justice and ability.[35]

The contribution which this kind of writing, and it is typical of Hume's polite but incisive essays, might have made to Madison's thinking was more one of mood and temper than one of bold, new ideas. Hume took a sensible, sophisticated middle ground on human nature. Of course, there was a great deal in the observable behavior of mankind that would give rise to a " disgust of the world." On the other hand, it was important to keep in mind that man was supposed

[35] David Hume, " Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature," *Essays, Literary, Moral. and Political* (London, 1870), 45–49.

to be "a little lower than the angels." Finally, Hume's sharp mind bared the sophistry of those who would utterly blacken the character of man. The pattern is a significant and interesting one: logical errors exposed, regrettable realities admitted, but modest hope maintained in spite of the recognition of human imperfectibility. The Master of Montpelier dealt with many perplexities in precisely this fashion.

What, then, might Thucydides, Aristotle, Locke, and Hume have finally meant for James Madison?[36] Most important, the emphasis on Aristotle and Thucydides, who perhaps were representatives of much more of the classical tradition, denoted a major break with the dominant mood of the Age of Reason—realistic, sagacious moderation, instead of simple, naïve optimism. This is not to say that there is no compatibility between Classical and Enlightenment thought, or that Madison's contemporaries were not exposed to the same ancient authors. It simply suggests that Madison was more impressed, and enough more impressed by the idea of moderation in the classical tradition of freedom to make a crucial difference in his thought and philosophy. Comparison with both Jefferson and Hamilton is instructive. Hamilton was perhaps too much impressed with the élitism and power-consciousness of such classical figures as Plato and Caesar, and saw too little of the hope for human dignity and freedom which Christian and humane learning might have revealed to him. Jefferson, on the other hand, saw too much of the vision of the "heavenly city of the eighteenth-century philosophers," and was too neglectful of the sobering wisdom he might have gleaned while he was learning Greek and Latin.

In short, Madison's view of human nature, whether borrowed from the authorities suggested or merely a coincidental combination similar to them, can be summarized in a somewhat systematic fashion: the great truth, which critics of Plato from Aristotle to Karl Popper have pointed out so forcefully, that the talents and motivations of mankind are many, not one, was placed at the keystone of Madison's thought. Furthermore, the diversity ran not just in shades of black or shades of white, but covered the whole gamut of possibilities from very black to very white, from men who stoned dissenting preachers to George Washington. Also, since the passions and desires of individuals were sometimes modulated by rational judgment and sometimes not, it was not easy to predict what men would do, or indeed depend

[36] No comprehensive analysis of the thought of the four men has been attempted, of course. Two things, perhaps, will excuse this. First, the passages quoted are not secondary or extreme views of the authors; they are relatively important and representative selections. Second, passages have been chosen which bear most directly on the question of human nature.

finally on the wisdom or virtue of any particular person. Viewed as a whole, this unpredictability left society in a somewhat precarious position. At worst, the picture of the Corcyrean noblemen slain on the altar of Dionysus came to mind. At best, if a mixed system of government such as was formed under the Constitution of 1787 was devised, there was reasonable hope that men would be able to pursue their various kinds of happiness. Finally, the indispensable moral absolute, and the only unchanging star in Madison's philosophic firmament, was that men of right ought to be, and in practice had to be free if civilized society was to survive and life was to be "human" in the fullest sense of the word.

It is scarcely possible to over-emphasize the importance of this view of human nature to Madison's thought and philosophy. Not only does it indicate the substantive positions he took on any number of political, economic, social, diplomatic, and religious questions, but it offers keen insight into the frame of mind with which Madison faced the world. He was realistic, tolerant, tentative, and cautiously hopeful. In short, he saw the sensibleness of finding in store for the world what he could see in the nature of the men who gave it life and being.

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