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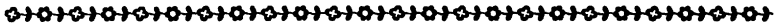
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John Quincy Adams: Virtue and the Tragedy of the Statesman

GREG RUSSELL

IN the unresolvable conflict between what he needs and what he is able to accomplish, the statesman is the prototype of social man, for what he suffers on his exalted plane is the common lot of all mankind. Suspended between his spiritual destiny, which he cannot fulfill, and his animal nature, in which he cannot remain, the statesman is forever condemned to experience the distinction between the longings of his mind and his actual condition as his personal, eminently human tragedy. Such was John Quincy Adams's assessment of his fate, a tragic legacy that was a persistent, and often painful, remembrance in the intellectual odyssey of two of his grandchildren, Brooks and Henry Adams. Neither Brooks's characterization of his grandfather as a failed philosopher nor Henry's description of the ex-president as a failed politician, however, ultimately comes to terms with the moral, indeed Christian, world view at the core of Adams's political tragedy: that the highest standard of human virtue sometimes leads to the greatest extreme of suffering and misfortune.



Writing in the second decade of the twentieth century, Brooks Adams described his grandfather as "an idealistic philosopher who sought with absolute disinterestedness to put the Union upon a plane of civilization which would have averted the Civil and might have altered the complexion of the recent [world] War." He failed "as all men must fail who harbor such a purpose and who almost with his last breath resigned himself and his ambitions to fate." Clearly, Brooks considered

his grandfather's tragedy the nation's tragedy, an ongoing crisis in the scientific and democratic life of America.

At this particular juncture in human affairs the tendency is very strong throughout the world to deify the democratic dogma . . . among men. . . . This form of belief was strong in my family a century ago, and found expression through . . . John Quincy Adams, who made the realization thereof the work and ambition of his life. . . . He based his hopes of success . . . on the belief that God, in whose existence . . . he did not doubt, favored him, and would aid him; but he died declaring that God had abandoned him, and was only kept from confessing agnosticism by his love and veneration for his mother. . . . But so far as he had watched, during a lifetime, the progress of the democrat toward perfection, he had little to say in the way of hope. . . . His life was a tragedy, ending in the Civil War, which he had long foreseen approaching, but which he had been unable to do anything about.¹

"The greatest tragedy of all," Brooks suggested, was that even though the Civil War had been fought to defend democratic principles "of the natural equality of man, and the possession of certain rights of which he cannot be deprived by violence," America was in the midst of a social war no less severe than when Lincoln had died. In part this predicament followed from "certain fundamental facts which are stronger than democratic theories." One such fact, derived from Brooks's historical and economic research, is that man is "a pure automaton, who is moved along the paths of least resistance by forces over which he has no control." By his own admission, Brooks had reverted to a pure form of Calvinism. Believing fear and greed to be the primary human passions, he concluded "that so much and no more might be expected from a pure democracy as might be expected from an automaton so actuated."²

Henry Adams, on the other hand, argued that "John Quincy Adams had been a political man, actuated by ordinary political feelings." Advising Brooks on their grandfather's legacy in a letter of 1909, Henry urged his own interpretation on his brother.

¹Brooks Adams, "Introductory Note," in Henry Adams, *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), pp. v-vi. Brooks Adams wrote both the introduction and lengthy first chapter, "The Heritage of Henry Adams."

²B. Adams, "Introductory Note," *Degradation*, pp. vii-viii.

No one with the intelligence of an average monkey will try to tell a story without leading up to its point. Your tragedy will be indicated as it is in the lives of us all, by the chief failure, which is, in your case, the Presidency. To me, the old gentleman's presidency appears always as lurid—which is not the impression made on me by his father's defeat,—and I see the age of Andrew Jackson and the cotton planters much as I see the age of Valois or Honorius,—that is, with profound horror.

The failure of his grandfather was, fundamentally, the failure of his countrymen. Americans, Henry claimed, are afraid of tragedy. He continued:

... they fly it, or shut their eyes to it; they are irritated if you insist on it; but they do not so much object to the suggestion of it, and are willing at times to admit that certain persons—like Abraham Lincoln—may be treated in that tone. . . . J. Q. Adams is, to my artistic fancy, a tragic picture, and his Presidency is the most tragic show of it. He is the prophet who ends in secret murder and open war, violence and fraud and hideous moral depravity. Americans dare not look at it as such a Shakespearean or Sophoclean plot, and would turn their backs on it; but in the miserable consciousness of meanness, they know it, and they still have enough left of atrophied imagination to feel the suggestion of it.³

Both Brooks and Henry, while differing about the forces acting on their grandfather from within and without, depicted the tragic eclipse of his life (particularly after the 1828 election) as less the result of ordinary human failings than of anonymous historical influences. The ex-president was led to the painful realization that science and education “offer no solution to our difficulties, but possibly on the contrary aggravate them.” For Brooks, the picture of the old man submitting to a destiny which he could not avert “is pathetic and not unlike that of his grandson [Henry] who has written . . . [about] his regret at the loss of religious faith, and his resignation to resistless nature, in *Phase* [“The Rule of Phase Applied to History”].” Brooks quoted from one of Henry's letters to throw the analogy into high relief.

³Henry Adams to Brooks Adams, 18 February 1909, *Henry Adams: Selected Letters* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992).

Yet, setting my own wicked nature aside, this familiar picture of the old man in the prize ring, much as I love it, interests me less than the documents you quote to show the steps of degradation that forced him against his will. Especially the letter to Upham of February 2, 1837, which is quite new to me, has given me cause for much thought. As I read, between its lines, the bitterness of his failure, and the intensity of his regret at having served the Sable Genius of the South, are immensely tragic—so much so that he shrank from realizing its whole meaning even to himself. . . . With the same old self-mortification which he and we have all . . . inherited from Calvinism, I believe, if he had read what I have written to you about his early life, he would have beaten his breast, and cried his culp, and begged the forgiveness of his God, although I can't make much of his God anyway.⁴

The tragic character of Adams's life cannot, however, be simply explained by the triumph of his political enemies or, for that matter, by the bitter pangs of religious doubt. Even Brooks and Henry—mired as they were in the dilemmas of their own times—seemed to understand the peculiar eighteenth-century context of J. Q. A.'s fate. In hindsight, the tragedy of Adams's national vision emerges from the lack of opportunity available to him to exercise his philosophical convictions about human nature, the relation of science to politics, and the public purposes of democratic government.

In J. Q. A.'s political theory, the Creator had made man a social being, had blended his happiness with that of his fellows. Government was the necessary instrumentality for assuring the success of that liaison. The point was expressed clearly in Adams's first State of the Union address.

The great object of the institution of civil government is the improvement of the condition of those who are parties to the social contract, and no government . . . can accomplish the lawful ends of its institution but in proportion as it improves the condition of those over whom it is established. . . . But social, political and intellectual improvement are duties assigned by the Author of Our Existence to social no less than [to] individual man. For the fulfillment of these duties governments are invested with power, and for the attainment of

⁴B. Adams, "Heritage of Henry Adams," *Degradation*, pp. 11–12. In the letter to Upham, J. Q. A. had reflected on his life and career.

the end . . . the exercise of delegated power is a duty as sacred . . . as the usurpation of powers not granted is criminal and odious.⁵

In consolidation—internal improvements at federal expense, encouragement of manufactures, conservation of public lands of the West, promotion of science, sympathy for the spirit of liberty throughout the world—lay the means of making America the noblest nation in history. “My system of politics more and more inclines to strengthen the union and its government,” Adams had written in 1816. “It is directly the reverse of that professed by Mr. John Randolph, of relying principally upon the state governments.”⁶

The teachings of Christianity echoed through and clearly informed Adams’s understanding of the democratic spirit in American politics. He spoke of a transcendent principle that limits, as it directs, the vital impulse of republican rule. Christian benevolence, he argued, “enjoins self-love as the standard of brotherly affection, and proclaims all mankind as a brotherhood of one kindred blood.” Equality understood in these terms dictates that “every citizen of such a republic must be devoted to improve the condition of his country and mankind.” Liberty, Adams insisted, far from jeopardizing equality, stimulates within each citizen “the constant exercise of all the faculties of body and of mind, with which he has been endowed by his Creator, to elevate . . . and beautify the land of his nativity, or of his choice.”⁷ Though skeptical of unwieldy majorities, and the radical doctrines of Bentham, he admitted there was one form of democracy in which he was a firm believer—“the democracy of Jesus and his Apostles.” This was the message addressed to all men in the Sermon on the Mount, in chapter 12 of the first Epistle to the Romans and in chapters 13–15 of the first Epistle to the Corinthians. St. Paul alluded to the obliga-

⁵John Quincy Adams, “First Annual Message,” in *The State of the Union Messages of the Presidents, 1790–1966*, ed. Fred L. Israel, 3 vols. (New York: Chelsea House, 1966), 1:243–44.

⁶*The Selected Writings of John and John Quincy Adams*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 287.

⁷John Quincy Adams, *An Oration, Delivered before the Cincinnati Astronomical Society on the Occasion of Laying the Corner Stone of an Astronomical Observatory* (Cincinnati: Shepard and Co., 1843), pp. 12–19, 61–63.

tions among men whose faith brings them into a covenant before the eyes of God:

. . . I bid every one among you to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him. For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ. . . . Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. . . .

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

Skeptical of any democracy “not unbedded [*sic*] in a profound sense of moral and religious obligation,” Adams favored “a democracy of duties always correlative to the democracy of rights.”⁸ The dangerous alternative, democracy *en masse*, leads to a loss of control, the surrender of moral discipline, and a haphazard life of random desires.

Adams’s religious beliefs did not diminish his enthusiasm for the study of science. Nor did he view science as separate from the study of man, his mind, and morality. In the history of mankind, astronomical observation was counted among the first sources of knowledge. Adams cited the initial chapter of Genesis: “God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and for years.” He alluded to a “common chain, which unites, as with links of adamant, the circle of sciences, and the liberal arts.” The people of America, Adams argued, did “not sufficiently estimate the importance of patronizing and promoting science as a principle of political action.” The benefits of science were so significant that education was absolutely essential to the public good. “Knowledge is the attribute of [man’s] nature which . . . enables him to improve his condition on earth,” Adams reasoned, “and to prepare him for the enjoyment of a happier existence hereafter.” In eulogiz-

⁸“Letters of John Adams and John Quincy Adams, 1776–1838,” *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 10 (April 1906): 245–46, 249. See Romans 12:3–9 for Adams’s reference.

ing James Smithson, Adams maintained that scientific knowledge enables man to discover his own nature as falling midway between earth and heaven: "Whoever increases his knowledge multiplies the uses to which he is enabled to turn the gift of his Creator to his own benefit, and partakes in . . . that goodness which is the highest attribute of Omnipotence itself."⁹

Brooks Adams classified his grandfather as "a precursor of the later Darwinians who . . . preached the doctrine of human perfectibility, a doctrine in which the modern world . . . still professes to believe."¹⁰ The theory, which was popularly accepted, had a compensatory function as Henry Adams depicted it in his *Education*. "Unbroken Evolution under uniform conditions pleased every one,—except curates and bishops; it was the very best substitute for religion; a safe . . . thoroughly Common-Law deity."¹¹ J. Q. A.'s attempt, in Brooks's view, to build "an efficient instrument for collective administration" by linking the democratic principle of equality to the promotion of science rested, however, on "a fundamental contradiction of human nature."¹² Education stimulated the desire for wealth, and the desire for wealth reacted on applied science in ways that convulsed Adams's hope of elevating the character and improving the condition of man.¹³ Analyzing the course of scientific learning after 1830, Henry wrote: "When the great development of physical energies began, all school teaching . . . [took] for granted that man's progress in mental energy is measured by his capture of physical forces, amounting to some fifty million steam horse power from coal." In fact, man "cares little what becomes of all this new power, he is satisfied to know . . . that his mind has learned to control them."¹⁴

⁹Josiah Quincy, *Memoir of the Life of John Quincy Adams* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, Lee, 1860), pp. 265, 306; J. Q. Adams, *Laying the Corner Stone*, pp. 34, 38; *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 12 vols. (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1874–77), 11:441.

¹⁰B. Adams, "Heritage of Henry Adams," *Degradation*, p. 30.

¹¹Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York: Modern Library, 1931), p. 225.

¹²B. Adams, "Heritage of Henry Adams," *Degradation*, pp. 78–79.

¹³J. Q. Adams, *Memoirs*, 11:409.

¹⁴H. Adams, cited by B. Adams, in "Heritage of Henry Adams," *Degradation*, p. 78.

The elder Adams, so his younger kin claimed, stimulated an education of waste while aiming at an education of conservation. Yet conservation was contrary to the greed that dominated the democratic mind and “impelled it to insist upon the pillage of the public by the private man.” And it was precisely here, Brooks advised, that his grandfather fell victim to the fallacy that underlies the theory of modern democracy—“that it is possible by education to stimulate the selfish instinct of competition, which demands that each man should strive to better himself at the cost of his neighbor, so as to coincide with the moral principle that all should labor for the common good.” Competition, as Adams discovered, meant Jackson and war; the common good would be achieved only in Christ’s kingdom. By sad experience, Adams found “that the statesman and the moralist cannot combine the two.”¹⁵

This tendency in their grandfather—his faith that there was a God in heaven whose thought was manifested and accessible as scientific law—was the psychic and tragic downfall of a man who exaggerated the power of moral principle in the turbulent world of politics. He was forever tormented by the thought of what he *should* have been and thus wrote near the end of everything:

If my intellectual powers had been such as have been sometimes committed by the Creator of man to single individuals of the species, my diary would have been, next to the Holy Scriptures, the most precious and valuable book ever written by human hands, and I should have been one of the greatest benefactors of my country and of mankind. I would, by the irresistible power of genius and the irrepressible energy of will and the favor of Almighty God, have banished war and slavery from the face of the earth forever. But the conceptive power of mind was not conferred upon me by my Maker, and I have improved the scanty portion of His gifts as I might and ought to have done.¹⁶

I do not presume to quarrel here with either Brooks’s or Henry’s characterization of the tragic consequences of their

¹⁵H. Adams, cited by B. Adams, in “Heritage of Henry Adams,” *Degradation*, pp. 78–79.

¹⁶J. Q. Adams, *Memoirs*, 12:277.

grandfather's legacy. I do, however, question the specific polarities—realism *v.* idealism; morality *v.* politics; individual competition *v.* public good—they choose to conceptualize the intellectual tragedy of John Quincy Adams. Brooks's profile of his grandfather as an "idealistic philosopher" does little justice to the diplomat who manipulated power and America's national interest on behalf of the Transcontinental Treaty of 1819 and the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. Similarly, the congressman who fought the "gag rule" and defended the slave's right to petition was far from being entrapped in the political world described by Henry Adams: "The effect of power and publicity on all men is the aggravation of self, a sort of tumor that ends in killing the victim's sympathies; a diseased appetite, like a passion for drink or perverted tastes; one can scarcely use expressions too strong to describe the violence of egotism it stimulates."¹⁷ Some, as the elder Adams might be expected to reply, take upon themselves the burden of sin (in this case, the sin of ambition) so that the rest of us might feel secure in our relative innocence. The tragedy that befell John Quincy Adams was not simply the result of excessive moralism nor, borrowing Henry's formulation, the self-deception and hypocrisy with which vice (power) repays virtue. Rather the simultaneous interaction, or collision, of political and ethical vitalities—and the uncertain compromises to which they give rise in the political arena—prompted Adams's humbleness in the face of his own failures.

In this very indeterminateness—in the limitations of man's vision and his power—lies the same tragic quality that has always marked great statesmen, and great moments, of history. And in this sense John Quincy Adams, if a great man, is also a tragic one. But tragedy, as George Kennan argues, is a dialectical concept, implying the confrontation between negative and positive phenomena.¹⁸ If the positive aspects of Adams's mind were not present in a measure at least comparable to the negative ones, even the element of tragedy would be absent from

¹⁷H. Adams, *The Education*, p. 147.

¹⁸George F. Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), p. 115.

the work of his leading biographers. Adams would be little more than a pitiable spectacle.



Any assessment of Adams's statesmanship must begin with his awareness of the existential human condition from which the religious impulse, made rational in dogma and visible in organization, springs: the finiteness of man's knowledge and limitations to his action. Adams thought incessantly about the perennial challenges man faces in his social and political existence—his heroic struggle to be and to know that he can be more than he is. Political wisdom, he believed, has its origin in the experience of this insecurity—a recognition of the hapless social forces that man's own unstilled desires have created. Great men respond by pushing themselves to the edges of human possibility; weak men prey upon expedient opportunity. A concern for both the good and evil in human nature—the belief that even miserably selfish and parochial man can transcend his nature through God's grace—was Adams's starting point in all realms—ethics, politics, and religion.

Adams was once moved to analyze the human tragedy that molded the moral and intellectual character of Hamlet. Literary tragedy involves the imitative representation of human action and passion, designed to purify the heart of the spectator through the dramatization of terror and pity. This, Adams maintained, was "the definition of Aristotle; and Pope's most beautiful lines in the prologue to [Addison's tragedy of] Cato, are but an expansion of the same idea." Hamlet is the personification of a man "crushed to extinction by the pressure of calamities inflicted, not by nature, but against nature; not by physical, but by moral evil." The symptoms of this mortal coil are evident in Hamlet's colloquy with Guildenstern:

What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me. [Act 2, scene 3, ll. 303–8]

Hamlet's reasoning faculty "always takes the tinge of passion under which he is labouring, but his conduct is always governed by the impulse of the moment." His reflections are as sportive and playful as they are indignant and melancholy. Hamlet's real madness is towering passion, the furor *brevis*, which is the ancient definition of anger. The ideal perfection in man's intellectual and moral nature "struggling with calamity beyond his power to bear, inflicted by the crime of his fellow man . . . sinking under it to extinction," is a synopsis of his tragic character, and Adams claimed to see in his own career and character the exclamation of the dying Hamlet exemplified:¹⁹

Oh God!—Horatio, what a wounded name
 Things standing thus unknown shall live behind me.
[Act 5, scene 2, ll. 336–38]

Adams viewed man's rational faculty as the peculiar, supreme quality that distinguished him from other animal species, an attribute that constitutes "the great link between the physical and intellectual world." Man's passions and appetites place him "on a level with the herds of the forest; by our REASON we participate of the divine nature itself." In the scale of creation, man ranks "higher than the clod of the valley" though "lower than the angels." The gift of reason alone enables man to enjoy the "privilege of progressive improvement" which follows from "the advantages of individual discovery."²⁰ Alexander Pope's figuring of the ubiquitous symbolism of the "Great Chain of Being" had a profound impact on the world view of the American Founding Fathers and, consequently, on John Quincy Adams. In the words of the poet:

¹⁹J. Q. A.'s thoughts on Shakespeare appear in John Quincy Adams and James H. Hackett, *The Character of Hamlet* (New York: J. Mowatt, 1844), pp. 3, 5. The reference to Pope can be found in Alexander Pope, *Collected Poems* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1983), pp. 57–58. J. Q. A. compared himself to Hamlet in J. Q. Adams to Charles Upham, 2 February 1837, "Ten Unpublished Letters of John Quincy Adams, 1796–1837," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 4 (April 1941): 382..

²⁰John Quincy Adams, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*, 2 vols. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 1:13–14.

Vast chain of being! which from God began,
 Nature's aethereal, human, angel, man,
 Beast, bird, fish, insect, what no eye can see,
 No glass can reach; from Infinite to thee,
 From thee to nothing.²¹

Without a break, a progressive hierarchy of creatures extended from the worm to the seraph.

The consequences of this world view for Adams's political thought can be noted briefly. Man formed the middle link between the lower and higher creatures. John Locke supposed he stood closer to the lower creatures than to God, from whom he is infinitely remote.²² If the depravity of human nature (i.e., original sin) had been banished (though, as Pope points out, not without a new innocence that prompts man to praise the Creator and the creation²³), so had man's striving for redemption, man's aspiration for perfection. His emancipation from original sin had lowered his goals. A. O. Lovejoy has noted that the "imperfection of man is indispensable for the fullness of the hierarchy of being." With no space allowed for millenarian prophecy or fanaticism, Pope's ethical perspective amounted to an ethics of prudent mediocrity.²⁴

Statecraft inhered in the recognition and application of the two premises underlying the political method of *counterpoise*: that men never act exclusively from disinterested and rational motives, but that it is nonetheless possible to fashion a good "whole," a happy and harmonious state, by mixing and counterbalancing antagonistic social elements.²⁵ Human reason enables one to judge the means by which the passions—all "Modes of Self Love"—can be gratified, but it has no driving power.

²¹Pope, *Collected Poems*, p. 188.

²²John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. John Yolton, 2 vols. (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1964), 2:50.

²³Pope, *Collected Poems*, pp. 182–83.

²⁴A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1936), pp. 199–200.

²⁵A. O. Lovejoy, *Reflections on Human Nature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961), p. 42.

On life's vast ocean diversely we sail,
Reason's the card, but Passion is the gale.

The card—reason—neither propels the ship nor determines its destination; that device merely allows the mariner to know in which direction his vessel is moving or where to steer to reach the desired port. Conflicting passions, however, can be expertly combined to insure social peace and tranquility, the very purpose of the Creator in making man.

Passions, like elements though born to fight,
Yet, mix'd and softened, in his work unite:
These, 'tis enough to temper and employ;
But what composes man, can man destroy? . . .
Each individual seeks a several goal,
But Heavens great view is one, and that the whole.
That counterworks each folly and caprice;
That disappoints the effect of every vice.

The statesman's assignment is to advance this divine mission by adjusting the parts of "the whole" so that "jarring interests" will

of themselves create
Th' according music of the well-mix'd State.²⁶

Not only priests and poets understood this need for balance. "The moral philosophy . . . of the Stoics resembles the Christian doctrine in . . . requiring the total subjugation of the passions," Adams declared; "and this part of the Stoic principles was adopted by the academies."²⁷ This obligation is addressed by Cicero in the fifth of his *Tusculan Disputations*.

As for that tranquility, greatly longed for and pursued—and by that I mean the freedom from anxiety on which the happy life depends—how can any one have it who is or may be attended by a multitude of evils? How will he be able to be lofty and erect, and to treat as trivial everything which can befall a human being, such as we claim the wise man is, unless he considers everything which can affect him to be

²⁶Pope, *Collected Poems*, pp. 192, 204.

²⁷J. Q. Adams, *The Bible and Its Teachings* (Auburn, N.Y.: James M. Alden, 1850), p. 99.

within himself? When Philip (the II of Macedon) . . . threatened to prevent the Spartans from doing everything they were trying to do, they asked whether he would even prevent them from dying—won't it be much easier to find our ideal individual with such spirit than a whole community? Again, if self-restraint, which controls all disturbances, is added to the courage of which I speak, what can he lack for living happily whom courage rescues from anxiety and fear, and self-restraint calls away from bad desires and does not allow to exult with excessive rapture? I would demonstrate that these are produced by Virtue.²⁸

Adams answered the objection “that this theory [or obligation to pursue the Good] is not adapted to the infirmities of human nature; that it is not made for a being so constituted as man.” Admittedly, the weakness of man's nature “is too strongly tested by all human experience, as well as by the whole tenor of the Scriptures.” That degree of weakness, however, must be measured against efforts to overcome it and not by instances of indulging it. Absolute impotence is all that remains once sinful man admits “weakness as an argument to forbear exertion.” Only the most inconclusive reasoning could infer “that because perfection is not to be absolutely obtained, it is therefore not to be sought.” Human excellence is at best an approximation of perfection; the degree of individual moral achievement will be in exact proportion to the degree of self-control man exercises over himself. According to the Stoics, all vice can be resolved into folly; according to “Christian principle it is the effect of weakness.” Moreover, those Christians counted as the most steadfast in their faith are often the very ones most tempted by the passions of others. Because kindness and benevolence “comprise the whole system of Christian duties,” there is “great danger of falling into errors and vice” when the individual lacks the “energy to resist the example or enticement of others.” On this point, Adams claimed that “the true character of Christian morality appears . . . to have been misunderstood by some of its ablest . . . defenders.”²⁹

²⁸Cicero, *Disputations II & V*, trans. and ed. A. E. Douglas (Westminster, England: Aris and Phillips, 1990), p. 103.

²⁹J. Q. Adams, *The Bible and Its Teachings*, pp. 100–102.

To illustrate such misunderstanding, Adams cited *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* by the English theologian William Paley, who answered the unbelievers of his day.

There are two opposite descriptions of character, under which mankind may . . . be classified: the one possesses vigor, firmness, resolution, is active and daring, quick in its sensibilities, jealous of its fame, . . . inflexible of its purposes, violent in its resentment; the other meek, yielding, complying, forgiving, not prompt to act, but willing to suffer . . . under rudeness and insults . . . where others would demand satisfaction. . . . The former of these characters is . . . the favorite of the world; it is the character of the great men—there is a dignity in which it commands respect. The latter is poor-spirited, tame, and abject. Yet, so it has happened, that with the founder of Christianity, the latter is the subject of his commendation, his precepts, his example, and that the former is so in no part of his composition.³⁰

Adams did not accept Paley's account either as an accurate delineation of moral character or as a correct representation of Christian principles. Christ pronounced distinct blessings upon the "poor in spirit" (though not to be confused with the "poor-spirited") and upon the meek. Where, Adams asked, is there evidence in the gospel that Christ countenanced by "commendation, by precept or example, the tame and abject"? Paley's Christian "is one of those drivellers, who, to use a vulgar phrase, can never say no, to anybody."³¹

Never once did Christ recede from his station as "Lord and Master." He reasserted his authority when he washed the feet of his disciples; he preserved it when the officer struck him for his deportment before the high-priest; he demonstrated it on the cross when, through his agony, he exclaimed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He said to his disciples, "Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart," but where did he ever say to them, "Learn of me, for I am tame and abject?" Nothing, Adams asserted, was more unmistakable in Christ's teachings than the principle of stubborn resistance

³⁰William Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity*, 2 vols. (London: F. Faulder, 1796), 2:30–32.

³¹J. Q. Adams, *The Bible and Its Teachings*, p. 104.

against the evil impulses of others. He called upon his disciples to renounce all that is considered enjoyable upon earth “to take up their cross” and to suffer ill-treatment, persecution, and death for his sake. The Acts of the Apostles is a moving inventory of the faithfulness with which the chosen ministers carried these injunctions into practice. Only those of a bold and intrepid spirit could be entrusted with the commission to “teach all nations.” The true Christian, Adams wrote, is the *Justum et tenacem propositi virum* of Horace (“the man who is just and steady to his purpose”). These qualities of heroic character—along with those of meekness, a humble heart, and brotherly love—are what constitute “that moral perfection of which Christ gave an example in his own life, and to which he commands his disciples to aspire.”³²

Few passages from John Quincy Adams’s writings better express the dialectical pull at the center of the statesman’s life—the promptings of the ordinary politician as well as the idealism of the reformer who sees in transcendence his own limitations—than the concluding stanzas to his poem entitled “The Wants of Man.”

I want the seals of power and place,
 The ensigns of command—
 Charged by the people’s unbought grace,
 To rule my native land:
 Nor crown, nor sceptre, would I ask,
 But from my country’s will,
 By day, by night, to ply the task
 Her cup of bliss to fill. . . .

These are the wants to mortal man:
 I can not want them long.
 For life itself is but a span
 And earthly bliss a song.
 My last great want, absorbing all,
 Is, when beneath the sod,
 And summoned to my final call,
 The *mercy of my God*.

³²J. Q. Adams, *The Bible and Its Teachings*, pp. 107–8.

And oh! while circles in my veins
 Of life the purple stream,
 And yet a fragment small remains
 Of nature's transient dream,
 My soul, in humble hope unscarred,
 Forget not thou to pray,
 That this thy *want* may be prepared
 To meet the judgment-day!³³

Adams the realist knew that governments, democratic and otherwise, function within an atmosphere of inflamed ambitions, rivalries, and resentments that seldom, if ever, bring out the best in the personalities involved and sometimes provoke the worst. His own political battles—from the acquisition of Louisiana to the annexation of Texas—made him perfectly aware that government is often an unpleasant business and should not be idealized. Rather, government should be approached by the outsider only with a sigh for its unquestionable necessity and by the participant only with contrition for the moral ambiguities it requires him to accept and the distortions of self it inflicts upon him.³⁴

Adams the moralist believed that a sound democracy must set as its goals rational discussion and the subordination of private interests to the common good, goals that require considerable moral and intellectual self-discipline. In fact, it is the faith that such self-discipline is possible, even in the face of goals that are ultimately unattainable, that makes democracy preferable to other, more exclusionary forms of government.³⁵ John Middleton Murry would later elaborate on the moral law that Adams found at the core of democratic government.

Just as the democratic society freely chooses its government, so the democratic citizen must freely choose to do his duty to the commonweal. He puts his conscience in control of his actions. He obeys the law, not as an external command, but as the expression of his own bet-

³³J. Q. Adams, *The Bible and Its Teachings*, pp. 127–28.

³⁴Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill*, p. 58.

³⁵John Hallowell, *The Moral Foundations of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), pp. 123–24.

ter self, which wills to act in obedience to a law which its reason recognizes to be necessary. . . . Democracy is based not only in theory but in fact upon the reality of a universal obligation to obey the moral law. If that obligation is not recognized, and acted on, democracy must, in time of real stress, collapse. If the validity of the moral law is an illusion, so is the validity of democracy.³⁶

Even as the United States was torn asunder by the controversy over slavery, Adams never lost faith in God, despite Brooks's charge of agnosticism, and in the fundamental morality of mankind. It is possible, perhaps even probable, as Henry and Brooks intimated, that his dream of a free people wisely governing themselves and rapidly improving their physical and spiritual welfare may have been irrevocably shattered even before he assumed a position of power. This spectacle led not to his withdrawal but to his determination to struggle harder against the forces and individual leaders who threatened to undermine the genuine good of the nation. He was the servant of God, battling God's enemies and his own, with his back against the wall. His fight was for human freedom—freedom from shackles in the South, freedom for the right to petition in Congress, freedom for the human mind in knowledge and science.³⁷

Adopting a tragic perspective in politics enables the statesman to accept humanity's propensity for evil so that he may be realistic in confronting political and social problems. Yet a recognition of man's capacity for evil is useless without some faith in his capacity for good. Tragedy in politics, Reinhold Niebuhr once suggested, and not without some considerable irony, is not consistent with an excessive pessimism about human potentialities.

A consistent pessimism in regard to man's rational capacity for justice leads to absolutistic political theories; for they prompt the conviction that only preponderant power can coerce the various vitalities of a community into a working harmony. But a too consistent optimism in regard to man's ability and inclination to grant justice to his fellows

³⁶John Middleton Murry, "The Moral Foundations of Democracy," *Fortnightly*, no. 162, September 1947, p. 168.

³⁷James Truslow Adams, *The Adams Family* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1930), p. 213.

obscures the perils of chaos which perennially confront every society, including a free society.

“Man’s capacity for justice,” he continued, “makes democracy possible,” and “man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”³⁸ John Quincy Adams would add that the recognition of man’s sinfulness was never intended to paralyze man’s capacity for intelligent thought and moral action but to liberate that capacity in the service of God rather than of self. John Quincy Adams achieved a profound understanding of the limits of politics and morality, at the same time recognizing what America had to offer the world in the areas of freedom and justice. Self-criticism and a clear-eyed perception of American failings ultimately served to strengthen rather than weaken his capacity for leadership.

³⁸Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), pp. x–xi.

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