

### 73. *Thoughts on Lotteries*

*February, 1826*

It is a common idea that games of chance are immoral. But what is chance? Nothing happens in this world without a cause. If we know the cause, we do not call it chance; but if we do not know it, we say it was produced by chance. If we see a loaded die turn its lightest side up, we know the cause, and that it is not an effect of chance; but whatever side an unloaded die turns up, not knowing the cause, we say it is the effect of chance. Yet the morality of a thing cannot depend on our knowledge or ignorance of its cause. Not knowing why a particular side of an unloaded die turns up, cannot make the act of throwing it, or of betting on it, immoral. If we consider games of chance immoral, then every pursuit of human industry is immoral; for there is not a single one that is not subject to chance, not one wherein you do not risk a loss for the chance of some gain. The navigator, for example, risks his ship in the hope (if she is not lost in the voyage) of gaining an advantageous freight. The merchant risks his cargo to gain a better price for it. A landholder builds a house on the risk of indemnifying himself by a rent. The hunter hazards his time and trouble in the hope of killing game. In all these pursuits, you stake some one thing against another which you hope to win. But the greatest of all gamblers is the farmer. He risks the seed he puts into

the ground, the rent he pays for the ground itself, the year's labor on it, and the wear and tear of his cattle and gear, to win a crop, which the chances of too much or too little rain, and general uncertainties of weather, insects, waste, &c., often make a total or partial loss. These, then, are games of chance. Yet so far from being immoral, they are indispensable to the existence of man, and every one has a natural right to choose for his pursuit such one of them as he thinks most likely to furnish him subsistence. Almost all these pursuits of chance produce something useful to society. But there are some which produce nothing, and endanger the well-being of the individuals engaged in them, or of others depending on them. Such are games with cards, dice, billiards, &c. And although the pursuit of them is a matter of natural right, yet society, perceiving the irresistible bent of some of its members to pursue them, and the ruin produced by them to the families depending on these individuals, consider it as a case of insanity, *quoad hoc*, step in to protect the family and the party himself, as in other cases of insanity, infancy, imbecility, &c., and suppress the pursuit altogether, and the natural right of following it. There are some other games of chance, useful on certain occasions, and injurious only when carried beyond their useful bounds. Such are insurances, lotteries, raffles &c. These they do not suppress, but take their regulation under their own discretion. The insurance of ships on voyages is a vocation of chance, yet useful, and the right to exercise it therefore is left free. So of houses against fire, doubtful debts, the continuance of a particular life, and similar cases. Money is wanting for a useful undertaking, as a school, &c., for which a direct tax would be disapproved. It is raised therefore by a lottery, wherein the tax is laid on the willing only, that is to say, on those who can risk the price of a ticket without sensible injury for the possibility of a higher prize. An article of property, insusceptible of division at all, or not without great diminution of its worth, is sometimes of so large value as that no purchaser can be found while the owner owes debts, has no other means of payment, and his creditors no other chance of obtaining it but by its sale at a full and fair price. The lottery is here a salutary instrument for disposing of it, where many run small risks for the chance of obtaining a high prize. . . . This method of selling was formerly very much resorted to, until it was thought to nourish too much a spirit of hazard. The legislature were therefore induced not to suppress it altogether, but to take it under their own special regulation. This they did for the first time by their act of 1769, c. 17, before which time every person exercised the right freely; and since which time, it is made unlawful but when approved and authorized by a special act of the legislature. . . .

We have seen, then, that every vocation in life is subject to the influence of chance; that so far from being rendered immoral by the admixture of that ingredient, were they abandoned on that account, man could no longer subsist; that, among them, every one has a natural right to choose

that which he thinks most likely to give him comfortable subsistence; but that while the greater number of these pursuits are productive of something which adds to the necessaries and comforts of life, others again, such as cards, dice, &c., are entirely unproductive, doing good to none, injury to many, yet so easy, and so seducing in practice to men of a certain constitution of mind, that they cannot resist the temptation, be the consequences what they may; that in this case, as in those of insanity, idiocy, infancy, &c., it is the duty of society to take them under its protection, even against their own acts, and to restrain their right of choice of these pursuits, by suppressing them entirely; that there are others, as lotteries particularly, which, although liable to chance also, are useful for many purposes, and are therefore retained and placed under the discretion of the Legislature, to be permitted or refused according to the circumstances of every special case, of which they are to judge; that between the years 1782 and 1820, a space of thirty-eight years only, we have observed seventy cases, where the permission of them has been found useful by the Legislature, some of which are in progress at this time. These cases relate to the emolument of the whole State, to local benefits of education, of navigation, of roads, of counties, towns, religious assemblies, private societies, and of individuals under particular circumstances which may claim indulgence or favor. The latter is the case now submitted to the Legislature, and the question is, whether the individual soliciting their attention, or his situation, may merit that degree of consideration which will justify the Legislature in permitting him to avail himself of the mode of selling by lottery, for the purpose of paying his debts.

That a fair price cannot be obtained by sale in the ordinary way, and in the present depressed state of agricultural industry, is well known. Lands in this State will not now sell for more than a third or fourth of what they would have brought a few years ago, perhaps at the very time of the contraction of the debts for which they are now to be sold. The low price in foreign markets, for a series of years past, of agricultural produce, of wheat generally, of tobacco most commonly, and the accumulation of duties on the articles of consumption not produced within our State, not only disables the farmer or planter from adding to his farm by purchase, but reduces him to sell his own, and remove to the western country, glutting the market he leaves, while he lessens the number of bidders. To be protected against this sacrifice is the object of the present application, and whether the applicant has any particular claim to this protection, is the present question.

Here the answer must be left to others. It is not for me to give it. I may, however, more readily than others, suggest the offices in which I have served. I came of age in 1764, and was soon put into the nomination of justice of the county in which I live, and at the first election following I became one of its representatives in the Legislature.

I was thence sent to the old Congress.

Then employed two years with Mr. Pendleton and Mr. Wythe on the revision and reduction to a single code of the whole body of the British statutes, the acts of our Assembly, and certain parts of the common law.

Then elected Governor.

Next to the Legislature, and to Congress again.

Sent to Europe as Minister Plenipotentiary.

Appointed Secretary of State to the new government.

Elected Vice-President, and

President.

And lastly, a Visitor and Rector of the University.

In these different offices, with scarcely any interval between them, I have been in the public service now sixty-one years; and during the far greater part of the time, in foreign countries or in other States. Every one knows how inevitably a Virginia estate goes to ruin, when the owner is so far distant as to be unable to pay attention to it himself; and the more especially, when the line of his employment is of a character to abstract and alienate his mind entirely from the knowledge necessary to good, and even to saving management.

If it were thought worth while to specify any particular services rendered, I would refer to the specification of them made by the Legislature itself in their Farewell Address, on my retiring from the Presidency, February, 1809. There is one, however, not therein specified, the most important in its consequences, of any transaction in any portion of my life; to wit, the head I personally made against the federal principles and proceedings, during the administration of Mr. Adams. Their usurpations and violations of the constitution at that period, and their majority in both Houses of Congress, were so great, so decided, and so daring, that after combating their aggressions, inch by inch, without being able in the least to check their career, the republican leaders thought it would be best for them to give up their useless efforts there, go home, get into their respective Legislatures, embody whatever of resistance they could be formed into, and if ineffectual, to perish there as in the last ditch. All, therefore, retired, leaving Mr. Gallatin alone in the House of Representatives, and myself in the Senate, where I then presided as Vice-President. Remaining at our posts, and bidding defiance to the brow beatings and insults by which they endeavored to drive us off also, we kept the mass of republicans in phalanx together, until the Legislatures could be brought up to the charge; and nothing on earth is more certain, than that if myself particularly, placed by my office of Vice-President at the head of the republicans, had given way and withdrawn from my post, the republicans throughout the Union would have given up in despair, and the cause would have been lost forever. By holding on, we obtained time for the Legislatures to come up with their

weight; and those of Virginia and Kentucky particularly, but more especially the former, by their celebrated resolutions, saved the constitution at its last gasp. No person who was not a witness of the scenes of that gloomy period, can form any idea of the afflicting persecutions and personal indignities we had to brook. They saved our country however. The spirits of the people were so much subdued and reduced to despair by the X Y Z imposture, and other stratagems and machinations, that they would have sunk into apathy and monarchy, as the only form of government which could maintain itself.

If Legislative services are worth mentioning, and the stamp of liberality and equality, which was necessary to be imposed on our laws in the first crisis of our birth as a nation, was of any value, they will find that the leading and most important laws of that day were prepared by myself, and carried chiefly by my efforts; supported, indeed, by able and faithful coadjutors from the ranks of the House, very effective as seconds, but who would not have taken the field as leaders.

The prohibition of the further importation of slaves was the first of these measures in time.

This was followed by the abolition of entails, which broke up the hereditary and high-handed aristocracy, which, by accumulating immense masses of property in single lines of families, had divided our country into two distinct orders, of nobles and plebeians.

But further to complete the equality among our citizens so essential to the maintenance of republican government, it was necessary to abolish the principle of primogeniture. I drew the law of descents, giving equal inheritance to sons and daughters, which made a part of the revised code.

The attack on the establishment of a dominant religion, was first made by myself. It could be carried at first only by a suspension of salaries for one year, by battling it again at the next session for another year, and so from year to year, until the public mind was ripened for the bill for establishing religious freedom, which I had prepared for the revised code also. This was at length established permanently, and by the efforts chiefly of Mr. Madison, being myself in Europe at the time that work was brought forward.

To these particular services, I think I might add the establishment of our University, as principally my work, acknowledging at the same time, as I do, the great assistance received from my able colleagues of the Visitation. But my residence in the vicinity threw, of course, on me the chief burthen of the enterprise, as well of the buildings as of the general organization and care of the whole. The effect of this institution on the future fame, fortune and prosperity of our country, can as yet be seen but at a distance. But an hundred well-educated youths, which it will turn out annually, and ere long, will fill all its offices with men of superior qualifications, and raise it from its humble state to an eminence among its associates which it has never yet known; no, not in its brightest

days. That institution is now qualified to raise its youth to an order of science unequalled in any other State; and this superiority will be the greater from the free range of mind encouraged there, and the restraint imposed at other seminaries by the shackles of a domineering hierarchy, and a bigoted adhesion to ancient habits. Those now on the theatre of affairs will enjoy the ineffable happiness of seeing themselves succeeded by sons of a grade of science beyond their own ken. Our sister States will also be repairing to the same fountains of instruction, will bring hither their genius to be kindled at our fire, and will carry back the fraternal affections which, nourished by the same *alma mater*, will knit us to them by the indissoluble bonds of early personal friendships. The good Old Dominion, the blessed mother of us all, will then raise her head with pride among the nations, will present to them that splendor of genius which she has ever possessed, but has too long suffered to rest uncultivated and unknown, and will become a centre of ralliance to the States whose youth she has instructed, and, as it were, adopted.

I claim some share in the merits of this great work of regeneration. My whole labors, now for many years, have been devoted to it, and I stand pledged to follow it up through the remnant of life remaining to me. And what remuneration do I ask? Money from the treasury? Not a cent. I ask nothing from the earnings or labors of my fellow citizens. I wish no man's comforts to be abridged for the enlargement of mine. For the services rendered on all occasions, I have been always paid to my full satisfaction. I never wished a dollar more than what the law had fixed on. My request is, only to be permitted to sell my own property freely to pay my own debts. To *sell* it, I say, and not to *sacrifice* it, not to have it gobbled up by speculators to make fortunes for themselves, leaving unpaid those who have trusted to my good faith, and myself without resource in the last and most helpless stage of life. If permitted to sell it in a way which will bring me a fair price, all will be honestly and honorably paid, and a competence left for myself, and for those who look to me for subsistence. To sell it in a way which will offend no moral principle, and expose none to risk but the willing, and those wishing to be permitted to take the chance of gain. To give me, in short, that permission which you often allow to others for purposes not more moral.

Will it be objected, that although not evil in itself, it may as a precedent, lead to evil? But let those who shall quote the precedent, bring their case within the same measure. Have they, as in this case, devoted three-score years and one of their lives, uninterruptedly, to the service of their country? Have the times of those services been as trying as those which have embraced our Revolution, our transition from a colonial to a free structure of government? Have the stations of their trial been of equal importance? Has the share they have borne in holding their new government to its genuine principles, been equally marked? And has the cause of the distress, against which they seek a remedy, proceeded,

not merely from themselves, but from errors of the public authorities, disordering the circulating medium, over which they had no control, and which have, in fact, doubled and trebled debts, by reducing, in that proportion, the value of the property which was to pay them? If all these circumstances, which characterize the present case, have taken place in theirs also, then follow the precedent. Be assured, the cases will be so rare as to produce no embarrassment, as never to settle into an injurious habit. The single feature of a sixty years' service, as no other instance of it has yet occurred in our country, so it probably never may again. And should it occur, even once and again, it will not impoverish your treasury, as it takes nothing from that, and asks but a simple permission, by an act of natural right, to do one of moral justice.

#### 74. *Epitaph*

Could the dead feel any interest in Monuments or other remembrances of them. . . the following would be to my Manes the most gratifying.

On the grave

a plain die or cube of 3 f. without any mouldings, surmounted by an Obelisk of 6 f. height, each of a single stone: on the faces of the Obelisk the following inscription, & not a word more

'Here was buried

Thomas Jefferson

Author of the Declaration of American Independence  
of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom  
& Father of the University of Virginia.'

because by these, as testimonials that I have lived, I wish most to be remembered.