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Author(s): C. Bradley Thompson

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# Young John Adams and the New Philosophic Rationalism

C. Bradley Thompson

**D**URING his retirement years, John Adams was fond of saying that the War of Independence was a consequence of the American Revolution. The real revolution, he declared, had taken place in the minds and hearts of the colonists in the decade or two before 1776. What he meant by this evocative statement and how he understood the sources and nature of America's Revolutionary transformation have long intrigued historians. In an 1818 letter to Hezekiah Niles, Adams left a clue to his meaning. Among other things, he said, there had been a "radical change" in the people's "religious sentiments of their duties and obligations." This "great and important alteration" in the colonists' religious and moral character forced them to rethink their duties and obligations to king and Parliament after imperial authorities began to violate "their lives, liberties, and properties."<sup>1</sup> How can historians examine or measure the causes and nature of such a phenomenon? We might begin by looking to Adams himself: his early diary records in remarkable detail a radical change in his religious and moral views. If we are to understand how John Adams experienced the coming of the Revolution, we must begin by examining the assumptions and ideas through which he filtered and interpreted events of the day.

Historians have commonly described Adams as a Puritan or a neo-Puritan and have equated his diary with the self-exorcising daybooks of his Calvinist forebears.<sup>2</sup> Two important attempts to examine Adams's early years agree that his behavior and character traits, his knowledge and ideas, and even his response to the Revolutionary crisis were largely shaped by a strict Calvinist

C. Bradley Thompson is an assistant professor of history at Ashland University, Ashland, Ohio. He wishes to thank Jon Butler, Lenore Thomas Ealy, Joseph J. Ellis, John R. Howe, and Sidney M. Taylor for their thoughtful and penetrating comments on drafts of this article.

<sup>1</sup> Adams to Niles, Feb. 13, 1818, in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States, with a life of the author . . .*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 10 vols. (New York, 1969; orig. pub. 1850–1856), 10:282–83. See also Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Aug. 24, 1815, and Adams to Thomas McKean, Nov. 26 1815, *ibid.*, 172–73, 180–82.

<sup>2</sup> John T. Morse, Jr., thought Adams "an admirable specimen of the New England Puritan" in *John Adams* (Boston, 1890), 6. Francis Newton Thorpe called him "a Puritan of the Puritans," in "The Political Ideas of John Adams," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 44 (1920), 3. Paul K. Conkin writes that Adams's "dominant character traits, his habits of thought, even his political ideals, were thoroughly Puritan," in *Puritans and Pragmatists: Eight Eminent American Thinkers* (New York, 1968), 109. John Patrick Diggins has gone the furthest in describing Adams as a "good Calvinist," in *The Lost Soul of American Politics: Virtue, Self-Interest, and the Foundations of Liberalism* (New York, 1984), 55.

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heritage and the cultural remnants of Puritan manners and mores. According to Bernard Bailyn, Adams “unconsciously and unquestioningly accepted as his own the exacting behavioral standards of the Bible Commonwealth.” To Edmund S. Morgan, the early diary “reveals Adams in full pursuit of the Protestant Ethic.”<sup>3</sup> At a time when historians are looking to classical-republican or classical-liberal paradigms to explain the coming of the American Revolution, Bailyn and Morgan usefully remind us that its deepest roots were very much indigenous.

The portrait of Adams as Puritan or Calvinist is most often based on two arguments. The first suggests that his early diary sustains the themes and elements characteristic of the Puritan confessional: sin, self-examination, preparation, repentance, self-mastery, the quest for salvation. At first glance, we see a young man facing what Morgan described as the classic Puritan dilemma: the struggle between earthly desires and otherworldly obligations. Inspired by Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Morgan attempted to explain Adams’s struggle against vanity, his asceticism, and his search for a calling as a form of secularized Puritanism. For Morgan, it was Adams and not Benjamin Franklin who best embodied Puritan forms and formalities.<sup>4</sup>

The second argument suggests that Adams adopted a view of human nature and Christian sin that was fundamentally Calvinist. Certainly, since the publication of the *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams* there has been a strong tendency among Adams scholars to interpret his mature political ideas from the perspective of his “dark, introspective psychology,” a psychology shaped early in life in a Puritan mental universe. Adams’s views on human nature were, in the words of Bailyn, “more akin to those of his Calvinist forebears . . . than of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.” One scholar has attempted to explain Adams’s political philosophy in the light of a “psychology of political behavior derived from Calvinist theology,” and another has gone so far as to compare Adams’s *A Defence of the Constitutions of*

<sup>3</sup> Bailyn, “Butterfield’s Adams: Notes for a Sketch,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., 19 (1962), 244; Morgan, “John Adams and the Puritan Tradition,” *New England Quarterly*, 34 (1961), 524.

<sup>4</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York, 1958); Morgan, “John Adams and the Puritan Tradition,” 518–29. See also Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (Boston, 1958). Morgan later expanded this theme to apply to the Revolutionary generation as a whole: see his “The Puritan Ethic and the American Revolution,” *WMQ*, 3d Ser., 24 (1967), 8–18. Those who have followed Morgan’s lead include Alfred H. Kelly, “American Political Leadership: The Optimistic Ethical World View and the Jeffersonian Synthesis,” in *Library of Congress Symposia on the American Revolution: Leadership in the American Revolution* (Washington, D. C., 1974), 23; John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair, *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805–1813* (San Marino, Calif., 1966), 18; Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* (Chapel Hill, 1976), 3–24; Joseph J. Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York, 1993), 48, 52–53; Ralph Ketcham, *From Colony to Country: The Revolution in American Thought, 1750–1820* (New York, 1974), 159–60, 166; Page Smith, *John Adams*, 2 vols. (Garden City, N. Y., 1962), 1:4, 234; and Jurgen Gebhardt, *Americanism: Revolutionary Order and Societal Self-Interpretation in the American Republic*, trans. Ruth Hein (Baton Rouge, La., 1993), 57, 72–93.

*Government of the United States of America* to Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*.<sup>5</sup>

There can be no doubt that Adams's diary resembles the daybooks of his Puritan ancestors and records struggles very much like theirs. Readers see a young man plunging into the depths of his soul, ferreting out hidden and impure motives, searching for, identifying, and confronting the secret passions that seem to direct his private and public actions. His strict daily regimen and constant self-examination surely owed something to the moral world created in his parents' home. Adams bore signs of the Protestant ethic his whole life: he was always looking inward, assessing the state of his soul, struggling against idleness, vanity, and luxury. In a way, Bailyn and Morgan were right: Adams never quite kicked the Puritan habit. But can we rightly call him a Puritan? Did his social and political thought reflect a Calvinist or even a secularized Calvinist view of human nature? Or are the dominant sources, foundations, and substance of Adams's thinking to be found elsewhere?

A fresh examination of Adams's diary and early correspondence reveals a very different young man from the one hitherto described. Spilling from almost every page is another image: we see the intellectual awakening and maturing of the youthful Adams as he enthusiastically begins to view the world and his fellow men from a position contrary to that of his Puritan ancestors. The diary shows a young man enjoying his liberation from the psychological imperatives and intellectual blinders associated with an inherited culture. Adams obviously delighted in his flowering ratiocination and the unfolding and empowering of his mental processes. He was constantly probing, assessing, validating, classifying, and cataloguing the constitution of nature and human nature. Deeply influenced by modern natural philosophy, he searched nature for its underlying laws; he kept trying to make sense of and bring order to the seeming disorder of the natural and social world around him. In short, Adams's diary is an exemplary document of the eighteenth-century American Enlightenment.

By focusing on Adams's subrational inner world—his “central personality characteristics,” his “tormented tossings and turnings,” his “sensuous

<sup>5</sup> L. H. Butterfield et al., eds., *The Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1961) (hereafter cited as *Adams Diary and Autobiography*); Bailyn, “Butterfield's Adams,” 255; Diggins, *Lost Soul of American Politics*, 71; Shaw, *Character of John Adams*, 211–12; Adams, *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government . . .*, vols. 4–6 of *Works of Adams*, ed. Adams; Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana . . .* (London, 1702). For Richard B. Morris, “it was the Puritan, with his deep pessimism about man and his Puritan stress on moral values, that gave so distinctively conservative a cast to Adams's revolutionary thought,” in “John Adams: The Puritan as Revolutionary,” in *Seven Who Shaped Our Destiny: The Founding Fathers as Revolutionaries* (New York, 1973), 110. Earl N. Harbert writes that “as much as Jonathan Edwards, Adams was convinced of the imperfection of man,” in “John Adams' Private Voice: *The Diary and Autobiography*,” *Tulane Studies in English*, 15 (1967), 98. See also Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*, vol. 1: 1620–1800: *The Colonial Mind* (New York, 1927), 324; Yehoshua Arieli, *Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 134; Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America* (New York, 1955), 114; and Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton, 1994), 227.

apprehension of experience,” and his “sensitive reactions to the human realities about him”—scholars neglected to account for the self-conscious intellectual transformation that takes place in the diary. Paying virtually no attention to Adams’s explicit and repeated declarations of the debt he owed to an entirely different intellectual tradition, they overestimated the role played by Puritan ways in Adams’s life and thought, and they underestimated the influence that modern philosophic rationalism played in revolutionizing his mental and moral universe.<sup>6</sup>

The most remarkable feature of Adams’s formative intellectual years was the degree to which he confronted and consciously repudiated the orthodoxies of New England Puritanism. From 1756 to 1760, Adams used his diary to work out a new way of understanding piety, virtue, and right living. This article will demonstrate that Adams not only rejected theological Calvinism but also disavowed much of his Puritan past by developing and embracing a view of nature, man, and moral obligation that drew heavily on the enlightened views of Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and John Locke. Most important, his confrontation with Locke’s *Essay concerning Human Understanding* marked the turning point in the young man’s intellectual and moral life. The *Essay* was important to Adams’s intellectual development because it provided him with a method for thinking. We can never appreciate what Adams thought until we know how he thought. By examining his youthful mental processes, we can see how he began to transform the New England Protestant ethos into a distinctly modern form of liberal individualism. In a larger sense, Adams’s intellectual biography helps illuminate why and when many American colonials consciously moved away from Puritan orthodoxy and toward Enlightenment rationalism.<sup>7</sup>

When Adams entered Harvard College in 1751 at age fifteen, his father, Deacon John Adams, expected him to study for the ministry.<sup>8</sup> In Cambridge,

<sup>6</sup> Bailyn, “Butterfield’s Adams,” 246, 249, 252, 253. For Bailyn and Morgan to demonstrate convincingly how Adams’s thinking and behavior could be adequately explained as theological or cultural secularization, they would have had to provide a standard by which to judge how or why the psychological process of secularization took place. Both understood, in the words of Morgan, that Adams was “not quite a Puritan,” but neither discussed the agent or cause of Adams’s personal and intellectual movement away from the Puritan ideal; Morgan, “John Adams and the Puritan Tradition,” 525. For two studies that seek to demonstrate how first Calvin and Calvinism and then Cotton Mather and Puritanism were influenced by modern rationalism see Ralph C. Hancock, *Calvin and the Foundations of Modern Politics* (Ithaca, 1989), and Michael P. Winship, *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment* (Baltimore, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1706), ed. John W. Yolton, 2 vols. (London, 1961). On this movement as a colonialwide intellectual phenomenon see Claude M. Newlin, *Philosophy and Religion in Colonial America* (New York, 1962); Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York, 1976); Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* (Boston, 1955); Alice M. Baldwin, *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution* (Durham, N. C., 1928); and Kerry S. Walters, *The American Deists: Voices of Reason and Dissent in the Early Republic* (Lawrence, Kan., 1992). For a very different interpretation of the moral and religious causes of the Revolution see Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966).

<sup>8</sup> Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 3:263. See also Shaw, *Character of John Adams*, 8–9.

however, the young man encountered a different intellectual world. He was particularly influenced by Hollis Professor of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy John Winthrop. Winthrop introduced Adams to the new philosophic rationalism associated with the modern revolution in the natural sciences. His lectures in "Experimental Philosophy" sought to explain the lawlike regularity of the Newtonian conception of nature. On April 9, 1754, Adams recorded in his diary that "Sir Isaac Newtons three laws of nature" and their application to planetary motion were "proved and illustrated" in Winthrop's lecture. Years later, Adams would say that his training in the sciences and mathematics gave him a "degree of Patience of Investigation, which I might not otherwise have obtained." He soon realized that he could apply the new scientific method to the study of man and society. The concrete and detailed observations of human nature, the sharp and vivid descriptions of those around him, the acute dissection of motives and actions, and the painstaking accumulation and cataloguing of historical actors that fill the diary attest to the importance of Winthrop's method for Adams's intellectual development.<sup>9</sup>

While Adams was studying at Harvard, his home town of Braintree became embroiled in controversy over the religious views of the local Congregational minister, Lemuel Briant. The event had a profound impact on Adams's intellectual development and ultimate career choice. In 1749, Briant had openly challenged Puritan orthodoxy with a sermon on "The Absurdity and Blasphemy of Depreciating Moral Virtue." Braintree soon divided into two warring parties "concerning the five Points" of traditional Calvinism: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistibility of grace, and perseverance of the saints. Briant was publicly censured for views that were seen as dangerously close to Arminianism. "Ecclesiastical Councils" called to resolve the issue met in the home of Deacon Adams. Young John read all the pamphlets surrounding the controversy, for and against, and he attended the "councils," which he described as more an inquisition than a free and open exchange of ideas.<sup>10</sup>

Disturbed by the "Spirit of Dogmatism and Bigotry" he witnessed in his father's home, Adams concluded "that the Study of Theology and the pursuit of it as a Profession would involve me in endless Altercations and make my life miserable, without any prospect of doing any good to my fellow Men." He found troublesome the prospect of constant scrutiny and censorship. At this time, he records, he began seriously to question whether he was cut out for the life of a New England minister. He began to consider other

<sup>9</sup> Butterfield et al., eds., *The Earliest Diary of John Adams* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), 60, 63; Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 3:262. For a useful discussion of Adams's scientific training under Winthrop see I. Bernard Cohen, *Science and the Founding Fathers: Science in the Political Thought of Jefferson, Franklin, Adams, and Madison* (New York, 1995), 196–236.

<sup>10</sup> Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 3:262; Briant, *The Absurdity and Blasphemy of Depreciating Moral Virtue* (Boston, 1749). Adams's recollection of Briant's apostasy and his subsequent quarrel with Boston-area Congregationalists is retold in Wright, *Beginnings of Unitarianism*, 67–75.

professions. By his senior year, he was still undecided among careers in “Divinity, Law or Physick.” Fortunately, he was able to defer the decision for another year or two after he was approached at his graduation ceremony by the minister at Worcester, Massachusetts, with an offer to teach school.<sup>11</sup> The time would give him the opportunity to clarify his religious beliefs and to decide on a profession.

Soon after settling into his new town and school, Adams turned to his self-appointed task of reconsidering the theological premises of his inherited religion and to developing what we would today call a philosophy of life. He contemplated the mysteries of his religion, the “Stupendous Plan of operation” of the universe, and the glory and omnipotence of God.<sup>12</sup> During that critical first year in Worcester, he tackled and settled the great questions of religion and philosophy in ways that would later ground his moral and political principles. The themes of the diary reflect his agenda: nature and God, reason and revelation, virtue and vice, free will and determinism.

Worcester introduced Adams to a small, clandestine group of dissenters and freethinkers. On arriving in town, Adams learned that Thomas Morgan’s deist treatise, *The Moral Philosopher*, “had circulated, with some freedom” and that “the Principles of Deism had made a considerable progress among several Persons, in that and other Towns in the County.”<sup>13</sup> In his autobiography, he recorded vivid memories of the discussions and debates in which he engaged with a lively clique of Arminians, deists, and atheists. His interlocutors provided the intellectual camaraderie, freedom of thought, and exchange of ideas that a young man searching his soul would find exciting and challenging. By contrast, he lost all patience with the “Frigid performances” of the local Congregational minister and his “Frigid” theology drawn from John Calvin.<sup>14</sup>

Adams spent many “Evenings with these Men, as they were readers and thinking Men, though I differed from them all in Religion and Government, because there were no others in Town who were possessed of so much literature.” The group’s two principal members were the merchant Ephraim Doolittle and the local register of deeds, Nathan Baldwin, whom Adams described as “great Readers of Deistical Books, and very great Talkers.” The equally talkative and inquisitive Adams found these armchair philosophers especially attractive because they were “never rude” or “insolent to those who differed from them.” Politics and religion were always at the center of their discussions: “They were great Sticklers for Equality as well as Deism.” Though not a radical, he found something appealing in the subversiveness of his newfound acquaintances. A third member was an “excentric” shopkeeper,

<sup>11</sup> Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 3:262–63.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:24.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:263; Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher. In a Dialogue between Philaletus a Christian Deist, and Theophanes a Christian Jew . . .*, 3 vols. (London, 1737–1740). For a discussion of Morgan’s treatise and its place in 18th-century deist thought see Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols. (New York, 1962; orig. pub. 1879), 1:140–42.

<sup>14</sup> Adams to Nathan Webb, Sept. 1, 1755, in *Papers of John Adams*, ed. Robert J. Taylor et al. (Cambridge, Mass., 1977–), 1:1, hereafter cited as *Adams Papers*.

Joseph Dyer, a man “very bitter against . . . the Clergy” and an “Arian by profession.” Dyer had apparently written “many Manuscripts especially upon the Athanasian Doctrine of the Trinity,” which Adams claimed to have read in their entirety. His favorite and most frequent interlocutor was James Putnam, a lawyer, at whose house he boarded. Putnam’s religious views were apparently shaped by his friend Peasley Collins, “who had been to Europe and came back, a Disbeliever of Every Thing: fully satisfied that all Religion was a cheat, a cunning invention of Priests and Politicians.” The principal area of disagreement between Adams and Putnam concerned the “Evidences of a future State, and the Principles of natural and revealed Religion.” Putnam challenged and Adams defended the idea of “a future Existence” and a very limited conception of revealed religion.<sup>15</sup> Though never quite a deist, Adams was nonetheless influenced by his association with Putnam and the Worcester dissenters. At the very least, they drove him to stake out his own position regarding the principles of religion, natural and revealed.

During his first year in Worcester, Adams was challenged by two ministers, Jason Haven of Dedham, Massachusetts, and Thomas Balch of Norwood, Massachusetts, on two critical points of doctrine: the divinity of Christ and the veracity of biblical revelation.<sup>16</sup> Haven and Balch associated the rejection of these principles with an extreme form of Arminianism, and Haven told Adams “very civilly” that “he supposed I took my faith on Trust from Dr. Mayhew.” The charge is revealing: Jonathan Mayhew was the great liberal theologian and pastor of Boston’s West Church. Late in life, Adams told Thomas Jefferson that Briant and Mayhew exchanged pulpits with some regularity, thereby giving the teenager an opportunity to hear the Boston minister. In *Seven Sermons* delivered in 1749 and in all likelihood heard or read by Adams, Mayhew preached that there is a “natural” difference between right and wrong, that we are all naturally endowed with a rational faculty to discern the differences, and that we are morally obligated to choose right over wrong. If Adams did not exactly take his faith on trust from Mayhew, his diary makes clear that he was drawing conclusions remarkably similar to those of the Boston preacher. The young man was particularly influenced by Mayhew’s *Discourse concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers* (1750), which he later told Jefferson he read at age fourteen “till the Substance of it was incorporated into my Nature and indelibly engraved on my Memory.” Two weeks after his encounter with Haven and Balch, Adams reported to his friend Charles Cushing that there had been “a story about Town that I am an *Orminian*.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 3:264–66.

<sup>16</sup> For Haven see Clifford K. Shipton, *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates: Biographical Sketches of Those Who Attended Harvard College . . .* (Boston, 1965), 13:447–55; For Balch see *ibid.*, vol. 9 (1956): 273–78.

<sup>17</sup> Mayhew, *Seven Sermons* (Boston, 1749) and *Discourse concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers* (Boston, 1750); Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 1:14–15; Adams to Jefferson, July 18, 1818, in Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill, 1959), 2:527; Adams to Cushing, Apr. 1, 1756, in *Adams Papers*, ed.



He let the rumor pass without comment, suggesting that there was some truth to it, but we also see him struggling to defend even the most rudimentary principles of revealed Christianity. He accepted the immortality of souls on faith, for he could not believe that "Death was an endless Sleep." He also accepted the necessity of miracles and the Bible as revealed truth. Much beyond that he would not go.<sup>18</sup>

On August 21, 1756, Adams signed a contract to read law with James Putnam. His rejection of a clerical calling had not in the end been a difficult one. He wrote to Richard Cranch that the "frightful Engines of Ecclesiastical Co[u]ncils, of diabolical Malice and Calvinistical good nature" terrified him whenever he thought of preaching. In the wake of the Briant controversy and in the light of new intellectual influences, Adams warned Cushing that only those with "the highest opinion of what is called Orthodoxy" were accepted as ministers in New England. He claimed to know more than one preacher distinguished for a "sleepy stupid soul." Experience taught him that "people are not disposed to inquire for piety, integrity, good sense or learning in a young preacher." Instead, they looked for "stupidity (for so I must call the pretended sanctity of some absolute dunces), irresistible grace and original sin."<sup>19</sup> The letters to Cranch and Cushing suggest some of the reasons why Adams rejected a career as a minister. His reference to irresistible grace and original sin indicate others, about which the diary is informative.

On the day he formally announced his decision to pursue a career in the law, Adams wrote in his diary that his reason for "quitting Divinity was my Opinion concerning some disputed Points."<sup>20</sup> As we shall see, the disputed points that he associated with New England orthodoxy were the well-known "five points" refined by Dutch and English theologians at the Synod of Dort and confirmed in the Westminster Confession. These disputed points were the very ones that Adams had seen Briant interrogated about in the home of his father.

Almost from the moment that young Adams began to think about theological and moral issues, he rejected the doctrine that the original sin of Adam "was enough to damn the whole human Race, without any actual Crimes committed by any of them." He shuddered at the Calvinist's claim that mankind had been arbitrarily judged and found guilty of a crime, not because of "their own rashness and Indiscretion, not by their own Wickedness and Vice, but by the Supream Being." Adams thought the charge unjust and therefore "a real Injury and Misfortune because it renders us worse than not to be."<sup>21</sup> He also thought the doctrine of unconditional

Taylor et al., 1:13. The editors of the *Adams Papers* believe that the misspelling of "Arminian" by Adams was an intentional play on words and was intended as a joke between the two.

<sup>18</sup> Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 3:265.

<sup>19</sup> Adams to Cranch, Aug. 29, 1756, in *Adams Papers*, ed. Taylor et al., 1:15–17; Adams to Cushing, Oct. 19, 1756, *ibid.*, 21–22.

<sup>20</sup> Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 1:42–43.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

election “detestable,” “invidious,” and “hurtful.” Its purpose was to represent “eternal life, as an unattainable Thing without the special favor of the Father.” When combined with the doctrine of limited atonement, the effect was “to discourage the practice of virtue.” For Adams, unconditional election was the linchpin of Calvinist theology and practice, yet he could not accept a doctrine that denied free will, moral obligation, and the possibility of performing the virtue and piety necessary for everlasting happiness. Writing to a friend, he vowed never to be “persuaded or frightened either by Popes or Councils . . . to believe that the world of nature, learning and grace is governed by such arbitrary Will or inflexible fatality.” No, indeed not! “We have much higher Notions of the efficacy of human endeavours in all Cases,” declared the twenty-five-year-old Adams.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, he found the connected teaching of limited atonement—the belief that salvation was not possible to all men and women but only to a few—a “strange religious Dogma.” He thought preposterous the teaching that “God elected a precious few (of which few however every Man who believes the doctrine is always One) to Life eternal without regard to any foreseen Virtue, and reprobated all the Rest, without regard to any foreseen Vice.” Adams appreciated the “serious gravity” of such a doctrine but could not countenance a religious teaching that “represents the world, as under the government of Humour and Caprice.” He found such a precept to be morally destructive and intellectually absurd. Even the “Hottentots and Mohawks would reject with horror” the notion that some men and women are predestined to eternal grace and others to eternal damnation regardless of their virtue and vice.<sup>23</sup> As we shall see, the doctrine of free will was central to Adams’s rejection of Calvinism.

Adams thus dismissed several of the foundational premises of Calvinism: he denied original sin and the total depravity of mankind; he denounced unconditional election; he rejected limited atonement. Moreover, although he did not directly address the related doctrines of the irresistibility of grace and perseverance of the elect, he surely rejected them as well, for they were meaningful only to the degree that original sin, limited atonement, and unconditional election were accepted. During these early years, Adams seems to have been utterly uninterested in the depth, intellectual rigor, and rich complexities of New England’s historic faith. There is no evidence, for instance, that he read or even cared to read the greatest of the American Calvinists, Jonathan Edwards. In rejecting Calvinism, Adams could often sound like an Arminian, but it would be incorrect to describe him so simply. To call Adams an Arminian is to suggest that he still carried in his mental constitution traces of Calvinism’s original principles, which, as we shall see, he certainly did not. Although it is difficult to pin down and label Adams’s

<sup>22</sup> Adams to Samuel Quincy, Apr. 22, 1761, in *Adams Papers*, ed. Taylor et al., 1:48–50.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 49. In the diary, Adams records a conversation of 1756 with one Major Greene about limited atonement. Greene presented the Calvinist view of the “Divinity and Satisfaction of Jesus Christ.” He argued “that a mere creature, or finite Being, could not make Satisfaction to infinite Justice, for any Crimes,” to which Adams responded in the margin, “Thus mystery is made a convenient Cover for absurdity”; Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 1:6.

true religious views during this period in his life ("natural religion" may be the closest we can come), we can with some certainty reconstruct and describe the principal philosophic sources that influenced his developing worldview.

A revealing indication of the direction of Adams's thought as he worked out his relationship with God, nature, and mankind is his reading. We cannot know all the books he perused, but we can discover from his diary, literary commonplace book, and autobiography the works he thought important.<sup>24</sup> The list is heavy in natural philosophy, ethics, and theology. Adams paid special attention to the English theologians known as Latitudinarians. In February 1756, he copied out extracts from Archbishop John Tillotson's sermons. Several months later, he took extensive notes on Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (1736). Adams's commonplace book shows that he read Samuel Clarke "on the attributes of God" and Richard Bentley's *Sermons at Boyle's Lecture* (1692).<sup>25</sup> In the wake of Newtonian science and Lockean epistemology, these liberal churchmen sought to give Christianity a new, stronger foundation grounded on reason, natural law, and free will. They taught that "right reason" was capable of determining God's laws and that all men could attain saving grace volitionally by leading moral, virtuous, and pious lives. They emphasized man's natural capacity and duty to pursue moral rectitude.<sup>26</sup>

Also conspicuous on Adams's list are such early modern English and Continental philosophers as Bacon, Newton, René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Gotfried Wilhem Leibniz, and, above all, Locke.<sup>27</sup> In at least four

<sup>24</sup> The only Adams scholar to have addressed this question is John L. Paynter, "The Ethics of John Adams: Prolegomenon to a Science of Politics" (Ph. D. diss., University of Chicago, 1974), 1–55. Paynter makes a convincing case that the primary intellectual influence on Adams during these years was his reading of theological texts of the English school of "rationalist" theologians.

<sup>25</sup> Tillotson, *Works*, 10 vols. (Edinburgh, 1759); Butler, *Analogy of Religion* (London, 1736); Clarke, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (London, 1705); Bentley, *Sermons on Boyle's Lecture* (Cambridge, 1692). Tillotson's influence in America is shown in Norman Fiering, "The First American Enlightenment: Tillotson, Leverett, and Philosophical Anglicanism," *NEQ*, 54 (1981), 307–44. Also see Fiering, *Moral Philosophy at Seventeenth-Century Harvard: A Discipline in Transition* (Chapel Hill, 1981).

<sup>26</sup> The role of "right reason" in Latitudinarian thought is ably discussed in G. R. Cragg, *From Puritanism to the Age of Reason; A Study of Changes in Religious Thought within the Church of England, 1660 to 1700* (Cambridge, 1950), and *Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1964). I have also profited from these studies on the development of English natural theology: Margaret C. Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution, 1689–1720* (Ithaca, 1976); Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*; Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period* (Boston, 1962; orig. pub. 1940); and Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton, 1951).

<sup>27</sup> On the general role played by Lockean philosophy in America see Steven M. Dworetz, *The Unvarnished Doctrine: Locke, Liberalism, and the American Revolution* (Durham, N. C., 1990), and Jerome Huyler, *Locke in America: The Moral Philosophy of the Founding Era* (Lawrence, Kan., 1995).

places in his early diary and in one important letter, Adams copied or paraphrased long passages from Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding*.<sup>28</sup> These passages and others of the period show him embracing a Newtonian conception of nature as understood by Lockean epistemology. "In Metaphysicks," he wrote, "Mr. Locke, directed by my Lord Bacon, has steered his Course into the unenlightened Regions of the human Mind." Dramatically, Adams compared Locke to Columbus: he had discovered a "new World." This newfound epistemological continent was full of dangers and possibilities: it had "unwholsome Weeds," "unprofitable Brambles," and "motly Savages," but it also had "wholsome fruits and flowers," "useful Trees," and "civilized Inhabitants." Locke, Adams said, taught mankind how to exterminate the weeds and to cultivate the fruits of the human mind. Just as Locke cleared man's field of vision, so too had discoveries by natural philosophers such as Bacon and Newton "done Honour to the human Understanding." Thus in philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy the modern world had advanced far beyond the high culture of the classical world. In that advance, Adams excitedly found the "true sphere of Modern Genius."<sup>29</sup>

In Adams's estimation, Locke's exemplary genius displayed itself above all in his effective demolition of the ancient theory of innate ideas. All knowledge, according to Locke, rests on two fundamental premises: physical reality exists independent of the human mind, and men acquire knowledge only through an inductive process of reasoning that filters and orders the experience of the five senses. The implications of this teaching—what Locke called the "historical plain method"—for all revealed religions were clear: the doctrine of the tabula rasa excluded all innate ideas, among them, most fundamentally, the idea of God.<sup>30</sup> For Locke, the only intuitive knowledge that man has is of his own existence; all other knowledge, even of God, is derived by rational deduction from our experience of the world. Nothing is to be taken on trust or faith.<sup>31</sup> In a single stroke, Locke thus denied that God had imprinted in the minds of men certain indisputable truths.

Locke held that God's existence can and must be proved by reason; it may be confirmed by revelation, which also must stand the test of reason. By stripping away the layers of Scholastic system and dogma, Locke laid bare a simple and direct means of coming to know God. One victim was the Antinomian doctrine—what we might call the "pure" doctrine of Calvinist election—that knowledge of God and his saving grace is stamped on the mind or in the breasts of certain men and women. The God of Locke and Adams is not the mysterious yet intensely personal God of the Puritans. Unlike the God of the Puritans, whose existence and majesty were known through his word and works, the God of Locke and Adams could be known only through rules of evidence that approximated mathematical demonstra-

<sup>28</sup> See Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 1:11, 32–33, 38, 40, 43–44, 98–99.

<sup>29</sup> Adams to Jonathan Sewall, Feb. 1760, *Adams Papers*, ed. Taylor et al., 1:42–43.

<sup>30</sup> Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Yolton, bk. 1, chap. 1, sec. 2.

<sup>31</sup> See *ibid.*, chap. 4, secs. 12, 18.

tion. The God that emerges from the pages of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* is an intellectual construct whose existence could be proved by rational demonstration and whose purpose could be established by sober argument. The effect of raising reason above faith and revelation for determining the veracity of Christian doctrine fundamentally reshaped Christian thought and experience. The idea of a natural religion did not originate with Locke but was hurried along by his epistemology. The very title of his treatise on theological questions, *On the Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), set a tone and an agenda for English and American theological investigation for the next century.<sup>32</sup> In this post-Lockean world, some in England and America undertook to replace the “enthusiasm” of the seventeenth century with a rational theology, a simple and direct moral teaching, and a moderate and reasonable faith.

No part of the Protestant synthesis escaped Locke’s influence. As faith became subject to rational reappraisal, so, too, did morality. “Reason,” Locke declared, “must be our last judge and guide in everything,” including our relations with fellow human beings and our duties to God.<sup>33</sup> It, and it only, could supply standards for determining rules of good behavior and provide guidance for right living. This teaching not only undercut the doctrine of original sin but thrust powerfully toward Latitudinarianism and Arminianism by linking God’s grace to man’s free will and good works. Redemption, according to Locke, is the reasonable reward for right conduct.

Adams’s first step in constructing a new moral vision was to examine human nature. He was particularly concerned with delineating the origins, nature, and limits of human knowledge. Three years after he had resolved on a career, he restated the intellectual issue that he had been grappling with since 1756. The connection to Locke is obvious.

Tis impossible to employ with full Advantage the Forces of our own minds, in study, in Council or in Argument, without examining with great Attention and Exactness, all our mental Faculties, in all their Operations, as explained by Writers on the human Understanding, and as exerted by Geometricians.

Tis impossible to judge with much Præcision of the true Motives and Qualities of human Actions, or of the Propriety of Rules contrived to govern them, without considering with like Attention, all the Passions, Appetites, Affections in Nature from which they flow. An intimate *Knowledge therefore of the intellectual and moral World is the sole foundation on which a stable structure of Knowledge can be erected.*<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Locke, *On the Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. George W. Ewing (Chicago, 1964).

<sup>33</sup> Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Yolton, bk. 4, chap. 19, sec. 14.

<sup>34</sup> Adams to Sewall, letter draft, in Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 1:123 (emphasis added). Compare with Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Yolton, bk. 1, chap. 1, secs. 1–7.

Ultimately, according to Adams, it is by examining the “Constitution of our Minds and Bodies” rather than through “supernatural Revelation” that we come to know our rights and moral obligations.<sup>35</sup> Such a premise or strategy—starting with man rather than with God—demonstrates how far Adams had ventured into the rational humanism of his age.

Following Locke, Adams held that knowledge begins with two basic axioms: something exists that one perceives, and one exists possessing consciousness or the means of perceiving that which exists. These irreducible primaries, existence and consciousness, were the starting point for Adams’s intellectual project. For him, as for Locke, reality existed independent of man’s awareness of it—nature is an autonomous realm, self-sufficient and real in its own right. Awareness of external reality is the beginning of knowledge; everything we know “is acquired by Experience, i.e. by sensation or Reflection.” Adams is clear and direct on this point: “these ideas can enter our minds no other way but thro the senses.” From these “slender and contracted Faculties,” he notes, “We find our Selves capable of comprehending many Things.” Reason, building on sensory accumulation of information and liberated from tradition, authority, and theological system, enables man to know himself, nature, and God:

all the Provision[s] that he [God] has [made?] for the Gratification of our senses, tho very engaging and unmerited Instances of goodness, are much inferior to the Provision, the wonderful Provision that he has made for the gratification of our nobler Powers of Intelligence and Reason. *He has given us Reason, to find out the Truth, and the real Design and true End of our Existence, and has made all Endeavours to promote them agreeable to our minds, and attended with a conscious pleasure and Complacency.*

Sometime between February and August 1756, when he was exploring the unenlightened regions of his own mind and reexamining his philosophical and religious convictions, Adams came to the conclusion that reason was a sufficient guide to questions of religion, science, and morals. “Nature and Truth or rather Truth and right,” he wrote in May 1756, “are invariably the same in all Times and in all Places,” and “Reason, pure unbiassed Reason,” “perceives them alike in all Times and in all Places.”<sup>36</sup>

Untutored reason, however, was not enough. Something more was needed, and that something was a method for acquiring knowledge. It was principally “the Method,” mused Adams, that allowed Newton to discover and demonstrate “the true system of the World.” Newton rose above other English scientists of the time because he had “employed Experiment and [geometry?]”—that is, induction and deduction—in scientific inquiry. “It [is] the Method then,” concluded Adams, “and not the Drudgery of science”

<sup>35</sup> Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 1:42.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 18, 26, 33, 43–44 (emphasis added), 98–99.

that discovers nature's secrets.<sup>37</sup> Advocating the "historical plain method" of Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Adams defined "Natural Philosophy" as "the Art of deducing the generall laws and properties of material substances, from a series of analogous observations."

The manner of reasoning in this art is not strictly demonstrative, and by Consequence the knowledge hence acquired, not absolutely Scientifical, because the facts that we reason upon, are perceived by Sense and not by the internal Action of the mind Contemplating its Ideas. But these Facts being presumed true in the form of Axioms, subsequent reasonings about them may be in the strictest sence, scientific. This Art informs us, in what manner bodies will influence us and each other in given Circumstances, and so teaches us, to avoid the noxious and imbrace the beneficial qualities of matter.<sup>38</sup>

Lockean method applied as much to society as to nature. Moral and political philosophers must devote themselves to experiencing the world around them, and they must study the history of mankind. "By curiously enquiring into the Scituation, Fruits, Produce, Manufactures, &c. of our own, and by travailing into or reading about other Countries," he ventured, "we can gain distinct Ideas of almost every Thing upon this Earth, at present." Similarly, knowledge of the here and now should be supplemented by an examination of the past. By "looking into Hystory," by observing the "Wealth and Commerce, Warrs and Politicks" of different nations over long periods of time, and by examining "the Characters of their principal Leading Men, of their Grandeur and Power, of their Virtues and Vices," Adams thought moral philosophers could determine how and why nations rise and fall.<sup>39</sup>

Knowledge of the past and experience of the present give access to a far wider and higher field of vision. "Our minds," Adams noted, "are capable of receiving an infinite Variety of Ideas, from those numerous material objects with which we are surrounded." But rather than being "satiated with Knowledge, our Curiosity is only improved, and increased." Remarkably, "our thoughts are more free and active and clear than before." They "rove beyond the visible diurnal sphere, they range thro the Heavens and loose themselves amidst a Labyrinth of Worlds, and not contented with what is, they run forward into futurity and search for new Employment there. Here they can never stop. The wide, the boundless Prospect lies before them. Here alone they find Objects adequate to their desires." Given the efficacy of reason and armed with a proper method or art, Adams was astonished at the range and openness of human knowledge. At the same time, he recognized that some things are simply inaccessible to the human mind. He agreed with Locke that "The Nature and Essence of the material World" are

<sup>37</sup> Adams to unidentified correspondent, letter draft, in Butterfield et al., eds., *Earliest Diary of John Adams*, 71–72.

<sup>38</sup> Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 1:11.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 40–41.

“conceal’d from our knowledge.” Likewise, while he would concede that the existence of God can be inductively demonstrated from the data and lawlike regularity of nature, he denied that God’s essence or true nature could be known. The most that man can know about physical reality or ultimate spiritual reality are the “Effects and Properties,” the mechanical laws of nature that can be observed or demonstrated through experimentation. Ultimate or final causes are “hid from us in impenetrable Obscurity.”<sup>40</sup> Adams lost no sleep lamenting the necessary limits of human knowledge. For either scientific or social purposes, he held, it was the visible effects and tangible properties, not the outlying mystery, that mattered.

Thus did Adams follow Locke’s counsel to direct the pursuit of knowledge toward things that are useful here and now. The quest should be practical, utilitarian, and aimed at the immediate improvement of the human condition. The “Primary Endeavour,” Adams thought, should “be to distinguish between Useful and unuseful, to pursue the former with unwearied Industry, and to neglect with much Contempt all the Rest.” There was no need to fear, he warned, that the “subjects of Inquiry will be so few, that the Treasures of useful Knowledge will be exhausted.” Adams never tired of promoting knowledge that would be useful “in the Course of Life.”<sup>41</sup> He thought the elevation of practice over theory had wrought a revolution in the arts and sciences during the two centuries before the American Revolution. He later found a direct connection between “the advancement of civilization and humanity” and “the inventions in mechanic arts, the discoveries in natural philosophy, navigation, and commerce.”<sup>42</sup> To that end, natural philosophy should seek to discover the secrets of nature and to master its processes for the purpose of bettering man’s lot. Through “the Exercise of his Reason,” he argued, man “can invent Engines and Instruments”; he can “take advantage of the Powers in Nature, and accomplish the most astonishing Designs.” He can also “cultivate and assist Nature in her own Productions.”

By pruning the Tree, and manuring the Land, he makes the former produce larger and fairer Fruit, and the latter bring forth better and greater Plenty of Grain. He can form a Communication between remotest Regions, for the benefit of Trade and Commerce, over the yielding and fluctuating Element of water. The Telescope has settled the Regions of Heaven, and the Microscope has brought up to View innumerable millions of Animals that Escape the observation of our naked sight.<sup>43</sup>

The art of reasoning for Adams is the means by which man acquires knowledge of the natural world for the betterment of the intellectual and material lives of the mass of humanity.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 29–30, 38–39, 40–41.

<sup>41</sup> Butterfield et al., eds., *Earliest Diary of John Adams*, 71.

<sup>42</sup> Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions*, in Adams, ed., *Works of Adams*, 4:283.

<sup>43</sup> Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 1:27.



By the same art, man's moral condition could be bettered as well. Ascending the ladder of philosophical inquiry, Adams moved from discerning man's primary and immediate sense experience to recognizing nature's physical laws to examining the laws that govern the moral universe. Once again, analogous observation unlocks the door to an understanding of man's moral constitution. In much the same way that man can acquire knowledge of nature, he can learn of his moral obligations in this world and assess the likelihood of being accepted into the next by performing them. Thus, when Adams thought about virtue and moral action, he had little if any need for theology, for he had been given "Reason, to find out the Truth, and the real Design and true End of our Existence."<sup>44</sup> Like Locke, Adams was primarily concerned with establishing a demonstrative science of ethics based on examination of nature and human nature.

By clearing reason's field of vision, Adams could tackle the great moral question: "What is the proper Business of Mankind in this Life?" The young man devoted much of his early thinking to answering this query; he broached it directly at teatime with Putnam on a late May Saturday in 1756. Having calculated that, for practical purposes, the time that one might devote to contemplating and pursuing piety and virtue amounted to less than four hours a day, the rest being given to sleep, to "procuring a mere animal sustenance," or to pursuing such "Phantoms" as honor, wealth, or learning, Adams spelled out his answer in three parts. We should use the little time available to worship God, to love our fellow men, and to practice self-discipline by cultivating the "Habits" appropriate to each. Adams's prescription concludes where a man habitually devoted to this threefold "proper Business" might expect his own life to conclude: "We may then exult in a Consciousness of the Favour of God, and the Prospect of everlasting Felicity."<sup>45</sup> Moving swiftly from religion to ethics, Adams's answer skates over such issues as the relative weights and interdependencies of piety and virtue. But one main thing is very clear: man's proper business, properly pursued, leads to what Christians called redemption and Adams translated as God's favor and man's felicity.

There is no trace here of the traditional Christian or, more precisely, Calvinist scheme of salvation. Adams's God did not save men by a kind of *force majeure* that Calvinists termed irresistible grace. Instead, Adams made God's good will and reward depend on man's good deeds as *quid pro quo*. Divine favor could be secured by the initiative of autonomous and freely acting men who took time and trouble to honor God with praise and thanks, to be good neighbors, and to practice "Habits of Temperance, Recollection and self Government." Such actions had, as we shall see, the far-from-trivial fringe benefit of affording "real and substantial Pleasure" here and now.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

After several years of philosophic reflection, Adams was clearly moving toward two conclusions: first, that scriptural revelation may fortify but is not a source of moral truth, and, second, that man, despite his weaknesses, is a rational being who can derive standards of moral obligation and virtuous behavior from observation of the external world and of the operations of his own mind. For Adams as for Locke, the moral law of nature was synonymous with reason: "Law is human Reason," he asserted; it governs all "the Inhabitants of the Earth; the political and civil Laws of each Nation should be only the particular Cases, in which human Reason is applied." In order to discern piety and virtue, Adams turned to three objects of investigation: the "general Constitution of the World," the "Nature of all terrestrial Enjoyments," and the "Constitution of our own Bodies." Thus would be discovered "the Laws which the Wisdom of perhaps fifty Centuries, has established for the Government of human kind."<sup>47</sup>

At age twenty-one, Adams set down a series of reflections regarding the general constitution of the world and the laws that order it. From the observation of nature he deduced six basic laws. First, nature is governed by universal rules that are accessible to the human mind.<sup>48</sup> Second, the internal organization and structure of all animate and inanimate creation is self-sustaining, harmonious, and purposeful.<sup>49</sup> Third, physical nature is interconnected and co-dependent.<sup>50</sup> Fourth, the various species are self-selecting and self-preserving—that is, "each Species regularly and uniformly preserve all their essential and peculiar properties, without partaking of the peculiar

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 117, 41–42; Butterfield et al., eds., *Earliest Diary of John Adams*, 66.

<sup>48</sup> "No doubt There is as great a multitude and variety of Bodies upon each Planet in proportion to its magnitude, as there is upon ours. These Bodies are connected with and influenced by each other. Thus we see the amazing harmony of our Solar System. . . . But to rise still higher this Solar System is but one, very small wheel in the great the astonishing Machine of the World. Those Stars that twinkle in the Heavens have each of them a Choir of Planets, Comets, and Satellites dancing round them, playing mutually on each other, and all together playing on the other Systems that lie around them. Our System, considered as [one] body hanging on its Center of Gravity, may affect and be affected by all the other Systems, within the Compass of Creation. Thus it is highly probable every Particle of matter, influences, and is influenced by every other Particle in the whole collective Universe"; Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 1:24.

<sup>49</sup> "Now every Animal that we see in this Prospect, Men and Beasts, are endued with most curiously organized Bodies. They consist of Bones, and Blood, and muscles, and nerves, and ligaments and Tendons, and Chyle and a million other things, all exactly fitted for the purposes of Life and motion, and Action. Every Plant has almost as complex and curious a structure, as animals, and the minutest Twig is supported, and supplied with Juices and Life, by organs and Filaments proper to draw this Nutrition of the Earth"; *ibid.*, 30.

<sup>50</sup> "If we consider a little of this our Globe we find an endless Variety of Substances, mutually connected with and dependent on Each other. In the Wilderness we see an amazing profusion of vegetables, which afford Sustenance and covering to the wild Beasts. The cultivated Planes and Meadows produce grass for Cattle, and Herbs for the service of man. This milk and the Flesh of other Animals, afford a delicious provision for mankind. A great Part of the human Species are obliged to provide food and nourishment for other helpless and improvident Animals. Vegetables sustain some Animals. These animals are devoured by others, and these others are continually cultivating and improving the vegetable Species. Thus nature, upon our Earth, is in a continual Rotation"; *ibid.*, 23.

Properties of others.”<sup>51</sup> Fifth, the structure of the universe is hierarchical: man is just one link in a chain of being that begins with inanimate objects and culminates with the creator.<sup>52</sup> Sixth, God must, of necessity, be the creator of such a universe.<sup>53</sup> For Adams, the very concept of God implied a universal system that was rational, orderly, purposeful, knowable, and governed by these same “general Laws.”<sup>54</sup>

From the laws of nature as they apply to animate and inanimate matter, Adams thought he could deduce the laws appropriate to humankind. Among the latter, he hoped to determine and distinguish between laws required for man’s survival and those necessary for the attainment of happiness in this life and in the next. One way to do so was to reason backward from effects to causes. By observing empirically the nature of “terrestrial Enjoyments” and sufferings—rewards and punishments consonant with divine or natural law—Adams thought it possible to determine the content of virtue and piety. By annexing “Pain to Vice, and Pleasure to Virtue,” the Creator had provided man with the means of discovering his laws. Adams came close to suggesting that God had implanted in man a moral sense that made a “Course of Impiety and Injustice, of Malevolence and Intemperance, appear Shocking and deformed to our first Reflections.”<sup>55</sup>

By terrestrial enjoyments Adams meant the long-term pleasures and rational happiness connected with a good conscience and good works, although he did not entirely exclude the pleasures of the senses. The “real and substantial Pleasure” associated with living a pious and virtuous life was a sign of God’s favor, pointing toward “the Prospect of everlasting Felicity.” A good life was a certain indication “that the same or a like Disposition of Things may take place hereafter.” God’s hierarchy of pleasure, according to Adams, rewards, as its “greatest Pleasure,” the “Discovery of Truth.” It is from “a sense of the Government of God, and a Regard to the Laws established by his Providence” that “all our Actions for

<sup>51</sup> “We dont see Chickens hatched with fins to swim, nor Fishes spawned with wings to fly. We dont see a Colt folded [foaled] with Claws like a Bird, nor men with the Cloathing or Armor which his Reason renders him capable of procuring for himself. Every Species has its distinguishing Properties, and every Individual that is born has all those Properties without any of the distinguishing Properties of another Species”; *ibid.*, 39.

<sup>52</sup> “There is, from the highest Species of animals upon this Globe which is generally thought to be Man, a regular and uniform Subordination of one Tribe to another down to the apparently insignificant animalcules in pepper Water, and the same Subordination continues quite through the Vegetable Kingdom”; *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> “God whose almighty Fiat first produced this amazing Universe, had the whole Plan in View from all Eternity, intimately and perfectly knew the Nature and all the Properties of all these his Creatures. He looked forward through all Duration and perfectly knew all the Effects, all the events and Revolutions, that could possibly, and would actually take place, Throughout Eternity”; *ibid.*, 30.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 25–26, 41–42, 43–44. For a discussion of how Adams applied the same method to deduce natural laws for politics that he used for morals see C. Bradley Thompson, “John Adams’s Machiavellian Moment,” *Review of Politics*, 57 (1995), 389–417.

ourselves or for other men, primarily originate.”<sup>56</sup> Hence the discovery of nature’s laws and the effort to conform to them provide the greatest opportunity for receiving God’s present blessing and future reward.

The most important and fruitful field for Adams was the examination of human nature, or what he often referred to as the “Constitution of our Minds and Bodies.”<sup>57</sup> From a very early age, Adams drove himself to understand and give an account of his own mental operations and those of others. “Let me search for the Clue, which Led great Shakespeare into the Labyrinth of mental Nature! Let me examine how men think,” he demanded of himself. Adams always began with himself, turning inward and observing his passions and the operation of his own mental processes: “Here I should moderate my Passions, regulate my Desires, increase my Veneration of Virtue, and Resolution to pursue it, here I should range the whole material and Intellectual World, as far as human Powers can comprehend it, in silent Contemplation.” Not even his parents escaped his inquest. He recorded in the diary a “conjugal Spat” between his mother and father. Rather than joining or refereeing the squabble, Adams excused himself and retired to his room where he “took up Tully to compose” himself. He later regretted having done so, for he “might have made more critical observations on the Course and Progress of human Passions” by steadily observing “the faces, Eyes, Actions and Expressions of both Husband and Wife.”<sup>58</sup> By closely scrutinizing the behavior and relations of people, Adams thought he could discover the underlying passions and powers that animate human action. Once those passions were brought to light, the job of the will was to tame, regulate, order, and channel them in the light of a rationally discernible moral law.

For Adams, initially at least, the idea of natural law assumed a priori the immortality of souls. His reasoning unfolded in the following manner. The afterlife of the soul could be inferred by observing some of the general laws by which God governs “his great Kingdom.” Though difficult to identify, these laws, when they illuminate the “particular disposition of Things” in the physical universe, are strong indicators that “there are other dispositions of Things in other Systems of Nature, analogous and of a Piece with them.” Thus one may conclude from “the Flux of the Tide to Day” that “the same Phenomenon may be observed tomorrow.” Likewise, “our Experience that the Author of Nature has annexed Pain to Vice, and Pleasure to Virtue . . . renders it credible that the same or a like Disposition of Things may take place hereafter.” The same reasoning that presumes a necessary relationship between cause and effect in nature applies no less to man’s spiritual state. Similarly,

Our observing that the State of minority was designed to be an Education for mature Life, and that our good or ill Success in a

<sup>56</sup> Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 25–26, 31, 33–34, 41–42, 43–44.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 61, 65; Butterfield et al., eds., *Earliest Diary of John Adams*, 77.

mature Life, depends upon our good or ill improvement of our Advantages in Minority, renders it credible that this Life was designed to be an Education, for a future one, and that our Happiness or Misery in a future life will be allotted us, according as our Characters shall be virtuous or vicious.

His analogous reasoning on this issue makes a leap of faith that falls short of any kind of verifiable demonstration, but the important point is that salvation and damnation are directly related to the degree that persons are virtuous or vicious. Adams saw the here and now as an "Education," a "State of moral Discipline," in which individuals work out the conditions of happiness. This process of trial and effort produces a "Temper of mind" that, Adams insisted, "is in our Power to acquire."<sup>59</sup> In sum, reason is man's primary tool in determining what is right, his obligation to do what is right is defined by his relationship with God, and his spur to right action is the anticipation of pleasant consequences in this life or in the next.

To a friend distraught over the destruction of his home by fire, Adams advised against mourning the loss of petty and impermanent things. Property and social standing, he admonished Josiah Quincy, distract us from higher duties and lower our sights to mere worldly goods. Viewing the fire as a hidden blessing, he offered consolation: "But if you consider it as a punishment of your Vices and follies, as a frown that is designed to arouse your attention, to Things of a more permanent Nature, you should not grieve, but rejoice, that the great Parent of the World has thus corrected you for your good." Adams told his friend that it was "irrational" and "unmanly" to worry about losing social status as a consequence of losing property. Instead, he should seek those things that "wise Men" think important and that "cant be torn" from those who lead "rational" and virtuous lives. "Wisdom and virtue," he implored, "are not dependent on the Elements of fire or Water, Air or Earth." In other words, seek those higher things that are "rational and noble" and beyond the vicissitudes of folly and fate.<sup>60</sup>

As we have seen, our "proper Business . . . in this Life," according to Adams, is not to accumulate wealth, honors, or positions but to pursue those "real and everlasting Excellences"—that is, "to improve our selves in Habits of Piety and Virtue." Adams wrote very little about piety, far less than he did about virtue. He considered it to consist of three basic requirements: it is a habit "of Contemplating the Deity and his transcendent Excellences"; it includes the corresponding habit "of complacency in and Dependence upon him"; it should foster a habit "of Reverence and Gratitude, to God." The emphasis on piety as a habit suggests that Adams thought of worship as something other than an intimate relationship, an immediate and felt experience. It seems to partake of a social convention, probably a useful reinforcement for virtue, but very far from the fear and trembling associated with the God of the Puritans. Piety, in Adams's revealing words, was "rational and manly."<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 1:25–26, 41–42.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, 23, 31.

Adams was much more concerned with the nature and content of virtue. The true design of Christianity “was not to make men good Riddle Solvers or good mystery mongers,” as he thought Calvinists had become, but to make “good men, good majestates and good Subjects, good Husbands and good Wives, good Parents and good Children, good masters and good servants.” When Adams spoke of goodness, he had in mind the ordinary virtues associated with governance of self and obligations to others. Holding that virtue, like piety, should be experienced and practiced as a habit, he divided the moral duties that provide a real and substantial pleasure into “Habits of Love and Compassion to our fellow men” and “Habits of Temperance, Recollection and self-Government.”<sup>62</sup> In this regard, he followed a common eighteenth-century distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding virtues.<sup>63</sup>

The other-regarding virtues play a negligible role in the diary: they sum up in the Golden Rule. Self-governance, on the other hand, dominates the diary as its most visible and characteristic theme. It was for Adams the indispensable foundation of a worthy life and the end to which virtues like moderation, frugality, and industry are directed. Declaring war on all unruly and destructive appetites, he deemed unfit for public office any man who “has left one Passion in his Soul unsubdued.” Raging passions “should be bound fast and brought under the Yoke.” This could be accomplished by rational commitment to the constructive virtues of prudence, fortitude, justice, gratitude, and benevolence that “are found and proved to be human Duties, and beneficial to society, by Reason and Experience.” Such virtues “are Duties of the Law of human Nature”; they “are Institutions of Reason.” Invoking a common nautical metaphor, Adams described the passions as “the Gales of Life,” while “Reason is the Pilot.”<sup>64</sup> The moral education that young Adams sought for himself and recommended to others aimed to promote certain virtues embodied in the idea of self-mastery.

In a letter to his soon-to-be wife, Abigail Smith, he dramatically explained the importance and rewards of self-rule: “Learn to conquer your Appetites and Passions! Know thyself[!] . . . The Government of ones own soul requires greater Parts and Virtues than the Management of Kingdoms, and the Conquest of the disorderly rebellious Principles in our Nature, is more glorious than the Acquisition of Universal Dominion.”<sup>65</sup> The goal of self-knowledge, self-mastery, and self-reliance was rational independence in the fullest sense. The critical self-examination that fills the diary and that so many scholars have attributed to Adams’s Puritan upbringing represents his

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 31.

<sup>63</sup> See, for instance, Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), intro. E. G. West (Indianapolis, 1976).

<sup>64</sup> Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 1:33–44; *Earliest Diary of John Adams*, ed. Butterfield et al., 53–54, 64–65. Adams used the same metaphor some 30 years later in *Discourses on Davila*, in *Works of Adams*, ed. Adams, 6:243. See Paynter, “Ethics of John Adams,” 48 n. 5, for a record of other 18th-century usages of the pilot-gale image.

<sup>65</sup> Adams to Abigail Smith, Apr. 20, 1763, in L. H. Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Family Correspondence* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 1:5.

attempt to order his soul according to the new moral dispensation advocated by John Locke.<sup>66</sup> By exploring the content of moral virtue through an examination of human nature and physical reality, Adams thought he could establish the basis for a wholesome moral life.

We are left with an important question: what role did religion play in Adams's public philosophy? He certainly thought moral self-regulation was possible for all, and he also recognized that individuals require additional supports in the form of customs, laws, institutions, and religion. Accordingly, he thought Christianity should be used as an educative tool in shaping and reinforcing moral virtue. In a diary entry of 1796, a much older Adams provided a clear description of the utilitarian role that religion and America's churches ought to play in cultivating private and public morality.

One great Advantage of the Christian Religion is that it brings the great Principle of the Law of Nature and Nations, Love your Neighbour as yourself, and do to others as you would that others should do to you, to the Knowledge, Belief and Veneration of the whole People. . . . The Duties and Rights of The Man and the Citizen are thus taught, from early Infancy to every Creature. The Sanctions of a future Life are thus added to the Observance of civil and political as well as domestic and private Duties.<sup>67</sup>

Adams did respect Christianity, not for its creeds, councils, priests, prophets, enthusiasts, miracles, or dogmas, but for its moral and political value. It should support the moral principles and civic responsibilities associated with a Lockean regime founded on the law of nature and nations. Belief in the immortality of souls and the sanctions of a future life, Adams thought, provided the incentive and moral backbone necessary to sustain a liberal society built on the rights of individuals. Late in life, he told Thomas Jefferson that his moral and religious creed could be encapsulated in four short words: "*Be just and good.*"<sup>68</sup> In the end, the religion of John Adams was little more, but certainly not less, than a religion of civic morality.

John Adams's earliest reflections on God and scripture, man and nature, piety and virtue help to illuminate his response to the Revolutionary crisis and the sources of his mature political thought. When he rose in 1765 to defend the colonial cause, Adams espoused principles that he had been formulating since his graduation from Harvard. As he journeyed from New England piety to Enlightenment rationalism, young John Adams both symbolized and played an important role in defining the nature and parameters of a larger moral revolution that was taking place in the minds and hearts of the American people.

<sup>66</sup> For the influence of Locke's revolutionary moral theory on American thinking see Baldwin, *New England Clergy and the American Revolution*; Huyler, *Locke in America*; Thomas L. Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke* (Chicago, 1988); and Michael P. Zuckert, *Natural Rights and the New Republicanism* (Princeton, 1994).

<sup>67</sup> Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, 3:240–41.

<sup>68</sup> Adams to Jefferson, Dec. 12, 1816, in Cappon, ed., *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 2:499,