Jefferson, Adams, and the Natural Aristocracy
by Philip J. Costopoulos, FIRST THINGS, MAY 1990

Starting from a common premise and a shared commitment to republicanism, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams arrived at widely divergent conclusions about the problem of aristocracy. As good republicans, both men despised hereditary nobility. But both also affirmed that there exist always and everywhere a naturally superior few who necessarily play a key role in politics—even, and perhaps especially, the politics of democratic republics. Here their ways parted. Jefferson was eager to seek out the "natural aristoi" and cultivate them for public service. Adams regarded their appearance and rise as inevitable; far from wishing to recruit them into public office, he feared their influence and sought doggedly to straighten it within the confines of a senate in a modernized version of the classical mixed regime.

Each man's thought on the question of the natural aristocracy can only be understood in the context of his political or moral philosophy as a whole. While Jefferson and Adams were not original thinkers on the order of, say, Aristotle or Rousseau, they were nonetheless reflective statesmen of a very high order. Each had carefully conceived notions of human nature and the best regime, which could serve as theoretical standards for political practice.

I

Although Jefferson never dealt with the problem of natural aristocracy in a systematic or extended manner, it was never far from his mind. His thoughts concerning the question remained remarkably consistent over the years and may readily be collected from his many public papers, his voluminous correspondence, and his one full-scale book. Notes on the State of Virginia (1781). For Jefferson, consideration of the subject of natural aristocracy necessarily involved consideration of two related topics: education and republican government.

For example, in his "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge" (1779), Jefferson argued for public schooling in Virginia on dual grounds. To begin with, he reasoned, since even governments well calculated to secure rights may be perverted into tyrannies by "those entrusted with power," something extra was needed to secure republican governance. That something extra was popular education, which by teaching "the people at large" cautionary examples drawn from history, would enable them to recognize and reject potential despots.

Having established the negative value of education for the many as an auxiliary precaution to a well-calculated government, Jefferson went on to argue for the positive benefits of free public education for a few. On the assumption that "laws will be wisely formed, and honestly administered, in
proportion as those who form and administer them are wise and honest," he concluded that "those persons, whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue, should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights of their fellow citizens, and... should be called to that charge without regard to wealth, birth, or other accidental condition or circumstance."

This double-barreled conception of the importance of education to republican government, expressed early in Jefferson's public career, lies behind the many bills, reports, memoranda, and proposals concerning education that flowed from his prolific pen and culminated in his creation of the University of Virginia. Jefferson himself gave an indication of the significance he attached to public education by requesting that "Father of the University of Virginia" be included among the three great achievements listed on his gravestone. The other two were "Author of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom" and "Author of the Declaration of Independence."

According to Jefferson, a republican educational system must be both democratic and aristocratic. It must teach the people at large how to guard their rights and properly exercise their liberties; it must also identify the natural aristocrats and train them to govern. These "best geniuses" would, in Jefferson's memorable phrase, be "raked from the rubbish annually" by competitive grading and examinations, progressing up the educational pyramid until the elite arrived at the university to pursue higher studies until called to public life.

His alma mater, Williamsburg's College of William and Mary, was Jefferson's initial choice to form the peak of Virginia's educational structure. Later, however, he decided that the school's royalist and high-Anglican heritage and its location in the malaria-riden Tidewater were crippling impediments. Another, wholly new-model, institution would have to be built, preferably in the higher, cooler Piedmont country near Jefferson's home at Monticello. The creation of the University of Virginia—from the design of its buildings to the details of its curriculum and its students' diet—formed the chief occupation of Jefferson's last decades. "Mr. Jefferson's University" (as it is still sometimes called) was to be based on a plan "so broad and liberal and modern," as he put it, that it would "be worth patronizing with the public support, and be a temptation to the youth of other states to come and drink of the cup of knowledge . . . with us." At one point, even this did not seem sufficient, and President Jefferson urged the creation of a national university in the nation's capital to educate the best young men from every state.

While Jefferson loved learning for its own sake and he often protested that he preferred private contemplation to the hurly-burly of practical politics, an unmistakable streak of utilitarianism runs through all of his educational schemes. It is inseparable from his republican intention. All his schools' students, whether geniuses or generality, would receive a common grounding
in practical morality, history, and the useful arts and sciences.

The notion of practical moral education flows directly from Jefferson's political psychology—his account of the human soul. Moral training would subdue the "selfish propensities" by educating the "moral sense" that nature implants in the hearts of all humans, whatever their intelligence. Unlike Rousseau, the philosopher of sentiment par excellence, Jefferson did not sunder natural compassion from natural sociality. "Nature," he wrote in 1814, "hath implanted in our breasts a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct, in short The Creator would indeed have been a bungling artist, had he intended man for a social animal, without planting in him social dispositions."

The moral sense is crucial to the success of Jefferson's plans. Without common moral sentiment to restrain them, the natural aristocrats would come to regard themselves as beings of a higher order, "a favored few booted and spurred" and eager to spurn the check of those salutary, republican bands that prevented them from riding their more poorly turned-out neighbors. But if even the superior few have deep ties of common sentiment with their inferiors, then it becomes possible for the regime to new-model its natural aristocrats along democratic lines. Natural superiority could then be given its head—on a field of natural equality.

Moreover, the education of the people at large in the ways of self-government—in its individual as well as its collective sense—would form a strong barrier against pseudo-aristocrats. "Leave to the citizens the free election and separation of the aristoi from the pseudo-aristoi, of the wheat from the chaff," urged Jefferson. "In general they will elect the real good and wise. In some instances, wealth may corrupt, and birth blind them; but not in sufficient degree to endanger the society."

Jefferson feared not aristocracy as such, but only the "pseudo-aristoi." A properly educated natural aristocracy evidently posed little danger in his eyes, or so his silence on the possibility of turpitude among the best men seems to indicate. Perhaps he assumed that like instances of mistaken popular choice, instances of corruption among the natural aristoi would be rare, and, in any case, already adequately guarded against by institutions like free elections and bills of rights.

We have seen how Jefferson's political psychology and his proposed educational system contribute to his conception of the best regime. Now we must consider the social matrix in which his educational system was to work and his morally sensitive citizens were to move and have their being: the small agrarian republic.

Suggested to him by his experience of Virginia and by the revolutionary-era townships of New England, Jefferson's "little republics" would be self-
governing political units—"hundreds" or "wards"—formed by subdividing the "large and lubberly" counties of the southern and western states. Each hundred would have its own militia company, justice of the peace, polling place, jurors, commissioners for roads, police, and the poor, and last—but not least—its own public school. The discovery of wise and virtuous men would presumably prove easy in such a compact body of educated and active citizens.

Jefferson famously maintained that "mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body" and that "dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for ambition." He was therefore emphatic that his model for education and local self-government could work only in a small republic of independent yeoman farmers. For serfs and the "canaille of the cities" have little hope of rising to "the high ground of moral respectability necessary to their own safety, . . . orderly government, and . . . the great object of qualifying them to select the veritable aristoi for the trusts of government, to the exclusion of the pseudalists."

It was for the sake of "little republics," Jefferson explained in a letter to John Adams in 1813, that he secured the passage not only of his bill for the diffusion of knowledge, but also of laws abolishing primogeniture and entail (thus "la[ying] the axe to the root of pseudo-aristocracy"), and the "Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom" (1779), which "put down the aristocracy of the clergy." Near the end of his life, in 1821, he wrote that these four bills together had "laid [a foundation] for a government truly republican" in Virginia.

Jefferson regarded popular self-rule as consistent with wisdom in government; he thought that the people would generally elect their wisest neighbors, whom he apparently assumed would be university graduates. His enthusiasm for direct popular election, however, stopped at the borders of the hundred. His 1776 draft of a new constitution for Virginia provided for indirect election (by the lower house) of the state senate. And in a letter in 1787 to James Madison concerning the proposed federal Constitution, he said:

I like the power given the Legislature to levy taxes, and for that reason solely approve of the greater house being chosen by the people directly. For tho[ugh] I think a house chosen by them will be very illy qualified to legislate for the Union ... yet this evil does not weight against the good of preserving inviolate the fundamental principle that the people are not to be taxed but by representatives chosen immediately by themselves." [Emphasis added.]

The small republics as Jefferson conceived them would never be lacking in vigor; their people would be too accustomed to cooperative effort and civic
activity to let public affairs slip into desuetude. Indeed, he wrote to the governor of Virginia in 1810, "these little republics would be the main strength of the great one... Could I once see this I should regard it as the dawn of the salvation of the Republic." This, of course, was several years before the discontent of township-filled New England culminated in the abortive secessionism of the Hartford Convention and showed the dangers inherent in strong local patriotism.

A well-designed educational system in a nation of small agrarian republics, Jefferson argued, would preserve both the people and the aristocrats uncorrupted. Enlightened self-interest and trained moral sensibility would buttress everyone's beneficent social tendencies. An educated populace would vote for university-educated natural aristocrats, who would in turn execute the public trust wisely and faithfully, sustained by their good natures and the well-deserved esteem of their countrymen. Such a system, revolving around the local hundred, its school house, and its ballot box, was Jefferson's model for Virginia, America, and (he hoped) the world. This vision of the best possible regime informed his whole career. Among the keys to its realization are the democratic discovery, education, and election of aristocrats.

II

Throughout his long life, John Adams found aristocracy both a fascinating and a frustrating topic. "I recollect near some thirty years ago," he wrote to Jefferson in 1813, "to have said... to you that I wished I could find time to write something upon aristocracy. ... I soon began, and have been writing upon that subject ever since." Then he ruefully added: "I have been so unfortunate as never to be able to make myself understood."

Adams was largely right; few seemed to understand him even though he treated "that subject" at length, doggedly asserting, explaining, and reasserting the same crucial points. The man who had begun his career with a ringing denunciation of the canon and feudal law found himself compelled, ironically enough, to spend much of his maturity fending off charges that he favored feudal aristocracy or even monarchy.

Some of these charges were leveled by Jefferson himself. After reading Adams' "Discourses on Davila," which appeared from 1790 to 1791 in the fractious Federalist press, Jefferson (who was then sponsoring an equally vociferous Republican party press) wrote President Washington to complain that their old New England compatriot had left behind "the days of his republicanism" and "committed apostasy to hereditary monarchy and nobility."

That there was a bit of truth in such claims Adams himself, in later years, admitted. But he always maintained that the portrayal of him as an ardent friend of aristocracy was grossly inaccurate. In an 1809 letter to his and
Jefferson’s mutual friend Benjamin Rush, Adams explained:

I believe there is as much in the breed of men as there is in that of horses. I know you will upon reading this cry out: "Oh, the Aristocrat! The advocate for hereditary nobility! For monarchy! and every political evil!" But it is no such thing. I am no advocate of any of these things. As long as sense and virtue remain in a nation in sufficient quantities to enable them [sic] to choose their legislatures and magistrates, elective governments are the best in the world. But when nonsense and vice get the ascendancy, command the majority, and possess the whole power of a nation, the history of mankind shows that sense and virtue have been compelled to unite with nonsense and vice in establishing hereditary powers as the only security for life, property, and the miserable liberty that remains.

Four years later, he told Jefferson that "I am for excluding legal hereditary distinctions from the U.S. as long as possible. ... I only say that mankind have not yet discovered any remedy against irresistible corruption in elections to offices of great power and profit, but making them hereditary."

To Adams, then, correcting distortions of his views about the problem of aristocracy was more than a mere personal matter; it was a public duty. Aristocracy was not synonymous with hereditary nobility, and hence was not an artificial institution that could be abolished by decree. Aristocracy, in its deepest sense, was a natural phenomenon and Adams—like Jefferson—regarded its proper handling as essential to the success of republican government.

Adams of course shared the Virginian’s abhorrence of the "tinsel aristocracy" of the Old World, and he was glad that America had been spared the baneful influence of a corrupt, hereditary noblesse. Nevertheless, he thought that a prescriptive nobility could offer certain advantages, and so was sometimes inclined to regard its absence as a mixed blessing. While recognizing that the abolition of primogeniture and entail and the prohibition of titles of nobility precluded certain kinds of artificial aristocracy, Adams insisted that such measures could not preclude aristocracy as such—or even artificial aristocracy in some other, perhaps more insidious, form. He argued that in addition to accidental inequalities (such as birth into a wealthy or renowned family) that are beyond the control of any nondespotic government, there are natural inequalities inherent in the constitution of the world that inevitably create a better-endowed few.

Whereas Jefferson favored provisions for the discovery and recruitment of such natural aristocrats, Adams was sure of—and far from sanguine about—their spontaneous emergence. "Pick up the first one hundred men you meet and make a republic," he challenged his friend. "Every man will have an equal vote. But when deliberations... are opened... twenty-five, by their talents,
virtues being equal, will be able to carry fifty votes. Every one of these twenty-five is an aristocrat in my sense of the word; whether he obtains his one vote in addition to his own by his birth, fortune, figure, eloquence, science, learning, craft, cunning, or even his character for good fellowship."

Thus, while Adams agreed with Jefferson about the existence of "a natural aristocracy among men, the grounds of which are virtue and talents," he demurred that "it is not yet certain that we are perfectly agreed in sense," for "fashion has introduced an indeterminate use of the word 'talents.' " Talents might be good qualities, but they might also be morally neutral ones, like beauty, or even downright reprehensible ones, like craft or cunning. The most important thing is not that these talents are good, bad, or indifferent, but that they are unequally distributed.

The unequal distribution of talents, reasoned Adams, means that "natural aristocracy is a fact essential to be considered in the institution of government." He warned of both its opportunities and its perils: "It forms a body of men which contains the greatest collection of virtues and abilities in a free government, is the brightest ornament and glory of the nation, and may always be made the greatest blessing of society if it be judiciously managed in the constitution. But if this be not done, it is always the most dangerous; nay, it may be added, it never fails to be the destruction of the commonwealth."

Perhaps Adams' most vivid expression of this idea occurs in a letter he wrote to Rush in 1810. "I can never too often repeat that aristocracy is the monster to be chained," he said. "Yet so chained as not to be hurt, for he is a most useful and necessary animal in his place. Nothing can he done without him. . . . Bind aristocracy then with a double cord, shut him up in a cage from which, however, he may be let out to do good but never to do mischief." What Adams means by a cage becomes clear elsewhere in the same letter. After insisting that "every government is an aristocracy in fact" and castigating the avarice, ambition, and factiousness of the aristoï, he indicates the remedy: "The great secret to liberty is to limit [the aristocrats'] power and control their passions. Rome and Britain have done it hest."

Thus the ground for Adams' well-known—and controversial—admiration for the British constitution was that it (like the Polybian version of the Roman constitution to which he also alludes) was a mixed regime. Mixed regimes offered the best security for liberty by luring the aristocrats into a gilded cage—the upper house of the legislature. There a strong executive and a jealous lower house could control them even while they, driven by their own ambition, could in turn check whichever other department of power appeared most overweening. Republicanism reinforces this arrangement because in a republic an informed electorate watches over all the branches. The "balance of government," and with it liberty, would be preserved. Thus could a well-mixed regime—or some mechanical approximation thereof—pluck the flower of republican safety from the nettle of aristocratic danger.
With respect to aristocracy, Adams' approach to the problem of republican government diverges from Jefferson's. In the brute fact of natural inequality Jefferson saw an opportunity for republicanism; Adams, a threat.

Both men agreed, however, on the value of education for ordinary citizens. Adams even included an unprecedented provision for "The Encouragement of Learning" in the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780. He did so on the grounds that "wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people, [are] necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties"—a thought very close to Jefferson's in the section of his "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge" dealing with the need to school "the people at large."

Yet whereas Jefferson's advocacy of both popular and aristocratic education remained staunch throughout his career, Adams had grown hesitant about the advantages of even popular education by the time he completed his "Discourses on Davila" in 1791. There he saw the "increase and dissemination of knowledge" as but one more indication of the need for "the checks of emulation and the balances of rivalry in the orders of society and constitution of government." This is so because "science . . . and letters are employed for the purposes of injustice and tyranny as well as those of law and liberty, for corruption as well as for virtue." The "balance of passions and interests" (albeit "scientifically concerted") remained his chief reliance, for "the essence of a free government consists in an effectual control of rivalries. . . . The nation which will not adopt an equilibrium of power must adopt a despotism."

In his years of reflective retirement after 1800, Adams continued to wrestle vigorously with the questions he had raised. He was not always free of a certain noble self-contradiction. In his 1814 correspondence with the Virginia Republican John Taylor of Caroline, for instance, Adams waxes strangely ambivalent about education. One moment he is the Adams of 1791, echoing the "Discourses" argument; then he becomes the Adams of 1780, recommending enlightenment and the building of numerous schools and colleges. But the moment following, he again takes up his 1791 position. The resolution of this dialogue with himself is the wise observation that knowledge, while a blessing, is an emphatically mixed one:

I fear not the propagation and dissemination of knowledge. The conditions of humanity will be improved and ameliorated by its expansion and diffusion in every direction. May every human being—man, woman, and child—be as well informed as possible! But, after all, did you ever see a rose without a briar, a convenience without an inconvenience, a good without an evil, in this mingled world? Knowledge is applied to bad purposes as well as to good ones. Knaves and hypocrites can acquire it, as well as honest, candid, and sincere
men. . . . If I admit, as I do, that truth generally prevails and virtue is or will be triumphant in the end, you must allow that honesty has a hard struggle and must prevail by many a well-fought and fortunate battle, and, after all, must often look to another world for justice, if not for pardon.

These reflections in turn lead Adams to posit the existence of something that looks very much like Jefferson's "moral sense," except that Adams, overlooking the Latin scientia or "knowledge" in the root, of the word, calls it "conscience":

There is no necessary connection between knowledge and virtue. Simple intelligence has no association with morality. What connection is there between the mechanism of a clock or watch and the feeling of moral good and evil, right or wrong? A faculty or quality of distinguishing between moral good and evil, as well as physical happiness or misery, that is, pleasure and pain, or, in other words, a conscience—an old word almost out of fashion—is essential to morality.

As he grew older and pondered the atrocities and wars that the philosophically inspired French Revolution visited upon the world, Adams took an even more jaundiced view, not only of popular enlightenment, but also of Jefferson's belief that "wise" and "honest" are coordinate terms. While Adams still had some confidence that "in a well-balanced government, reason, conscience, truth, and virtue must be respected by all parties, and exerted for the public good," he worried that the passions feed on "science," and so listed "the learned" (whom he sometimes equated with "the rich" and "the idle") among those to be included in the senate.

When Jefferson wrote that he considered the natural aristocracy as "the most precious gift of nature for the instruction, the trusts, and the government of society," and asked, "May we not even say that that form of government is best which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of these natural aristoi into the offices of government?" Adams answered that "your distinction between the aristoi and the pseudo-aristoi will not help the matter. I would trust one as soon as the other."

Jefferson's distinction is unhelpful not only because it fails to account for the frequent non-coincidence of wisdom and virtue with each other—and with accidents of birth or wealth—but also because it fails to consider how inexorably such accidents, and even natural aristocracy itself after the passage of a generation or two, become the basis for prescriptive aristocracy. Even if artificial aristocracy is leveled, a naturally superior few will soon arise and erect a new edifice of privilege on the ruins of the old. The fluid, open-ended, compassionate, and dutiful aristocracy that Jefferson envisioned would fade like the snows of March. And if not replaced by some other, more
ominous, group of power-seekers, it would end by converting itself into a ruling caste. Neither outcome could please friends of democratic republicanism.

Jefferson, for his part, was prepared to admit that there exists "self-love [which] is the sole antagonist of virtue." But he was sanguine: "Take from man his selfish propensities, and he can have nothing to seduce him from the practice of virtue. Or subdue those propensities by education, instruction, or restraint, and virtue remains without a competitor." Adams might well have found it odd that virtue could be simultaneously without competitors and in need of support from the forces of what Jefferson delicately called "restraint." Surely a competitor forcibly subdued is not the same as no competitor at all.

In Adams' view, taming the selfish propensities was a more problematic and less straightforward business than was dreamt of in Jefferson's philosophy. "Simple benevolence alone," he maintained, "is not a balance for the selfish affections." If selfishness is to be outweighed, "the desire for reputation" must join benevolence on the scale. This desire—Hobbes called it "vainglory"—Adams identified as the mainspring of the human soul. Even the seemingly elemental passions for wealth and power serve the truly fundamental passion for esteem. Although itself a kind of selfishness, this passion could be politically useful, simply because it is possible to be esteemed for "promoting the good ... of mankind." It is not the simply good, eminently educable moral sense that is the crucial fact of political psychology; it is rather the irreducible, inescapable, and morally ambiguous passion for distinction.

III

Connected to the differences of opinion between Adams and Jefferson concerning natural aristocracy is a similar divergence on the question of historical progress. The Virginian was given to acerbic comments about "barbarians" who held "the Gothic idea that we are to look backwards instead of forwards for the improvement of the human mind, and to recur to the annals of our ancestors for what is most perfect in government." In private, he bitterly criticized the praise of ancestral wisdom (about, among other things, systems of education) that Adams delivered in a 1798 presidential address. At about the same time, Jefferson assured a correspondent that "I believe... with Condorcet... that [man's] mind is perfectible to a degree of which we cannot as yet form any conception." And he regarded the American Revolution as a uniquely decisive turning point in human history. "We can no longer say there is nothing new under the sun... This whole chapter in the history of man is new... our republic is new," he wrote in 1801. Democratic republican government, advancing arm in arm with scientific enlightenment, has made over the features of life and politics, including aristocracy. Jefferson's democratic aristoi, his enlightened elite of public servants, are new men for a new age.
Jefferson’s meliorism and progressivism were not unqualified, to be sure. As early as the *Notes on the State of Virginia* he had gloomily predicted that civic virtue would decline after the Revolution as Americans proceeded to focus most of their energy on making money. Despite his early enthusiasm and his inflamed rhetoric about watering the tree of liberty with the blood of tyrants, he was sobered by the excesses of the French Revolution, and by the Napoleonic monster that grew out of them. In 1822, the ancient Sage of Monticello wrote, "That every man should be made virtuous, by any process whatever, is no more to be expected than that every tree shall be made to bear fruit, and every plant nourishment. The brier and the bramble can never become the vine and the olive; but their asperities may be softened by culture, and their properties improved." And though he said in the same letter that "in the present spirit of extending to the great mass of mankind the blessings of instruction, I see a prospect of great advancement in the happiness of the human race," he added that "this may proceed to an indefinite, although not to an infinite degree."

Like Jefferson, Adams thought that the eighteenth century had witnessed unprecedented improvements culminating in the American Revolution. Yet looking down the road, he saw more than anything else the threat of decline. Nor would he ever have joined in Jefferson’s blithe dismissal of Ecclesiastes’ words about the lack of novelty in human affairs. Adams emphatically rejected any notion of human perfectibility and foresaw the disastrous futility of attempts to new-model the human race. For him, no enlightenment, no education, no agrarianism, no scientific advances could ever eradicate the ills and vices to which man is heir. Politics remains a stern struggle with the weak flesh, scheming brain, and restless heart of the old Adam. "Mankind," he wrote to Jefferson in 1813, "have not yet discovered any remedy against irresistible corruption." From the vantage point offered by our century of industrialized mass destruction and scientifically justified, technologically sophisticated genocide, Adams seems a prophet.

Yet while it is true that the contrast with Adams brings out something unrealistically sanguine in the thought of Jefferson, it must in fairness be noted that Adams’ own thought is not free of difficulties. Although he did not deny human benevolence or morality, he paid little attention to the subject of mores and their inculcation—to what Jefferson called "the manners and spirit of a people." Adams preferred instead to concentrate on institutional and mechanical methods—theymselves suggested in part by the modern scientific advances he sometimes deprecated—of keeping the dangerous *aristoi* in bounds and the system as a whole in equilibrium. His conclusion was a model for successful self-government premised on the assumption that nobody governs himself. Men think only of themselves when they deal with others, and only of what others think of them when they deal with themselves. In his anxiety to avoid Jefferson’s naive optimism about human moral tractability, Adams opts instead for a conviction of human moral
corruptibility that may be too strong to allow for self-government. Hence his reluctant advocacy of hereditary offices as necessary evils—nonrepublican cures for the republican disease of overweening natural aristocracy.

Nevertheless, despite the problems posed by Adams’ ambivalence towards republican self-government and Jefferson’s unwarranted faith in progress and human perfectibility, their combined thoughts on natural aristocracy contain much wisdom. Jefferson reminds us that self-government means not only that all govern themselves collectively, but also that each—be he a genius or a member of the generality—must govern himself individually as well. Friends of democratic republicanism should always remember that we ignore education, and indeed everything that helps to form the "manners and spirit of a people," at our own peril. From Adams, on the other hand, we can learn that politics remains a realm where "honesty has a hard struggle" not only with the simple, but with the learned and able as well. We cannot look to historical inevitability or modern scientific enlightenment to solve the human problem for us, for in history only that which is already past is inevitable, and modern positive science tells us nothing from which we can take our bearings as men and citizens.

For both Adams and Jefferson, the problem of the natural aristocracy is the human problem in heightened form. The best men share in the moral capability—and the moral corruptibility—of man as man. We might say, paraphrasing Reinhold Niebuhr, that for Jefferson the best men’s capacity for good makes democracy possible, while for Adams the best men’s inclination to ill makes democracy necessary.

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