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The Meaning of Moral Sense in Thomas Jefferson's Political Thought

Tadashige SHIMIZU
Kobejogakuin College

I

THE RELATIONSHIP OF REASON AND MORAL SENSE

Today Thomas Jefferson is still idolized as a symbol of liberty and equality in American democracy. The tyrannical character and ideological limits of his political thought have rarely been pointed out. However, his political thought should be interpreted with due regard to both his brilliant side as an "Apostle of Freedom" and an oppressive "darker side." Regarding the latter, Leonard Levy's *Jefferson and the Civil Liberties: The Darker Side* is an instructive and insightful study that focuses on Jefferson's neglected aspects and demonstrates how Jefferson suppressed his political enemies' civil liberties. As for the explanation of this oppression, I do not believe Levy's interpretation is very persuasive or cogent. Dismissing Jefferson's philosophical dimension, Levy locates the cause in historical circumstances. He concludes that emergencies or crises in the Revolutionary War led Jefferson to tyrannical behavior. However, it would seem that the suppression was caused not by an accidental occurrence of political events alone, but by Jefferson's own

political beliefs. Jefferson's intolerance was not, at any rate, a deviation from his political thought.

In the intellectual climate of Revolutionary America, the ideas of most thinkers were dominated by the philosophy of "natural law." Thomas Jefferson, however, used the word nature more frequently than any other thinker or statesman of his time. Nature is said to be the foundation of his world view. In this paper I will point out the characteristics of Jefferson's understanding of human nature, and I will show how his interpretations restrict his social views and political thoughts.

Jefferson's theory of human nature posits two essential human endowments: reason and moral sense. He often refers to the former as "the endowments of Head" and the latter as "the endowments of Heart." He also writes of "the endowments of Heart" as conscience, or "the sense of right & wrong." The first step in comprehending Jefferson's idea of human nature is to see how he defines the relationship of these two endowments.

Jefferson regards the Head and the Heart as different and independent innate capabilities. In the "Age of Reason" preference had been given to the Head, and most philosophers subordinated the Heart to the Head. They perceived these faculties as having the relationship of servant to master. Jefferson, however, denies this. He emancipates the Heart from the superintendence and interference of the Head. In a letter to Maria Cosway, he allows the Heart to speak to the Head.

> When nature assigned us the same habitation, she gave us over it a divided empire. To you [i.e., the Head] she allotted the field of science; to me [i.e., the Heart] that of morals. When the circle is to be squared, or the orbit of a comet to be traced; when the arch of greatest strength, or the solid of least resistance is to be investigated, take up the problem; it is yours; nature has given me no cognizance of it. In like manner, in denying to you the feeling of sympathy, of benevolence, of gratitude, of justice, of love, of friendship, she has excluded you from their control. To these she has adapted the mechanism of the heart. [1]

The phrase "a divided empire" explicitly indicates that Jefferson believed the Head and the Heart each had a completely different jurisdiction. In a letter to Peter Carr, he asserts:

> I think it lost time to attend lectures in this branch [i.e., moral philosophy]. He who made us would have been a pitiful bungler if he had

> made the rules of our moral conduct a matter of science. For one man of science, there are thousands who are not. What would have become of them ?...State a moral case to a ploughman & a professor. The former will decide it as well, & often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules. [2]

We can see a kind of anti-intellectual inclination in these sentences. What he is saying is that a person of reason may not always make a judgment of conduct on moral grounds alone but may use some type of logical rule. An ignorant and illiterate ploughman, on the other hand, can only base his judgment on moral grounds, since he has not been influenced by scientific thinking. We are constantly making discoveries in the scientific and physical world. A "scientific truth" today may not be one tomorrow. However, the fundamental principles of moral conduct have already been laid out in the Divine Plan. In this sphere even an ignorant man can immediately distinguish right from wrong, because for that judgment one does not need academic research or a sophisticated system of logic.

For us in the twentieth century, the idea of "a divided empire" is not novel or original; by today's standards, it seems rather old and worn-out. However, most people of Jefferson's era did not think this way. In his famous Farewell Address, President George Washington closely links knowledge to morals and holds to the notion that institutions established to promulgate knowledge will also advance the morality and virtue of the nation. In the eighteenth century most philosophers believed that the reasoning used to solve complicated mathematical problems was the same reasoning that should be applied to moral judgments. Therefore, a learned man or a good mathematician could make principled judgments and assess moral conduct using scholarly methods. Jefferson, on the contrary, distinguishes "wisdom," "talents," or "science" [attributes of the professor] from "virtue" [attribute of the ploughman] and rejects the traditional intellectual view. He insists that the training of one's reason does not always result in improvement of one's moral conduct. In a letter to Mr. Correa, he states, "morals do not of necessity advance hand in hand with the sciences." [3] In the eighteenth century, this was an unconventional proposition.

A second characteristic of Jefferson's theory is that it holds the moral sense (Heart) to be a more prevalent endowment than reason (Head). Jefferson believed that reason was a gift limited to a natural aristocracy. In a letter to Maria Cosway, he contends:

> Morals were too essential to the happiness of man to be risked on the uncertain combinations of the head. She [i.e., Nature] laid their foundation therefore in sentiment, not in science. That she gave to all, as necessary to all: this to a few only, as sufficing with a few. [4]

When Jefferson asserts that all men are created equal, we should understand that this thesis encompasses the Heart and not the Head. As for the latter, he seems to believe men are innately unequal.

A third point is that moral sense is grasped as a more deeply rooted endowment than reason. Moral sense, he believes, can give us surer and more reliable judgment than reason, which cannot be depended on and which sometimes leads us astray. In a letter to James Fishback, Jefferson explains:

> The practice of morality being necessary for the well-being of society, he [i.e., our Creator] has taken care to impress its precepts so indelibly on our hearts that they shall not be effaced by the subtleties of our brains. [5]

In considering such words we can see, contrary to a popular interpretation, that moral sense holds a position superior to reason in the logical structure of Jefferson's theory of human nature. We can further surmise that Jefferson attaches much more importance to the moral sense in the case of value judgments. In a letter to Carr, he argues,

> Give up money, give up fame, give up science, give up the earth itself and all it contains, rather than do an immoral act. An honest heart being the first blessing, a knowing head is the second. [6]

These remarks explicitly show that, for Jefferson, moral sincerity or honesty is more important than any other quality in this world. In his famous paragraph from *Notes on Virginia* praising farmers' pastoral lives, Jefferson bases his standard of value not on the farmers' economical contribution to America or on their intellectual eminence, but on their moral soundness. Ranking the unschooled more highly than the educated, Jefferson says:

> As for France and England, with all their pre-eminence in science, the one is a den of robbers, and the other of pirates. And if science produces no better fruits than tyranny, murder, rapine and destitution of national morality, I would rather wish our country to be ignorant, honest and estimable as our neighboring savages are. [7]

II

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF JEFFERSON'S CONCEPT OF MORAL SENSE

In contrast to the "Age of Reason," the early nineteenth century is often regarded as the "Age of Romanticism." The spouting of sentiment was enthusiastically acknowledged and, to some extent, even glorified by thinkers and artists alike. In this period of changing ideological themes, we can understand that Jefferson's theory of human nature combines the elements of both the rational element (Head or reason) of the eighteenth century and the emotional element (Heart or moral sense) of the nineteenth century. We can also ascertain, contrary to a popular view, that the latter element is given much more serious consideration than the former. Jefferson's democratic theory is based on the assumption that all men are created equal in the natural gift of moral sense.

In contemplating Jefferson's thoughts on the role and the meaning of moral sense in his theory of human nature, we should notice he always refers to it in relation to the definition of man as a social animal. According to Jefferson, the moral sense is deeply implanted in human nature, and every man has an inclination towards sociability. In the following we will see several examples where he associates this sense with a man's natural social love.

> Man was destined for society. His morality therefore was to be formed to this object. He was endowed with a sense of right & wrong merely relative to this. [8]

> I am among those who think well of the human character generally. I consider man as formed for society, and endowed by nature with those dispositions which fit him for society. [9]

> The Creator would indeed have been a bungling artist, had he intended man for a social animal, without planting in him social dispositions. [10]

We can further say that Jefferson's moral sense is a sense of social norms or societal morality that teaches us what we should do or should not do in our personal relationships within the community. It is important, too, that this moral sense is thought to be an innate, a priori characteristic and constitutional quality. In man,

> this sense is as much a part of his nature as the sense of hearing, seeing, feeling:...The moral sense, or conscience, is as much a part of man as his leg or arm. [11]

Jefferson contends that we have a kind of sixth sense that allows us to distinguish right from wrong, just as our eyes and ears help us to immediately discern various colors and sounds.

When we contemplate Jefferson's theory of human nature, we may derive the following three conclusions. The first is that Jefferson's position leads towards a communitarian or organic view of society. It will not allow for the development of individualistic ideas. If the thesis that "a man is a social animal" is at the base of Jefferson's social thought, the rights and interests of the community must be much more important than those of the individual. Also, since it is supposed that a man's conscience or moral sense is intended for the good of the whole community, it cannot be admitted that an individual can rebel against the community or disobey the decision of the majority. From this communitarian view, we must disallow the defense theory of minority rights and of individual disobedience to society. We will consider below how this restricts Jefferson's political thoughts.

The second conclusion is that the conception of a "moral sense" idealizes minimal government and leans towards the rejection of state power or artificial human laws. Indeed, Jefferson inclines towards political anarchy. If the sense of social norms implanted innately in every man manifests itself perfectly, as in the case of social insects such as ants or bees, men can live harmoniously and cooperatively; mankind need not create artificial norms, laws and institutions. In "Query XI" of *Notes on Virginia*, Jefferson, referring to Native Americans, argues that "their only controls are their manners, and that moral sense of right and wrong, which, like the sense of tasting and feeling, in every man makes a part of his nature." Jefferson contrasts "no law, as among the savage Americans" with "too much law, as among the civilized Europeans." He prefers the former. [12] Such a preference — with its flavor of anarchy — can be said to be the logical conclusion of moral sense philosophy. It repels everything artificial and attaches a primary importance to human nature.

The third conclusion is that the theory of innate moral sense has a penchant to produce a monistic world view, one that cannot accept a plurality of values. If we believe, with Jefferson, in "the general existence of a moral instinct [in the human species]," [13] it naturally follows that every

man is endowed with the same ability to distinguish between good and evil. It would then be impossible for that which is the right conduct for one man to be the wrong conduct for another. This presupposes a universal standard of value. Such a standard will not admit that conflicts or differences of opinion can exist in society, and it contrasts with James Madison's views, as expressed in *The Federalist*. In No.10, Madison maintains that the cause of diverse and conflicting opinions originates in human nature itself, and he regards the conflict of world views as a self-evident fact. Madison thus affirmatively evaluates the existence of rivaling factions in society. We cannot, however, discern such a spirit of political tolerance and pluralism from Jefferson's body of political thought.

III

MORAL SENSE AND PUBLIC OPINION

The next theme addressed concerns the relationship of moral sense and public opinion. "How does this sense manifest itself in the collective behavior of men?"

In response to this question, Jefferson argues in a letter to James Madison that "gratitude," i.e., the moral sense, can become the motive for national conduct and asserts:

> I know but one code of morality for men, whether acting singly or collectively...If the morality of one man produces a just line of conduct in him, acting individually, why should not the morality of one hundred men produce a just line of conduct in them, acting together? [14]

These words suggest that the moral sense guides and works upon not only the individual person, but also the mass of people, allowing both to act virtuously and conscientiously. Thus we can justifiably rely on the public, or majority, opinion because it represents the social conscience. In his First Inaugural Address Jefferson urges "absolute acquiescence in the decisions of the majority" and in a letter to William Findley he argues,

> it is rare that the public sentiment decides immorally or unwisely, and the individual who differs from it ought to distrust and examine well his own opinion. [15]

He recommends conformity to public opinion and stresses that, as the social majority acts in accord with the innate moral sense, one should accept its views even at the expense of one's own. From this idea, we cannot deduce either a defense theory of minority's rights or any justification for civil disobedience.

This philosophy contrasts greatly with that of James Madison. In *The Federalist*, No.55, Madison states: "Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob." [16] Madison declares here that the principle at work in group behavior is quite different from that of individual behavior. Even if a man is as honest and thoughtful as Socrates, in the aggregate he can become an uncontrollable mob carried away by a fit of passion.

Jefferson's social view also differs from that of Bernard Mandeville. Mandeville criticized Shaftesbury, the originator of the Moral Sense School, and denied the existence of a moral sense. In *The Fable of the Bees*, Mandeville depicts the relationship of individual and society in the following manner:

> THUS every Part was full of Vice,
> Yet the whole Mass a Paradise;
> .....
> Such were the Blessings of that State;
> Their Crimes conspir'd to make them Great. [17]

Mandeville argues that "Private Vices" themselves conduce to "Publick Benefits" and that the individual pursuit of self-interests contributes to the happiness and harmony of the whole community. He never directly connects the part to the whole. Jefferson, however, intimately links the two. He asserts that an individual's good behavior produces immediate social benefits. Social good is simply the product of the good motives of individuals, and public vice stems from personal vice.

Moreover, it is clear that on the issue of justification of majority rule, Jefferson's logic contrasts with Madison's. In a letter to Jefferson, Madison argues:

> On what principle does the voice of the majority bind the minority? It does not result I conceive from the law of nature, but from compact founded on conveniency. [18]

Jefferson could not accept such a concept. For him majority rule is not a mere convenience. The voice of the majority represents social justice. It is the moral sense of the community. Jefferson, in a letter to Thomas

Law, states:

> I sincerely, then, believe with you in the general existence of a moral instinct. I think it the brightest gem with which the human character is studded, and the want of it as more degrading than the most hideous of the bodily deformities. [19]

If the moral sense is the social norm, and if one does not participate in this norm, and if one performs acts that deviate from this norm, one must be considered a kind of heretic, a mentally debilitated and socially unfit individual. Jefferson's position makes it difficult to accept a defense theory for a minority party's interests and rights. We know the Jacksonian democracy of the 1830s was attended by the so-called "tyranny of the majority." Jefferson's theory contains no effective preventative for this type of political abuse, and we may say that such tyranny is one of the legacies of Jeffersonian democratic theory.

IV

JEFFERSON'S MORAL SENSE AND POLITICS

Lastly, we have to discuss what effects Jefferson's theory of human nature had on his political thought. As he believes that moral sense is directed to communal good and brings social benefits, whether one's deed was done in obedience to the dictates of conscience becomes especially significant. Jefferson attaches great importance to sincerity of motives as the basis for all action.

In a letter to Peter Carr, Jefferson says that "you are answerable not for the rightness but uprightness of the decision."[20] He lays more stress on the motive than the result and believes good intentions always produce good social results. This stand can be labeled as typical "heart ethics." They are not the ethics of a statesman but rather of a moralist or priest. Jefferson, however, brings these ethics into the political realm and views personal sincerity as a most important requisite of statesmanship. In the "Summary View of the Rights of British America," he addresses George III, the King of England.

> The great principles of right and wrong are legible to every reader; to pursue them requires not the aid of many counselors. The whole art of government consists in the art of being honest. Only aim to do your duty, and mankind will give you credit where you fail. [21]

Jefferson stresses here not the suitability or the results of political means, but the personal sincerity involved in making policy. From a practical political viewpoint, statesmen should bear the responsibility for the results of their decisions and should not be acquitted for failure because of their pure motives or good intentions. Jefferson, however, asserts that if the statesman's motive is honest and uncorrupt, even a political blunder should be overlooked by the governed.

Jefferson's sentimental stand can lead to another emotional and subjective view: If a motive is pure and honest, one can disregard legal and formal procedures. This is well indicated in his justification of the Louisiana Purchase. In a letter to John Breckinridge, Jefferson admits that in the Louisiana Purchase, the "Executive...[has] done an act beyond the Constitution." He draws an analogy, however, to "the case of a guardian" who invested "the money of his ward in purchasing an important adjacent territory." The guardian explains to the ward: "I did this for your good...I thought it my duty to risk myself for you." [22]

In this letter Jefferson apologizes for having transgressed Constitutional limits, mentioning his subjective, disinterested motive as justification of the Purchase. We find in his logic no indication of the brake that should be used when one who has good intentions violates the law. On the contrary, he believed that it was his duty to violate the Constitution. Heart ethics are based on the premise that the inner motive is potentially truer than the objective law. Jefferson is no exception to this. We may say that moral sense theory makes him self-righteous. The Louisiana Purchase did not bring any harmful results to American whites, but the legality of Jefferson's procedure, and the validity of his apology, remain very controversial.

It is also of interest that the minority is frequently regarded as heretical in Jefferson's political thought. In a letter to L.H.Girardin, Jefferson develops this theme and suggests very intolerant methods to deal with social heretics:

> No one doubted that society had a right to erase from the roll of its members any one who rendered his own existence inconsistent with theirs; to withdraw from him the protection of their laws, and to remove him from among them by exile, or even by death if necessary. [23]

To understand the full import of these remarks we have to make note of a law named the Bill of Attainder and Outlawry. During the Revolutionary War, this bill was enacted by the House of Burgesses at

Jefferson's initiative. On May 1, 1778, political leaders in Virginia received news that Josiah Philips, a Tory cutthroat, rose in revolt in Princess Anne county at the head of fifty men. Jefferson, the leader of the assembly, drafted the Bill of Attainder and Outlawry to suppress the rebels, and the assembly instantly passed it. This bill permitted the punishment of suspected criminals without due process. Under the new law it was legal for any person, with or without orders, to slay Philips or his associates on the spot. The law not only usurped the authority of the judiciary branch, but it also violated the principle of division of powers. Jefferson pressed for the passage of this bill even though he often advocated these fundamentals of democratic government on other occasions. In fact, the law was bitterly criticized at the time by John Marshall and Edmund Randolph. Jefferson, however, justified his actions even forty years later. The suppression of Philips's revolt was not a serious deviation from his political creed.

We should also consider that, after the American Revolution, Jefferson's devotion to the ideal of Southern pastoralism as the only sound way of life was strengthened. His intolerant attitude was directed towards his political enemies, the Northern heretics with commercial interests. In 1816 he writes to William H. Crawford that the policy of government should attach much importance, not to the minority infected with heterogeneous (i.e., commercial) concerns, but to the majority interests engaging in innocent and safe pursuits (i.e., agriculture). He continues:

> Every society has a right to fix the fundamental principles of its association, and to say to all individuals, that, if they contemplate pursuits beyond the limits of these principles, and involving dangers which the society chooses to avoid, they must go somewhere else for their exercise; that we want no citizens, and still less ephemeral and pseudo-citizens, on such terms. We may exclude them from our territory, as we do persons infected with disease. [24]

Here Jefferson characterizes the class to which he belongs as the sound majority, and advocates the exclusion of a heretical minority from society. These remarks remind us of the central idea of a Bill of Attainder in the Philips' case.

For Jefferson, the University of Virginia was the citadel in his ideological struggle against Northern political heresies. His narrow-minded attitude was revealed explicitly in the educational program and the administration of the university. He had a strong desire to establish a

southern university for southerners. He believed that in order to prevent the spread of heretical commercialism and moral corruption, the South had to inspire its younger generations with pastoral principles and hoped that the graduates disciplined by ideological training in such a university would someday constitute the majority leadership in Southern legislatures. To assure that the pastoral principles would be propagated, he also became involved with personnel management, i.e., the selection of professors in the law department. In 1826 he writes to Madison: "In the selection of our Law Professor, we must be rigorously attentive to his political principles." [25] In another letter Jefferson, admitting that the selection of text books should be left to the professors, asserts:

> there is one branch in which we are the best judges, in which heresies may be taught, of so interesting a character to our own State and to the United States, as to make it a duty in us to lay down the principles which are to be taught. It is that of government. [26]

In referring to "the quondam federalism, now consolidation " of a certain candidate applying for professorship, he further added:

> It is our duty to guard against such principles being disseminated among our youth, and the diffusion of that poison, by a previous prescription of texts to be followed in their discourses. [27]

We know Jefferson was very tolerant in the realm of religion. When he discussed many rivaling religious sects in *Notes on Virginia*, he positively admitted the variety of religious opinions and denied the existence of an "inquisitor" who could judge what the right sect was or where heresy lay. He cannot, however, adopt such a liberal stand in political theory, and he rather appears to make himself an inquisitor, one who can judge what constitutes the right republicanism. It is certainly not wrong — and may indeed be admirable — for one to hold an unshakable belief. If that person, however, hoping to realize his own ideal, violates democratic rules or procedures and suppresses academic freedom, then the result is absolute tyranny.

In considering Jefferson's darker side, the moral sense (which has been treated more frequently since the studies of Morton White and Garry Wills), seems to be a very important concept, and I think Jefferson's ideological limits should be attributed to this. We have confirmed that a strong moralistic tone underlies Jefferson's political ideas. The human

or social theory based on good nature [i.e., "a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct, in short" [28]] assumes a bright and optimistic appearance, but actually can create a fanatical sense of self-righteousness and intolerance of other people's political ideals. It is a matter of common knowledge that excellent political theories are usually based on the ethical view that human nature is evil, and we know that so-called modern theories of society were established by recognizing human character as it is. When Adam Smith founded modern political economics as a social science, he did it by regarding self-interest, self-love or egoism, as a self-evident appetite based on human nature itself. When modern political thought was theorized by Machiavelli, he emancipated it from the shackles of Christian morality. Jefferson, however, could not separate politics from morals, and could not accept conflicts or discords in society as natural conditions that originated in human nature. In his heart ethics, as man usually regards the dictates of his conscience as the majority's, the more sincere he is, the more tyrannical he becomes. Thus he regards his own republican ideal as an absolute and infallible creed, and finally makes himself an inquisitor of political thought.

NOTES

[1] To Maria Cosway, October 12, 1786. Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1984), p. 874.

[2] To Peter Carr, August 10, 1787. *Ibid.*, pp. 901-02.

[3] To Mr. Correa, June 28, 1815. H.A. Washingtonn ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (Washington, D.C.: Taylor & Maury, 1854) VI, 480.

[4] Peterson, p. 874.

[5] Saul K. Padover, ed., *Jefferson on Democracy* (New York: The New American Library, 1939), p. 116.

[6] To Peter Carr, August 19, 1785. Peterson, pp. 814-15.

[7] To John Adams, January 21, 1812. *Ibid.*, p. 1259.

[8] To Peter Carr, August 10, 1787. *Ibid.*, p. 901.

[9] To William Green Munford, June 18, 1799. *Ibid.*, p. 1064.

[10] To Thomas Law, June 13, 1814. *Ibid.*, p. 1337.

[11] To Peter Carr, August 10, 1787. *Ibid.*, p. 901.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 220.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 1338.

[14] Padover, p. 37.

[15] To William Findley, March 24, 1801. Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1904. 12 vols.), IX, 225.

[16] *The Federalist* (New York: Random House, Inc., The Modern Library), p. 361.

[17] Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*

(London: J. Tonson, MDCCXXV, The Fourth Edition), I, 9.

[18] James Madison to TJ, February 4, 1790. Julian Boyd, *et al.*, eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1950-), XVI, 149.

[19] To Thomas Law, June 13, 1814. Peterson, p. 1338.

[20] To Peter Carr, August 10, 1787. *Ibid.*, p. 904.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 121.

[22] To John Breckinridge, August 12, 1803. *Ibid.*, pp. 1138-39.

[23] To L.H. Girardin, March 12, 1815. Andrew A. Lipscom and Albert Ellery Bergh, eds., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (Washington, D.C.: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903-1904, 20 vols.), XIV, 277.

[24] To William H. Crawford, June 20, 1816. Ford, XI, 538.

[25] To James Madison, February 17, 1826. Peterson, p. 1513.

[26] Address lost, February 3, 1825. H.A. Washington, VII, 397.

[27] *Ibid.*, VII, 397.

[28] To Thomas Law, June 13, 1814. Peterson, p. 1337.