

Self Interest and the Oracle of Reason- Part 1

Intelligence Report
American Foundations #4

"The way to see by faith is to shut the eye of reason."
Benjamin Franklin

THOMAS JEFFERSON and **BENJAMIN FRANKLIN** *et al* graced the *Declaration of Independence* with an elegant and perennial philosophical truth that all men are endowed by their Creator with an "unalienable right" to "pursue happiness". Unfortunately, Jefferson and Franklin imbibed their philosophy, and thus their ideas about "happiness", from the streams of Roman Epicureanism[\[1\]](#) and classical Liberalism that flooded the waters of the Potomac, rather than from the current of Thomism that graced the waters of the Seine as it cascaded along the Sorbonne[\[2\]](#). That is, they drew their ideas about human nature and happiness from pagan rather than Christian sources.

The otherwise rich waters of Virginia's 18th century Potomac River were contaminated by noxious liberal elements such as Deism, Epicureanism, anti-Trinitarianism, secularism, materialism, and *enlightened* self-interest. Most Americans have been taught the benign and positive attributes of the latter. On the surface, enlightened self-interest certainly sounds plausible, especially when its adherents are convinced that they must regularly deal with *unenlightened*, unformed, and underdeveloped men and women who seek pleasure from a motive of solipsistic self-interest ("what's in it for me" in disregard of "you"). Consequently, in the tradition of Jefferson and Franklin, *enlightened* self-interest has become

an American hallmark. The following words could be attached as a goal placquered to a "Mission Statement" and hung in the front lobby of American schools: "In accordance with our civic mission to promote liberty, the pursuit of happiness, and the common good, faculty, staff, administrators and students will be taught to value the existence of others and to act with *apparent* justice, charity and benevolence towards all." Not authentic justice, charity and benevolence, but the "apparent" brand, which enlightened men and women realize is the quintessential ingredient that must be added to the mix if they are to successfully advance their own interests. Anyone who fails to calculate the good of others while calculating his own, must resign himself to the likelihood that his own desire for future pleasure will likely be frustrated if everyone that deals with him ends up a loser. Thus, the more sophisticated a person becomes, the more benign their selfishness becomes, at least that is the way it is presented.

Even though enlightened self-interest is lauded for calculating the "good" of others, self-interest (as vaunted in the liberal tradition) remains, in the last analysis, a philosophical toxin. It remains a toxin because the rewards shared with others are usually less than the rewards a man feigning virtue assigns to himself, and the burdens assigned to others more. It is not a toxin simply because people tend to assign more good things to themselves and more burdens to others; it is a toxin precisely because *it fails to apprehend both what the "self" is and what the "good" is, and because it further fails to comprehend how the "good" is rooted in human nature (body and soul)*. As indicated in Intelligence Report #3, "*Liberalism and the Challenge of Faith and Reason*", representatives of 18th century liberalism, such as Jefferson and Franklin, despised metaphysics and speculative thinking from which knowledge of the human soul is derived:

"The metaphysical insanities of Athanasius, of Loyola, and of Calvin, are, to my understanding, mere relapses into

polytheism, differing from paganism only by being more unintelligible".[\[3\]](#)

"To talk of immaterial existences, is to talk of nothings. To say that the human soul, angels, God are immaterial is to say, they are nothings, or that there is no God, no angels, no soul. I cannot reason otherwise: ... I believe I am supported in my creed of materialism by Locke." [\[4\]](#)

Thus, to men like Jefferson and Epicurus, his philosophical master, who profess "materialism" there might be a soul, *but it is not spiritual*. Because liberalism fails to study and account for the existence of a spiritual soul, it does not, and cannot, know what the authentic *human* good is; it does not even know what a human being is. As a result, even though liberals like Thomas Jefferson *et al* mentioned happiness in the Declaration of Independence, they are unable to correctly diagnose what *human* happiness is or how it is to be obtained. When the *spiritual potentials* of the human soul are left unconsidered (either by faith or reason) and thus unactualized, the human good is robbed of its transcendental dimension and therefore misunderstood. With metaphysics and the spiritual soul excluded, the pursuit of happiness is necessarily limited to that of the human body guided by the "practical intellect" enlightened by mere "common sense". Common sense is a necessary guide for many things, but it is an *insufficient* guide for *authentic* integral human development and a *deficient* intellectual tool for understanding the spiritual nature of the human soul and for attaining wisdom and corollary moral virtues of the soul requisite to the "pursuit of (*human*) happiness".

This realization was first iterated by Aristotle:

"By human virtue we mean not that of the body but that of the soul; and happiness also we call an activity of soul. But if

this is so, clearly the student of politics must know somehow the facts about the soul” (Ethics, Book I, Chapter XIII).

But, it is precisely the “facts about the soul” that are lacking in liberal political philosophy. **Because liberalism fails to adequately account for the human soul, its conception of “enlightened self-interest” is rooted in a misconception about human nature.** It is also rooted in aberrant self-love, which is, as John Adams, among the first rank of America’s founders, tells us the “spring” or cause “of self-deceit”, deceit such as convincing oneself that taking the interests of another into account in order to satisfy one’s own pursuit of pleasure, is somehow a virtuous (rather than a utilitarian) act that leads to happiness – it might lead to physical “pleasure” as Jefferson and the Epicurus understood it, but human “happiness” is another matter; happiness involves the spiritual soul.

John Adams provides perhaps the most accurate account of self-deceit, which he rooted in self-love, the source of the “greatest vices and calamities” effecting mankind.

“There is nothing in the science of human nature, more curious, or that deserves a critical attention from every order of men, so much, as that principle, which moral writers have distinguished by the name of self-deceit. This principle is the spurious (illegitimate) offspring of self-love; and is perhaps the source of far the greatest, and worst part of the vices and calamities among mankind”.[\[5\]](#)

Self-love is not only a “calamity” and “vice”, improperly understood, it is also a cause for “lamentation”. It is a cause of lamentation because human beings are endowed with *innate potential* to acquire the intellectual virtue of wisdom and to act with the moral (and theological) virtue of love for the good of themselves and that of others without expectation of a “payback”. This potential, however, must be nurtured by

proper intellectual education and moral formation; it is not instinctual or the result of simple *common sense*. Wisdom and love are difficult to attain. With these virtues, human beings are properly equipped to pursue happiness and the authentic actualization of their spiritual potentials. Without them, human beings are reduced to little more than brute animals in pursuit of sentient pleasures, which they mistake for happiness. Because liberals misunderstood happiness, their pursuit of it results in misery – their own ontological misery as well as the ontological, social, or economic misery of most everyone else who suffers the misfortune of living in a society governed by such a principle, a principle that negates solidarity and improperly understands human nature and cannot therefore act to perfect it.

“For man, when perfected, is the best of animals... he is equipped at birth with arms, meant to be used by intelligence and virtue, which he may use for the worst ends. Wherefore, if he have not virtue, he is the most unholy and the most savage of animals, and the most full of lust and gluttony. (Politics, Book I).

Political philosophy, properly understood, revolves around the ontological idea of the human person (body and soul) and the corollary idea of virtue necessary to pursue human happiness. Many politicians, and men and women in general, talk about virtue; unfortunately, many do not have it because through the fault of a faulty educational system, they do not know what it is or how to obtain it. Consequently, they have not yet risen victorious in their struggle with concupiscence and the “pride of life” and therefore are reduced to the unenviable specter of feigning wisdom and love; in such a world, it is more about appearances than reality. Politicians are not taught to be actually be virtuous; rather they are taught that they must avoid “the *appearance* of impropriety” or run the risk of not getting elected. Unfortunately, even a nation of Christians (such as 18th century colonial America) living in a liberal

regime that talks about “God” can be seduced by excellent political performances veiled in theological and philosophical rhetoric that “sounds good” but is deceptive.

Surprisingly, liberalism promotes freedom to pursue human happiness, yet does *nothing* to advance *intellectual understanding* of the spiritual dimensions of human nature necessary to *correctly* pursue *human* happiness, and it does *next to nothing* to prepare people morally for responsible use of freedom, which is its beacon. Liberalism promotes liberty guided by “common sense”[\[6\]](#) aided by the lower sentient powers of memory, imagination, associative practical thinking, and by the physical passions associated with the body, which, Epicurus assures us, are involved in every act undertaken to pursue pleasure. Love, however, is not a physical passion of the body; it is an intellectual appetite of the rational soul “spirited” from the human will, which is activated by *understanding*. Knowledge and understanding *precede* loving – a person must be known before he or she can be more fully and properly loved. There is no love in the sentient passions, but there is pleasure, which untamed and undirected turns into lust. Lust does not require understanding; it is activated by mere sensation. Happiness requires wisdom and love, which are intellectual and spiritual virtues of the human soul. Consequently, the pleasures of the body (and even of the lower sentient mind) are not synonymous with happiness and *its* attendant pleasures. Happiness is experienced in the soul. But, because human beings are composite body-soul beings, the happiness experienced in the soul overflows as pleasure into the body. Although there is an integral back and forth relationship between the two, the connection between spiritual happiness of the soul and physical pleasure of the body does not work in converse; happiness requires wisdom and love, sentient pleasure does not. Wisdom and love have their attendant physical pleasures. Physical pleasure however does not result in wisdom and love, which reside in the soul.

“But a person does not always grasp or feel this love, because it does not reside with tenderness in the senses, but resides in the soul with properties of strength and of greater courage and daring than before, though at times it overflows into the senses, imparting a gentle, tender feeling” (Saint John of the Cross).[\[7\]](#)

Thus, Epicureans, like Jefferson, who spend a lifetime pursuing *pleasures of the body and practical intellect*, miss out on the *happiness of a soul crowned with wisdom and love*. They misunderstand human nature and cultivate the practical intellect (common sense), which can make a man “crafty” (I do not say prudent – authentic prudence requires speculative wisdom) but cannot make a man “wise”. Wisdom is dependent upon apprehension of the spiritual soul and by faith in the Word of God, which were rejected by men like Jefferson and Franklin. Thus, their “wisdom” is turned to naught.

“One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).

Nonetheless, enlightened self-interest is far better than mere (unenlightened) self-interest. What enlightened self-interest has going in its favor is the *true claim* that it does not *blindly* pursue the passions like an animal does. Because it is guided by common sense of the practical intellect, **it is able to consider the consequences before it acts to attain pleasure or decides to boldly abstain from it**. Many men, men such as Epicurus, Jefferson, Franklin, et al often boldly abstain from pleasure because commonsense counsels otherwise. Practical reason thus has its paragons of virtue. Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman chose Julian the Apostate to paint the elegant and even noble caricature of classical philosophical virtue so in vogue with America’s Framers. Julian was...

“...all but the pattern-man of philosophical virtue... His simplicity of manners, his frugality, his austerity of life,

his singular disdain of sensual pleasure, his military heroism, his application to business, his literary diligence, his modesty, his clemency, his accomplishments, as I view them, go to make him one of the most eminent specimens of pagan virtue which the world has ever seen.

Newman, appreciated the liberal and generous character of Classical Roman philosophy and pagan virtue, but in the end evaluated it negatively as a “gentleman’s religion” rooted in limited knowledge and understanding that produced *apparent* but not real virtue. Such men have the *appearance* of virtue; it is a merely apparent display because it falls short of authentic wisdom graced by love and therefore ends in pride, which earned such men the scorn of Newman’s eloquent pen:

“Rather a philosopher’s, a gentleman’s religion, is of a liberal and generous character; it is based upon honour; vice is evil, because it is unworthy, despicable, and odious. This was the quarrel of the ancient heathen with Christianity, that, (Christianity) instead of simply fixing the mind on the fair and the pleasant, it intermingled other ideas with them of a sad and painful nature; that it spoke of tears before joy, a cross before a crown; that it laid the foundation of heroism in penance; that it made the soul tremble with the news of Purgatory and Hell; that it insisted on views and a worship of the Deity, which to their minds was nothing else than mean, servile, and cowardly. The notion of an All-perfect, Ever-present God, in whose sight we are less than atoms, and who, while He deigns to visit us, can punish as well as bless, was abhorrent to them; they made their own minds their sanctuary, their own ideas their oracle.”[\[8\]](#)

Newman was quite sure that this display of self-confidence and flawless etiquette, although becoming, was nothing more than the “shadow of the future Anti-Christ”, a false show of “philosophical virtue”.

He, in whom every Catholic sees the shadow of the future Anti-Christ, was all but the pattern-man of philosophical virtue. Weak points in his character he had, it is true, even in a merely poetical standard; but, take him all in all, and I cannot but recognize in him a specious beauty and nobleness of moral deportment, which combines in it the rude greatness of Fabricius or Regulus with the accomplishments of Pliny or Antoninus[\[9\]](#)

Saint Peter displayed some of this false human wisdom before he was sharply rebuked by the Wisdom of God;

“Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.” (Matthew 16:23).

As if to say, you have mistakenly made mere emotion and human reason your oracle. Thus, we are able to understand why philosophers more skilled than Jefferson, philosophers such as Marcus Tullius Cicero, rejected Epicurus as a false teacher and as a “hedonist” in spite of eloquent arguments paraded in his defense by Epicurus’ followers. Although Epicurus at first sight appears to be a proponent of doctrines that end in hedonism, his followers were, and are, quick to point out that those who believe such silly things about him are unschooled and little understand the *true* meaning of Epicurus’ profound teachings. Such devoted disciples, either in ignorance themselves, or with a subtlety equal to that of their master, set about assuring those in darkness that their master’s doctrines are vehicles of light. Then they proceed to deceptively make them sound attractive and consummately virtuous[\[10\]](#).

Cicero, however, was not a novice—he demonstrated his excellent understanding of Epicurus’ doctrines, adroitly saw through them all, and then proceeded to take them apart, gently exposing them for what they were.[\[11\]](#) Because he had

recourse to the metaphysics of Aristotle and understood that happiness was an attainment of the *spiritual soul* requiring virtue (intellectual and moral), he exposed Epicurus as a novice, as one who had failed to master metaphysics and other Aristotelian insights that require extensive labor. This is the philosophical bottom-line underlined by Cicero:

“Yet the case is simply this, that to me the supreme good seems to be in the soul, to him in the body; to me in virtue; to him in the body; to me in virtue, to him in pleasure” (Tusculan Disputations).

Thus, Epicurus lacking any philosophical understanding of human nature, beyond that of the physical body and lower sentient intellect and sentient soul, had little reason to stay his passions when they erupted, causing Cicero to refer to him as a “voluptuary”:

“I do not ask of you that you should define pain by the same terms by which Epicurus, a voluptuary, as you know, designates pleasure” (Tusculan Disputations).

Epicurus, to be sure, wrote about moderating the passions; he even wrote well about the cardinal virtues, but he mistakenly had them all serve the end of pleasure rather than of happiness. Thus, gluttony was moderated by the virtue of temperance; however, temperance for Epicurus was not a virtue in service of wisdom, and of other persons, flowing from a motive of filial love (friendship) as Cicero and Aristotle understood it. Rather, temperance was intended to preserve the pleasure of satiety and to avoid the discomfiture of psychological distress or imagined medical maladies attributed to being overweight, which cause pain and thus are antithetical to pleasure. An Epicurean therefore learned to be moderate in eating or to use the vomitorium. I, with Cicero, suspect the latter was more prominent:

“For I should be sorry to picture to myself, as you are in the habit of doing (said Cicero to Torquatus, a disciple of Epicurus), men so debauched as to vomit over the table and be carried away from banquets, and then the next day, while still suffering from indigestion, gorge themselves again”. [\[12\]](#)

Temperance is a virtue associated with “moderation”. Unfortunately, moderation is oftentimes misapplied by philosophers who misunderstand human nature and the ethical pursuit of happiness. For example, the classical philosophical maxim *“In medio stat virtus”* [\[13\]](#) counseling moderation, is intended for *morally licit* actions, not for illicit ones such as adultery and covetousness. It is not a virtue to “screw” and “steal” with moderation. Thus, “philosophers” like Epicurus, and Benjamin Franklin after him, who argued for, or who permitted screwing and intoxication in “moderation” as if moderation were a moral panacea are, in Cicero’s words, hard to “endure”.

“It is as much as I can do to endure, a philosopher speaking of the necessity of setting bounds to the desires (inordinate passions). Is it possible to set bounds to the desires? I say that they must be banished, eradicated by the roots. For what man is there in whom appetites dwell, who can deny that he may with propriety be called appetitive? If so, he will be avaricious, though to a limited extent; and an adulterer, but only in moderation; and he will be luxurious in the same manner. Now what sort of a philosophy is that which does not bring with it the destruction of depravity, but is content with a moderate degree of vice” (Cicero speaking of Epicureanism)? [\[14\]](#)

Moderating inordinate passions is not enough, inordinate passions need to be mastered. Because political philosophers like Thomas Jefferson (who followed in the footsteps of

Epicurus) and his companion, Benjamin Franklin, because such eminent American statesmen rejected (1) Classical Aristotelian and Christian Thomistic metaphysics and more poignantly, (2) the rescuing grace inherent in the divinity of Christ, they misunderstood human nature, the powers and potentials of the spiritual soul, and the role of contemplation and selfless charity necessary for the proper pursuit of happiness, they made a deficient and false religion out of practical reason. They failed to master the inordinate passions and therefore did not disapprove of morally illicit actions if they were “moderated” by practical considerations accompanied by the quasi ersatz moral virtue of temperance. Although they sang the praises of reason and of virtues such as temperance, unfortunately, at their hands, both reason and moral virtue were disfigured and disgraced.

“...as you have one dress to wear at home, and another in which you appear in court, are you to disguise your opinions in a similar manner, so as to make a parade with your countenance, while you are keeping the truth hidden within?”[\[15\]](#)

Such, dear reader “... is the final exhibition of the Religion of Reason: in the insensibility of conscience, in the ignorance of the very idea of sin, in the contemplation of (their) own moral consistency, in the simple absence of fear, in the cloudless self-confidence, in the serene self-possession, in the cold self-satisfaction, we recognize the mere (pagan) Philosopher” (Newman, *The Idea of a University*). What are men who, like Franklin and Jefferson *et al*, reject Christ, but pagans?

Conclusion

Because liberal political philosophers and politicians associate happiness with physical pleasure, sentient knowledge, and peace of mind, and because the spiritual soul as understood by both Classical and Christian philosophy and

as revealed in sacred scripture remains unaccounted for liberal philosophers, the liberalism of the nation's Framers was, and is, an insufficient political philosophy for the purpose of founding a Christian nation or for the purpose of building or rebuilding one.

Liberal self interest, moreover, is tainted with self love and self-deceit because those who consider themselves wise apart from speculative wisdom of the human soul and/or apart from the revealed truth about God, the revealed truth that human beings are made in the image and likeness of the Holy Trinity, such people remain in darkness while professing themselves to be in the light.

The pagan philosophers of Rome made the mistake of dismissing metaphysics; they could not also make the additional mistake of dismissing the Christian faith because it had not yet been revealed. The American Founders cannot say the same; they rejected both metaphysics and the faith, and in their place set up the deficient "Oracle of Reason".

ENDNOTES

[1] "As you say of yourself, I too am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us."

(Thomas Jefferson, letter to William Short):
<http://www.godlessgeeks.com/LINKS/Quotes.htm#jefferson>

[2] The *University of Paris*, where Aquinas taught.

[3] Letter of Thomas Jefferson to Jared Sparks, Nov. 4th 1820.

[4] Thomas Jefferson, Letter to John Adams, August 15, 1820:
<http://www.godlessgeeks.com/LINKS/Quotes.htm#jefferson>

[5] Boston Gazette, August 29, 1763.

<https://www.masshist.org/publications/apde2/view?id=ADMS-06-01-02-0045-0007>

[6] The term is being used in the vernacular, not the Thomistic sense.

[7] Saint John of the Cross, *"The Ascent of Mt. Carmel"*, Chapter 24.

[8] Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman, *"The Idea of a University"*, (*Discourse Eight*).

[9] *Ibid*

[10] See Book One of Cicero's *Treatise "On The Chief Good And Evil"* (*Treatise de Finibus*).

[11] See Book Two of Cicero's *Treatise "On The Chief Good And Evil"* (*Treatise de Finibus*).

[12] Book One of Cicero's *Treatise "On The Chief Good And Evil"* (*Treatise de Finibus*).

[13] Virtue is in the middle of the road

[14] Marcus Tullius Cicero: *Second Book "Of The Treatise On The Chief Good And Evil"* (*Treatise de Finibus*).

[15] *ibid*