

## **A Dialogue Between the Head and the Heart**

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*Philanthropy: Voluntary Action for the Public Good*

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These reflections on reason and emotion in philanthropy are inspired by Thomas Jefferson's famous letter to Maria Cosway.

My theme is philanthropy and liberal education. My text is a letter-essay that Thomas Jefferson once wrote that goes by the title, "A Dialogue Between My Head and My Heart."<sup>1</sup> It is an essay on friendship, charity, the human condition, and the methods and values of science and morals. The letter was written to a married British woman whom Jefferson had met in Paris (and for whom he developed a strong but platonic affection), on the occasion of her departure for America. Jefferson was so moved by their parting that he returned to his apartment and wrote the long letter that same evening.

The body of the letter is in the literary form of a dialogue between Head and Heart, first as an exchange about the joy of friendship and the pain of separation. Jefferson then speaks of the "divided empire" of the self, the dialectic between reason and emotion, between self-interest and altruism, in each of us.

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<sup>1</sup> Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, The Library of America, 1984, pp. 866-877.

Friendship is at issue because of Jefferson's distress at the departure of his friend. His head tells him that the principle to follow is to avoid becoming entangled with others, with it "their follies and their misfortunes," and to play it safe. Don't rush into new relationships; recognize beforehand the anguish they may cause, and cultivate instead the pleasures of privacy and contemplation. In a miserable world, the best course is to avoid adding misery to it.

Jefferson's heart responds that because the world is full of sorrow, it is only sensible to share our burdens: "For assuredly nobody will care for him who cares for nobody." In fact, the balance will tip the other way: ". . . thanks to a benevolent arrangement of things, the greater part of life is sunshine."

Although Jefferson attributes to the Head the hegemony over the world of nature, he claims for the Heart the human virtues of sympathy, love, justice; of benevolence, gratitude, and friendship. The methods and values of science include calculation, and calculation in the form of self-interest in human affairs is a misapplication of science. Morality is too important, he says, "to be risked on the uncertain combinations of the head"; the foundation of morality requires "the mechanism of the heart."

There is, on balance, in Jefferson's view, a long-term wisdom in the reliance on the human affections rather than on human cleverness. Jefferson implies that the concessions that the head makes to the heart are the source of some of our most important moral victories. (Although he doesn't make the point, I suspect that Jefferson would agree that the discipline imposed by the head on the heart often saves us from doing harm in our rush to do good. I will return to that later.)

Beyond friendship, in our less personal relations in society at large, Jefferson counsels against the misleading influence of narrow self-interest. The head leads us astray when it intrudes in the affairs of the heart. He illustrates his theme with two examples, the first that of a weary soldier seeking a lift on the back of Jefferson's carriage. Jefferson's self-interest advises against it: His head argues that there will be other soldiers further on; eventually we'll put too much of a burden on the horses. Jefferson rides on, but his conscience gets the better of him: It may not be possible to help everyone, his heart pleads, but we ought to help those we can. The logic of compassion wins out, but too late, because when Jefferson turns back to find the soldier, the soldier has taken another road.

The second illustration is not one of voluntary service, but of voluntary giving. Jefferson's head tells him that a woman seeking alms is in fact a drunkard who will only waste his charity in the taverns. Jefferson's heart again belatedly overrules his head, but this time he is able to seek out the woman and learn the truth about her. She was not a drunkard, after all, but a woman seeking charity to place her child in school.

Jefferson recognizes that there are consequences to these actions of the heart: "We have no rose without it's [sic] thorn; no pleasure without alloy." There are risks to be run, which implies that pain may well be incurred in the search for happiness. But that is better than lonely isolation, better than the security of the contemplative life that his head advises him to choose: "Let the sublimated philosopher grasp visionary happiness while pursuing phantoms dressed in the garb of truth! Their supreme wisdom is supreme folly. . ."

The dialogue between the head and the heart is a metaphor for the study of the philanthropic tradition. Jefferson's letter serves as a useful point of

departure. Jefferson himself was a man of strong and developed reason as well as powerful and courageous commitment, presumably a model of the educated person, sensitive to human values, aware of human failings, pragmatic and visionary.

The philanthropic tradition is a setting in which to study the divided empire. We all have learned how our self-interest works, and we could quickly add to Jefferson's reasons for not picking up the soldier on the road: Not only will others be demanding the same help; the next thing you know they'll all want to sit up front with us.

Jefferson's example of the woman seeking alms makes us aware of the ancient moral problem of *desert*: Jefferson gave the woman help because she proved *not* to be a drunkard. Would he have helped her if his first impression had been accurate, had he detected the tell-tale odor on her breath? Today, we might simply evade the issue by contending that drunkenness is a disease, not a vice, and the woman deserves our help because she is sick. And that might then prompt us to ask ourselves—our hearts asking our heads—is there anyone out there who *doesn't* deserve our help?

The issue of the deserving poor and needy of our contemporary society has been debated at length in recent years. It continues to be a controversial issue of public policy. The complexities of the problem are by now familiar: Inspired by our hearts, we have followed our heads and turned the mentally ill out of institutions and into the streets. The consensus seems to be that such people shouldn't be made to live in the streets. At the same time, we have come to know that public shelters and institutions are often dangerous, heartless places. The morally right thing to do, it would seem,

would be to find decent homes that will take these people in. Decent homes, presumably, like yours and mine . . .

In Santa Cruz, California, according to newspaper reports, able-bodied young people are found in considerable numbers claiming food, shelter, and freedom of action as the rights and protections belonging to the modern vagabond. They are neither seeking nor interested in employment.

Should we consider the mentally ill on the streets of New York and the idle dropouts on the streets of Santa Cruz equal in their claims on us?

In choosing one's friends, Jefferson said, one should exercise careful judgment. Friendship should not be based on externals or self-interest: "I receive no one into my esteem until they are worthy of it." Did Jefferson apply a test of worthiness to his acts of charity? He apparently took the soldier's plea at its face value; the soldier was worthy simply by virtue of being a soldier on duty. The woman seeking alms, on the other hand, required a test to determine that she was worthy of his assistance. Had she turned out to be a drunkard after all, she would have failed the test. Whether one should make judgments about the moral worth of those seeking aid is one of the recurrent issues of the philanthropic tradition, livelier today perhaps even than it was in Jefferson's time.

Friendship is not the basis for charity, for voluntary giving and service. Acts of philanthropy reach out to total strangers, often in distant places, usually without the ability to screen out the unworthy or otherwise unqualified. Nothing could be more familiar to Americans today, for example, than the drawn faces and swollen bellies of starving children in Africa, yet presumably few of us are personally acquainted with any of

them. Our hearts tell us only that we *must* act to help them—even though are heads cannot tell us why.

That African appeal has touched millions of people, perhaps unprecedented numbers around the world. It has enlisted the efforts of people usually identified not with the relief of suffering, but with the manufacture of pleasure and self-indulgence. The rock musicians and other entertainers who produced the "We Are the World" and "Live Aid" fundraising extravaganzas were not more expert about the Ethiopian crisis than the readers of daily newspapers. They were able to condemn the situation as morally intolerable and to use their extraordinary promotional skills and technologies to raise large amounts of money very quickly—yet without any expertise at all in using that money to effect the changes they felt were necessary.

The dialogue between the Head and Heart over what we should do when faced with a human tragedy such as the famine in Ethiopia warns us of the limits of our emotion. The tens of millions of dollars raised by the rock concerts and records are not quickly and easily converted into food for the hungry. Rock stars prove to know little about the logistics of food aid, and seem to have only just recently discovered that Ethiopia is the center of a terrible civil war. We have learned to our dismay that some Ethiopians are willing to starve other Ethiopians for political ends. To seek to bring food for the innocent through that maze of ancient animosity may call for the cleverness of con men as well as for the patient commitment of saints.

Closer to home, and with no Russians to point a finger at, our failures to deal humanely and effectively with the homeless, even when we are inclined to respond to them, are instructive in teaching us that it is difficult to be enlightened and humane. Such failures seem to lead some people to con-

clude that the effort should not be made in the first place. As a nation, our head is telling us that we are better advised to ignore the "follies and the misfortunes" of others, and to make ourselves comfortable in our studies (or television rooms).

The purpose of liberal education is to bring some semblance of *detente* if not harmony to the divided empire of the human mind and spirit. To study the habits of the heart is to study the consequences of friendship and charity, of high aspiration and low technique, to reflect on knowing when to mind one's business and when not to, on wanting to do good and knowing how.

To study the tradition and practice of philanthropy is to confront liberal education at its best: in the education of the public citizen and the private person, in the continuing education of the Head *and* the Heart.