# Thirty-Six More Short Essays, Plus Another, on the Probing Mind of Thomas Jefferson

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# Preface

THIS LATEST BOOK ON JEFFERSON, WAGGISHLY TITLED, *Thirty-Six Short Essays, Plus Another, on the Probing Mind of Thomas Jefferson: "A sentimental traveller," II,* is a sequel to my prior book of a similar name.

Thomas Jefferson, all scholars know, was one of the largest American figures of his time, and probably one of the largest global figures of his time. Forever a student of the cosmos, he always approached the world just like an infant would approach a playpen filled with new toys. He had a penchant for observing, measuring, recording, and even critiquing the things he experienced on an everyday basis. He was no ordinary observer, but one who ever strived to make events to be experiences—that is, to be cosmically involved. He delighted in study of not only things abstruse and seemingly impenetrable, but also in study of things so exoteric, so commonplace, that they escaped the notice of almost all others. It was, all things considered, a wonderful world, and that is why Jefferson told John Adams in an 1816 letter, "I think … that it is a good world on the whole, that it has been framed on a principle of benevolence, and more pleasure than pain dealt out to us."

Because Jefferson had a cavernous mind and the amaranthine curiosity and appetence for learning of a child, he has become for me, qua philosopher, an object of philosophical study. Well-schooled in the philosophers of antiquity and of his own day, his writings are replete with philosophical content, especially of a moral sort, and I have made it my aim in my post salad years to flesh out that content and show those interested in the mind of Jefferson that he was more than a dilettante apropos of philosophy.

This book is another attempt to showcase Jefferson's extraordinary philosophical mind, *hors pair*. It is my hope that other philosophers will take up analysis of Jefferson's writings as well as my modest efforts in fleshing out and (sometimes) critiquing Jefferson's philosophical thoughts, which were systemic, not unpremeditated.

There are three parts to this undertaking. The first part contains 13 short essays on Jefferson's political philosophy. The second part has 13 essays on Jefferson's religious and moral views. The last part features 10 essays, critical of the often vitriolic revisionist literature, which is intent on reducing to inconsequentiality one of the greatest American figures. There

is an addendum: an essay, numbered "36+," which solves a problem, mentioned in essay 10, that has long been a botheration.

Much of my effort as a philosopher studying Jefferson's writings has been to read and analyze literally, not deconstructively, Jefferson's corpus, unless good reasons can be given for a non-literal reading. Many of the problems with contemporary scholarship on Jefferson are the result of in-vogue, deconstructionism—that is, as it were, loose-constructionist approaches—which give scholars ample flexibility when "examining," and interpreting, Jefferson's writings. That has led to harefooted formulation of often wild hypotheses, selection of material consistent with them, and eschewal of material inconsistent with them: i.e., cherry picking. Moreover, the most radical Revisionists, with their iteration and reiteration of Jefferson's hypocrisy and racism—neither accusation well-founded, but part of a lengthy trend to blur the line between greatness and ordinariness (here, recall Aristotle's sentiment in Book III of *Politics* that the worst form of injustice is to treat equally unequals)—have taken cherry picking to a new invidious, and insidious, level. In attempting not only to bring Jefferson down to earth, but also to show that he was much inferior to most of us, they implicitly state that they are his superior, and that is untoward.

Yet I suspect that the politically correct fad of Radical Revisionism will fade in time into obsolescence. Scholars then will return to the works of Gilbert Chinard, Dumas Malone, and Merrill Peterson, as well as a handful of fine scholars that today work, and build on, correct, and improve that scholarly tradition. When that occurs, the decades of politically correct scholarship will be ignored because of its irrelevance—it will become a sort of Dark Age. The goal, once again, will not be apologia or denigration, come what may, but the truth about Jefferson, and Jefferson, though a difficult figure on account of the breadth and depth of his scientific understanding, is not unfathomable and unapproachable. Knowing Jefferson merely takes scholarly digging—digging through the entire Jefferson corpus and through the books that molded his mind.

Before ending, I would like to thank Adam Rummens of Cambridge Scholars Publishing and their fine crew. They have, of late, invested heavily in my work on Jefferson. If my modest efforts have the effect that I hope they will have over time, I expect that that investment will pay large dividends for them.

How is one to read this book?

These 36+ essays offer a portal into the mind of Thomas Jefferson. They are meant not to be read in any particular order, but each is to be savored in its own time in the manner of a fine dry bourbon-barrel stout

which has been so aged that its complex of malts brings about a superior blend and a taste treat for one's palate. Enjoy, but do not read essay 36+ prior to essay10!

# PART I

# POLITICS & POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

# I
## "Not to find out new principles, or new arguments"
## Did Jefferson Really Write the Declaration of Independence?

JEFFERSON'S ENERGY IN THE CAUSE OF LIBERTY, his dedication to the cause of human rights, and his facility with language through his pen placed him in, often at the head of, over 30 committees in the Continental Congress. Yet his most significant work as member of a committee was a member of the five-man committee to draft the Declaration of Independence. And so, on June 9, 1776, Congress appointed Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman to draft the document.

With so much occurring in the Congress and most congressmen stretched to their limit, Jefferson was given the task of drafting the document. Why? John Adams recalled his conversation with Jefferson: "Reason first, you are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason second, I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular. You are very much otherwise. Reason third, you can write ten times better than I can". Jefferson called into question Adams' flattering account. "Mr. Adams [*sic*] memory has led him into unquestionable error. … The committee of 5 met, no such thing as a sub-committee was proposed, but they unanimously pressed on myself alone to undertake the draught".

Thus, Jefferson shut himself in the second floor of a three-story brick house at Seventh and Market Streets in Philadelphia, and worked on the project from June 11 to June 28. When finished with his initial draft, he handed a copy to Franklin and Adams for their corrections. The two made merely "verbal" alterations and the Continental Congress received the fair copy on June 28 and made substantial edits, thereby reducing the document by some one-quarter in length. The most notable omission was a long passage, penned by Jefferson, on the evils of slavery.

Because Jefferson was part of a five-man committee and because the fair copy had to go through the criticisms and edits of the Congress, it is fair to ask whether Jefferson can be called the author of the document.

Pauline Maier, in her *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*, warns against ascription of authorship to Jefferson. Jefferson was "no Moses receiving the Ten Commandments from God. He was part of a five-man committee, which oversaw the project. Also Congress

revised the document before its publication. Thus, "it was an act of group editing".

She warns against regarding the document as a "sacred text" and against championing Jefferson as "the father of all moral principles". She sums: Jefferson was the "most overrated person in American history".

More recently, Danielle Allen, in *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality*, also argues against ascription of authorship to Jefferson. The Declaration was a democratic work that was constructed by a committee and was intended for a global audience. The document was merely begun by Jefferson, as his original draft was reviewed by the four other members of the original committee, by 51 other members of Continental Congress, and by the clerk Matlack, who "textured the text with his formal calligraphy". Thus, there was the influence of "the words and voices of all those people who participated in conversation with Jefferson, Adams, Lee, and Mason". In addition, one must not forget the conversations of committee members with others within and without the Congress. If we follow Allen's line of reasoning, then it seems that nearly everyone with democratic leanings had a hand in penning the document. Yet with due consideration for Jefferson's meaty role in birthing the document, she sums: "The monumental achievement of Thomas Jefferson is, ultimately, to have produced a first draft—and a general argumentative structure—that, through its philosophical integrity and unquestionable brilliance, could survive such intense committee work and bear this much demand for agreement".

The document was certainly not considered to be a sacred text, though it is now considered to be one, when it received the final approbation of the Congress on July 4. As Maier said, its declaration of independence was *post factum*: Independence had formally been declared on July 2, 1776, and the document until years after its acceptance fell into relative obscurity in the states, though its effect in Europe was immediate and seismic. Jefferson himself was astonished by the significance of the document decades after it was penned. To Dr. James Mease (26 Sept. 1825), he writes of "the sacred attachments of our fellow citizens to the event of which the paper of July 4th, 1776, was but the declaration, the genuine effusion of the soul of our country at that time. Small things may, perhaps, like the relics of saints, help to nourish our devotion to this holy bond of our Union, and keep it longer alive and warm in our affections".

While he wrote the document, Jefferson was clear that his chief aim, as the letter to Mease shows, was not originality of sentiment, but to capture the spirit of the colonists at the time. That sentiment he expresses more plainly in an earlier letter to Henry Lee (8 May 1825):

> When forced, therefore, to resort to arms for redress, an appeal to the tribunal of the world was deemed proper for our justification. This was the object of the Declaration of Independence. Not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before; but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject, in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent, and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take. Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion. All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, &c.

In writing the Declaration, Jefferson aimed to encapsulate the "expression of the American mind" at the time of its composition. Originality was not an aim. The merit of the document, he concedes, is its ability capture the "harmonizing sentiments of the day". That the document has today taken on the status of a holy relic strongly suggests that Jefferson perfectly captured those sentiments.

The document in many respects is merely a formal reconstruction of Jefferson's Summary View of the Rights of British America—with excision of certain aspects and fleshing out others in a tone less angry and more measured. I examine Jefferson's fair copy.

First, the first paragraph is Jefferson's opening salvo.

> When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

That salvo is an appeal to the good judgment of mankind for the causes of the colonists' push for separation from England.

Secondly and most famously, he then limns several self-evident truths: that all men are created "equal & independent"; that "from that equal creation". all have the rights "to the preservation of life, & liberty, & the pursuit of happiness"; that governments, deriving their "just powers from the consent of the governed". are instituted to secure such rights; and that the people have a right to abolish any government which "becomes destructive of these ends" and to institute a new government, by "laying its

foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness".

Next, Jefferson lists numerous grievances—"Facts … submitted to a candid world"—which aim to show King George III's behavior, when it comes to ignoring their rights, to be tyrannical and of consistent purpose in ignoring colonists' rights. Many are taken from his Summary View.

Finally, there is the ending paragraph which is a normative argument for colonial separation and self-government. "These United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States … [and] are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown".

Thus, the Declaration is a lengthy argument—given in gist mostly in the second paragraph. All people are created equal. All people are endowed with certain rights (life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness) to enable them to live peaceably among each other in a social setting. Governmental power is derived from the consent of the people. The main task of a government is to secure its citizens' rights. When any government fails to secure its citizens' rights, the citizens have a right to abolish it and institute a new government. King George III has abusively violated the British colonists' rights (18 grievances). So, the colonists have a right to form their own government in keeping with their own notions of their safety and happiness.

The influence of John Locke and George Mason is apparent, but Jefferson was well read in the liberal/utopian literature of his time—e.g., More's *Utopia*, Mercier's *The Year 2440*, Condorcet's *History*, Harrington's *Oceana*, Charron's *On Wisdom*, and Volney's *Ruins*—and so it is vain to look too much at the influence of any one person on the document.

Yet there is reason to believe that in writing the document, Jefferson merely appealed to the skeleton of his own newly forming political philosophy, which would get fleshed out in certain letters on rebellion and revolution during his tenure in France, in his First Inaugural Address as president, and in certain letters later in life—the year 1816 is especially revelatory—on the notion of sound republican government. Jefferson writes to William Fleming, just prior to ratification of the Declaration (1 July 1776): "If any doubt has arisen as to me, my country will have my political creed in the form of a 'Declaration &c.' which I was lately directed to draw. This will give decisive proof that my own sentiment concurred with the vote they instructed us to give". There can be no stronger statement of ownership by Thomas Jefferson.

## II
## "The most precious gift of nature"
# Jefferson vs. Adams on the "Pillars of Aristocracy"

PHILOSOPHICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN JEFFERSON and John Adams, political rivals but ultimately intimate friends, are no more evident than in an epistolary exchange between the two vis-à-vis the nature of "aristocracy".

The exchange begins at the prompting of Adams, who has written extensively on the subject in a book and series of published articles—*Discourses on Davila* and "Defence of the Constitutions of the Government of the United States of America"—and whose views on the human condition are conservative and non-equalitarian. Adams, complaining he is ever misapprehended, begins a series of letters (9 July 1813, 14 Aug. 1813, 22 Aug. 1813, and 2 Sept. 1813), unanswered by Jefferson, in which Adams expatiates on his thoughts on aristocracy. He states in the last letter: "The five Pillars of Aristocracy, are Beauty[,] Wealth, Birth, Genius and Virtues. Any one of the three first, can at any time over bear any one of or both of the two last". He adds, doubtless with frustration due to Jefferson's uncommunicativeness, "I can only say at present that I can pursue this idle Speculation no farther, at least till I have replied to this fresh proof of your friendship and Confidence".

Jefferson replies on October 28. There exists a "natural aristoi" (Gr., "best men"), Jefferson concedes. Yet, *pace* Adam—for whom beauty, wealth, and birth individually or conjointly can trump talent and virtue—Jefferson's natural *aristoi* comprises only the virtuous and talented. "There is also an artificial aristocracy, founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents; for with these it would belong to the first class". Virtue and talent are sufficient to place one among the natural aristocracy—*viz.*, lack of either is sufficient to exclude one. His description points to three scenarios, which I list below.

Category 1: (Virtue & Talent) & (Wealth & Birth) = Natural Aristoi
Category 2: (Virtue & Talent) & (~~Wealth & Birth~~) = Natural Aristoi
Category 3: (~~Virtue & Talent~~) & (Wealth & Birth) = Artificial Aristoi

The three scenarios are exclusive, but not exhaustive. There are 13 other possible combinations—e.g., (Virtue & ~~Talent~~) & (Wealth & Birth) or (~~Virtue~~ & ~~Talent~~) & (~~Wealth~~ & Birth)—that Jefferson overpasses. His

point does not rely on enumeration of all possible combinations. He is unconcerned with taxonomizing the human organism to assess qualifications for governing. He aims to show that good governing is not merely a matter of talent alone. Virtue too, Jefferson insists, is needed for republican governing—a point pretermitted by most scholars. He aims also to show that wealth and birth are immaterial.

Jefferson, in distinguishing between a natural and artificial aristocracy, has proffered a radical redefinition of Adams's view of "aristocracy", and in doing that, he has underscored the political, and philosophical, dissimilarities between the two friends. Adams, backward looking, sees humans' future in terms of the past. It has always benefitted the people to be governed by persons of wealth, birth, and even beauty, and so it always will benefit them. Jefferson, forward looking, sees the scientific progress of the past several centuries, due in great part to dissemination of knowledge through newspapers and books, as evidence for the success of the experiment of government by the people through enlightened and morality-sensitive elected officials. For Jefferson, the wealthy and well born might have certain conveniences that those non-wealthy and non-wellborn do not have—*viz*., they might be better enabled to pursue virtue and to develop their talent, if they should so choose—but those conveniences themselves nowise make them any better suited for good governing than any other citizens.

Jefferson continues in an oft-quoted passage:

> The natural aristocracy I consider as the most precious gift of nature, for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society. And indeed, it would have been inconsistent in creation to have formed man for the social state, and not to have provided virtue and wisdom enough to manage the concerns of the society. May we not even say, that that form of government is the best, which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of these natural *aristoi* into the offices of government? The artificial aristocracy is a mischievous ingredient in government, and provision should be made to prevent its ascendency.

What seems clear in this passage is that, at least for the purposes of advancing new political ideals, Jefferson's redefinition of *aristoi* is an effort to distance himself from Adams's political conservatism and to advance a notion of "republicanism", idoneous for his progressivist political thinking. This notion of republicanism is not axially political, though it might seem to be. It is moral. He realizes that the people as members of a republic can govern themselves only to such an extent. As members of a county, state, and a federation of states, there are non-parochial con-

cerns—one, of course, being securing their human rights. For non-parochial concerns, they must have trustworthy and caring representatives. The best way to ensure that is to create a schema of government which guarantees only the true best, the natural *aristoi*, will be enabled to govern, if they so choose. Only the *natural* best, as moral citizens with an eye to the good of the whole, will prorogue their own interests to be responsive to the needs and concerns of the general citizenry.

Jefferson here is no mere speculative philosopher, inclined to satisfy himself with the mere knowledge that his system, thought up, is correct. He is, as he generally is, a practicalist. He is essaying to establish a system that will eventually remove from governing those whose only claim to desert is wealth or good birth. In his *Autobiography,* he writes of four of the 126 bills drafted by him, George Wythe, and Edmund Pendleton in their concerted effort to revise the laws of Virginia.

> I considered 4 of these bills, passed or reported, as forming a system by which every fibre would be eradicated of antient or future [artificial] aristocracy; and a foundation laid for a government truly republican. The repeal of the laws of entail would prevent the accumulation and perpetuation of wealth in select families, and preserve the soil of the country from being daily more & more absorbed in Mortmain. The abolition of primogeniture, and equal partition of inheritances removed the feudal and unnatural distinctions which made one member of every family rich, and all the rest poor, substituting equal partition, the best of all Agrarian laws. The restoration of the rights of conscience relieved the people from taxation for the support of a religion not theirs; for the establishment was truly of the religion of the rich, the dissenting sects being entirely composed of the less wealthy people; and these, by the bill for a general education, would be qualified to understand their rights, to maintain them, and to exercise with intelligence their parts in self-government: and all this would be effected without the violation of a single natural right of any one individual citizen. To these too might be added, as a further security, the introduction of the trial by jury, into the Chancery courts, which have already ingulfed and continue to ingulf, so great a proportion of the jurisdiction over our property.

Moreover, his message throughout his Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge (Bill 79) is consistent with the tenor of his letter to Adams. In the letter to Adams, Jefferson underscores that virtue and talent are what make one deserving of governing. In Bill 79, Jefferson mentions "genius and disposition".

After having read and received Jefferson's response to his thoughts on *aristoi,* Adams thereafter discontinues discussion of the topic. He likely

takes his disagreement with Jefferson as substratally political, while Jefferson no doubt sees the disagreement as substratally moral. The differences between the two friends in large part came to define the nation.

## III
## "A utopian characteristically draws on ahistorical, abstract ideals"
# Thomas Jefferson's "Utopian" Optimism

JEFFERSON'S OPTIMISM, both political and moral, Ari Helo and Peter Onuf maintain in a paper titled "Jefferson, Morality, and the Problem of Slavery", is such that he never embraced utopian notions of the good life. "[Jefferson's] optimism about the continuity of certain positive trends in recent history did not lead him to embrace utopian notions of the ultimate moral end of the still ongoing historical process. It is remarkable how little interest Jefferson ever showed in metaphysical speculations about man's essence or in other kinds of extrahistorical 'truths' about human nature".

Those claims give us pause for reflection. Jefferson never did compose a utopian work as did Thomas More, James Harrington, or Francis Bacon. Moreover, he never waxed fully utopian in any particular writing.

Jefferson did eschew and disdain metaphysical speculation. Yet it does not follow *pace* Helo and Onuf that one who eschews metaphysical speculation cannot wax utopian. One can be utopian—in the minimal sense of being forward-looking and optimistic, even perfectionistic in one's optimism—without being metaphysical.

In a more recent book titled *Thomas Jefferson's Ethics and the Politics of Human Progress,* Helo gives a fuller explanation of why Jefferson is no utopist. While both politicians and utopians have a future-orientation, "the utopian needs only to define the desirable end result, not a policy for moving forward from here and now. The difference, therefore, arises with the politician's attitude to the present as a result of the past and, thus, as the meaningful context of one's future orientation". He adds: "A utopian characteristically draws on ahistorical, abstract ideals and thus treats the past as insignificant to the future. A progressive politician, such as Jefferson claimed to be, sees the present as intimately related to the past, meaning that the so-called burden of history is precisely that with which a politician deals in his orientation to the future". For Helo, politicians segregate themselves from utopians in that utopians' vision of the future is pie in the sky—*viz*., it need not be a possible future. Only politicians, with a keen eye on the past and another on the present, are grounded futurists.

While I applaud Helo's attempt to distinguish between politicians and utopists, he does not create a sharp boundary for the purposes of delineation. Not all politicians are grounded—at least, not in reality (I resist the

temptation to cite illustrations)—and most politicians' view of a better future is centered on the immediate future—what will they do to ease the burden of citizens during their tenure in office—and such a vision of the future is scarcely utopian. Moreover, some utopists—e.g., Bacon and Condorcet—were well grounded in the present and had an excellent grasp of the past.

Jefferson, I argue, was a politician and in some measure, an utopist. The key to grounding Jefferson's "utopian" vision was a precise sense of location, and Jefferson, among statesmen of his day, had a profound, even matchless sense of location. He had a clear apprehension of a place in both space and time for himself, his fellow Virginians, his countrymen, and even his fellow humans.

I give a few examples of Jefferson's sense of location. In some effort to preserve what he could of that which he considered to be a moribund culture, he collected bits of various Indian languages for comparative study. Cognizant of collecting the laws of his state for the continued amelioration of them for future generations, he preserved as best he could the laws of Virginia. To acquire information about the animals he believed still extant in remote parts of North America to be used in part to parry objections of prominent Europeans concerning the inferiority of America's climate for biotic thriving, he collected petrified remains of animals. In an effort to promote the advance of science in his fledgling country, he was an active member and longtime president of the American Philosophical Society. To promote intelligence and virtue as bulwarks of education in his own state and nation, he founded the University of Virginia as a progressive institution, in which the most useful sciences were to be taught in their most progressive forms. In an effort to advance liberty and equality in the new-formed United States, he accepted the job of president of the United States, though he greatly disrelished positions of power. All such instances—and there are numerous more—are of a man with a profound grasp of forward movement through history and a well-founded sense of location amid that movement to expedite the movement.

Location for Jefferson gave purpose to his republicanism, normative at its core. His political views were grounded on a notion of the good life—government with intelligent, talented, and virtuous representatives elected and recallable by a properly educated and participatory citizenry, whose liberties were guaranteed by a bill of rights. Key to proper representation was government in partnership with science, which was progressing at an alarming rate in Jefferson's time. Key to progressive government was periodic constitutional reform in keeping with advances in science, including both moral and political progress.

To sustain the sort of scientific progress and to unmew human potentialities that fueled Jeffersonian republicanism, study of history for its moral lessons was critical. The idea of a flourishing state had advanced in his day. That is why he found *de trop* ancient political philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, neither of whom grasped the notions of representative government and demassified governing—*viz.,* a nation comprising states, comprising counties, comprising wards, and each relatively independent in their actions. Moreover, the ancients did not grasp the notions that a state could be very large and yet very stable and that governments ought to strive for independency and self-sufficiency through predominantly georgic means, and through peaceable relationships with all other nations.

Other keys to Jeffersonian progressivism were a vamped notion of morality and a Stoic/Kantian cosmology. (Jefferson read thoroughly the Stoics, but he did not read Kant, only of him.) He adopted three key features of morality posited by some Enlightenment thinkers—morality being non-rational, moral living as efficient and orderly living, and morality advancing the interests of the species over time—and each had significant implications for Jefferson's political philosophizing, axially moral. Furthermore, though he believed the overall advance of the cosmos was god-directed and ultimately unstoppable—i.e., fated—the future was not etiologically fixed by the past—i.e., not uniquely determined. Thus, location was not a static, but a dynamic, concern, and humans had some role to play, if only minimal, to expedite cosmic advance or delay it.

Thus, with location being moral and dynamic, Jefferson wished to have a precise notion of where he, his countrymen, and his fellow global citizens were at any point in time so as to project a plausible course of human affairs—a course ever perfecting itself—for future generations.

Inexorably committed to human progress, Jefferson was devoted to the notion of a better tomorrow for not only Virginians or Americans, in the generations ahead of him, but also all persons. He read avidly any literature with uplifting moral content—history, novels, poetry, sermons, and formal ethical treatises. "I never go to bed without an hour, or half hour's previous reading of something moral", he writes his physician Dr. Vine Utley (21 Mar. 1819) "whereon to ruminate in the intervals of sleep". He read with voracity utopists such as More, Harrington, Volney, Condorcet, Mercier, and even Plato, for whom he expressed detestation, and Jefferson's notion of an ideal republic is replete with borrowings from them. He read such materials not so much for enjoyment, but more for employment. Jefferson envisaged, if only inchoately, an "Empire for liberty"—an irenic, relatively self-sufficient, independent, and morality-loving nation, engaged in peaceable relationships with all other nations. In addition, he envisaged

in time the contagion of America's successes, and thus, a global community of Jeffersonian republics. Overall, he wished to do his part to ensure that the next generation would inherit a world improved by human agency, if only slightly. Whether the means he employed as politician and citizen did more to advance or retard his cause is still an open issue.

## IV
## "The last degradation of a free and moral agent"
# Freedom of Thought in Jefferson's Bill for Religious Freedom

THOMAS JEFFERSON, AS IS COMMONLY KNOWN, was wedded to the principle, expressed with laconic eloquence in his Declaration of Independence, that each person had a right to pursue his own path to happiness. Government had no right to intervene in a manner to dictate the road to happiness for its citizens.

Right-intended government could, he thought, "intervene" in citizens affairs to create social settings in which citizens would thrive by having more opportunities for self-expression. In his Sixth Annual Message as president, Jefferson speaks of a surplus of governmental revenue and suggests spending that money on public education, roads, rivers, canals and "such other objects of public improvement as it may be thought proper to add to the constitutional enumeration of federal powers". The aim is "new channels of [interstate] communication" so that "lines of separation will disappear, [states'] interests will be identified, and their union cemented by new and indissoluble ties". As is the case with Plato in *Republic,* it is not the function of a thriving republic to guarantee the happiness of all persons in it, but the greatest amount of happiness of those in it. For Jefferson, however, it is only the task of government to allow for the possibility of human thriving—i.e., the pursuit of human happiness—not for happiness itself.

Jefferson, so wedded to liberty of thought, did not believe in controlling others through controlling what they believed, and how they thought. In a letter to nephew Peter Carr (10 Aug. 1787), who was for all intents and purposes Jefferson's son, he advises Carr, when pursuing religious matters, merely to "lay aside all prejudice on both sides, & neither believe nor reject anything because any other persons, or description of person have rejected or believed it". Jefferson has no interest in foisting off his own views on his nephew—"your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable not for the rightness but uprightness of the decision"—and he treated similarly others.

Jefferson's most eloquent expression of freedom of thought occurs in his Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom (18 June 1779). I include the whole of the lengthy Section I.

Well aware that the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds; that Almighty God hath created the mind free, and manifested his supreme will that free it shall remain by making it altogether insusceptible of restraint; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments, or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, who being lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do, but to extend it by its influence on reason alone; that the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world and through all time: That to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors, is sinful and tyrannical; that even the forcing him to support this or that teacher of his own religious persuasion, is depriving him of the comfortable liberty of giving his contributions to the particular pastor whose morals he would make his pattern, and whose powers he feels most persuasive to righteousness; and is withdrawing from the ministry those temporary rewards, which proceeding from an approbation of their personal conduct, are an additional incitement to earnest and unremitting labours for the instruction of mankind; that our civil rights have no dependance on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry; that therefore the proscribing any citizen as unworthy the public confidence by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to offices of trust and emolument, unless he profess or renounce this or that religious opinion, is depriving him injuriously of those privileges and advantages to which, in common with his fellow citizens, he has a natural right; that it tends also to corrupt the principles of that very religion it is meant to encourage, by bribing, with a monopoly of worldly honours and emoluments, those who will externally profess and conform to it; that though indeed these are criminal who do not withstand such temptation, yet neither are those innocent who lay the bait in their way; that the opinions of men are not the object of civil government, nor under its jurisdiction; that to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion and to restrain the profession or propagation of principles on supposition of their ill tendency is a dangerous fallacy, which at once destroys all religious liberty, because he being of course judge of that tendency will make his opinions the rule of judgment, and approve or condemn the sentiments of others only as they shall square with or differ from his own; that it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government for its officers to interfere when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order;

> and finally, that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself; that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate; errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them.

Section I, oft-quoted and gravid 384-word sentence that functions as a proem, is a fusillade of arguments, concerning freedom of the mind and the wrongness of governmental alignment with any particular religion. At the core, there sits the following argument, from which many of the conclusions, based on coercive government, follow.

1. God crafted the mind free.
2. Thus, it is incapable of restraint.
3. God crafted the mind so that reason alone influences it.
4. Thus, any attempt at conformity through coercion is against the will of God and effects "habits of hypocrisy and meanness".
5. Thus, government has no right to impose a standard of religious uniformity on the citizenry.

The main premise of the bill, explicit in the letter to Carr and implicit in Query XVII, is the notion that the mind is essentially free and any attempts to corral it through coercion will, at least eventually, result in ill. The argument is an attempt to establish the rightful scope of governmental involvement in the affairs of the citizenry: "to interfere when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order".

The mind being free, no one had a right to force a particular manner of thought on another. That is why Jefferson was especially cautious not to advise others, even those most intimate, apropos of what to believe.

Cherishing freedom of the mind, Jefferson could never align himself with any party of thought—political or otherwise. Thus, to Francis Hopkinson (13 Mar. 1789), he stated: "I never submitted the whole system of my opinions to the creed of any party of men whatsoever, in religion, in philosophy, in politics, or in anything else, where I was capable of thinking for myself. Such an addiction, is the last degradation of a free and moral agent. If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all".

# V
# "Men by their constitution are naturally divided into two parties"
# Jefferson's Textured Republicanism

BOTH POLITICAL PARTIES, SAYS JEFFERSON to Abigail Adams (11 Sept. 1804), agree that the proper object of governing is the public good, yet they disagree concerning how it is best to promote that good.

> One fears most the ignorance of the people; the other, the selfishness of rulers independent of them. Which is right, time and experience will prove. We think that one side of this experiment has been long enough tried, and proved not to promote the good of the many; and that the other has not been fairly and sufficiently tried.

Here and in numerous other passages, Jefferson writes of Federalism and Republicanism as mutually exclusive political alternatives. Federalism has been fairly tried; Republicanism has not.

Moreover, Jefferson believes that Republicanism—comprising thin government of and by the people through elected officials—is an improvement over prior aristocratic or monarchical, thick Federalist-styled governments. Whereas in the latter wealth and birth are determining factors for right to govern, in a Jeffersonian republic, genius and morality are the only criteria. Federalists are dubbed "stock jobbers & king-jobbers" (TJ to Lafayette, 16 June 1792); "aristocrats and monocrats", who "float on the surface, … shew much, though they weight little" (TJ to J.P.B. de Warville, 8 May 1793); "monocrats and paper men", who want "armies & debts" (TJ to James Madison, 3 Apr. 1794); and even "subjects for a madhouse" (TJ to Dr. Thomas Leib, 23 Jan. 1808). Republicanism, in contrast, is "a government of laws addressed to the reason of the people, and not to their weaknesses" (TJ to Thomas Mann Randolph, 7 Jan. 1793); "the control of the people over the organs of their government" (TJ to John Taylor, 28 May 1816); and "the equal right of every citizen, in his person and property, and in their management" (TJ to Samuel Kercheval, 12 July 1816). To Levi Lincoln (25 Oct. 1802), he speaks with optimism of Federalists finding sobriety of thought and turning into republicans "by degrees". To John Melish (13 Jan. 1813), he suggests a moral difference: Republicans govern from a sense of duty to their fellow citizens, while Federalists govern from a love of "the exercise of power". In sum, whereas Federalism is founded on conservative political principles, monarchical in nature, which have had their day and failed, Republicanism is forward-

looking, progressive, and liberal. It is an experiment to be tried, and Jefferson gives every reason to think that the experiment will be rousingly successful.

Such things noted, Jefferson in several letters writes differently of Republicanism and Federalism: They are two complementary fundamental dispositions in the nature of humans.

Consider this letter to Joel Barlow (3 May 1802):

> As the division into whig and tory [republican and federalist] is founded in the nature of man; the weakly and nerveless, the rich and the corrupt, seeing more safety and accessibility in a strong executive; the healthy, firm, and virtuous, feeling a confidence in their physical and moral resources, and willing to part with only so much power as is necessary for their good government.

Twenty-two years later, Jefferson writes to Henry Lee (10 Aug. 1824):

> Men by their constitutions are naturally divided into two parties. 1. Those who fear and distrust the people, and wish to draw all powers from them into the hands of the higher classes. 2ndly those who identify themselves with the people, have confidence in them, cherish and consider them as the most honest & safe, altho' not the most wise depository of the public interests. In every country these two parties exist, and in every one where they are free to think, speak, and write, they will declare themselves.

To John Cartwright (5 June 1824), Jefferson states that the natural differences in disposition of thought are rooted in Anglo-Saxon and Norman thinking. He writes: "It has ever appeared to me, that the differences between Whig and Tory of England is, that the Whig deduces his rights from the Anglo-Saxon source, and the Tory from the Norman".

To William Short, months later (8 Jan. 1825), Jefferson writes:

> Men, according to their constitutions, and the circumstances in which they are placed, differ honestly in opinion. Some are whigs, liberals, democrats, call them what you please. Others are tories, serviles, aristocrats, &c. The latter fear the people, and wish to transfer all power to the higher classes of society; the former consider the people as the safest depository of power in the last resort; they cherish them therefore, and wish to leave in them all the powers to the exercise of which they are competent.

Here he adds "circumstances"—and here he has in mind mostly climate—to constitution. Climate, it seems, can mitigate or enhance a constitutional disposition. Moreover, there is something unexpectedly adscetitious. This division is "the most salutary of all divisions". The justification for this claim is not much: If not fostered, "some more dangerous principle of division will take its place". What principle is that? Here Jefferson is silent, and it is perhaps best not to surmise.

In reply to letter to the Marquis de Chastellux (2 Sept. 1785) concerning his fellow Virginians, Jefferson expatiates on "circumstances". He essays to explain certain human regional behavioral dissimilarities, which are the result of climate. The reply lists those dissimilarities between northerners and southerners that are the result, Jefferson unabashedly adds, of "that warmth of their [southern] climate which unnerves and unmans both body and mind".

| **Northerners** | **Southerners** |
|---|---|
| Cool | Fiery |
| Sober | Voluptuary |
| Laborious | Indolent |
| Persevering | Unsteady |
| *Independent* | *Independent* |
| Jealous of own liberties; just to others | Zealous of own liberties; trampling on others |
| Interested | Generous |
| Chicaning | Candid |
| Superstitious and hypocritical in religion | Attached only to religion of the heart |

The nine character traits are each contraries, with the exception of the middle trait, which is independency of spirit, endemic to America. "These characteristics grow weaker and weaker by gradation from North to South and South to North", writes Jefferson, "insomuch that an observing traveler, without the aid of the quadrant may always know his latitude by the character of the people among whom he finds himself". Pennsylvania, being roughly situated neatly between north and south, forms a people "free from the extremes of both vice and virtue".

Thus, two basal "climate-conditioned" types of constitution, for Jefferson, are needed aspects of good governing. He writes to John Taylor (1 June 1798): "In every free and deliberating society, there must, from the nature of man, be opposite parties and violent dissensions and discords; and one of these, for the most part, must prevail over the other for a longer or shorter time. Perhaps this party division is necessary to induce each to watch and relate to the people the proceedings of the other.

These two strands in Jefferson's writings—what might be dubbed the *mutual-exclusivity thesis* and the *complementarity thesis*—seem clearly at odds with each other. Was Jefferson such a casual, discretionary thinker on such issues?

That is not the case. The principles are not inconsistent.

The Federalism and Republicanism of which Jefferson speaks in the passages supporting the mutual-exclusivity thesis are the two parties—the Federalism articulated by Adams and Hamilton, founded on birth and wealth, and Jeffersonian Republicanism, founded on genius (talent and intelligence) and virtue and illustrated in his First Inaugural Address. Thus, to speak of Republicanism as an improvement over Federalism is to speak of the principles embraced by the political movement (demassified and thin government, progressivism, suspiciousness of power, protection of citizens' rights, and trust of the citizenry, etc.) as philosophically superior to those of Federalism (centralized and large federal government, filiopiety, hunger for power, heavy-handed governing, distrust of the citizenry, etc.).

The federalism and republicanism of which Jefferson speaks in the passages supporting his complementarity thesis are merely two climate-controlled human dispositions—one not superior to the other—limned in his letter to Chastellux and conformable to the principles of Jeffersonian republicanism. The fieriness, love of luxury, indolence, and unsteadiness of the republican disposition needs to be counterbalanced in government by the coolness, sobriety, laboriousness, and perseverance of the federalist disposition. Moreover, the chicanery and religious hypocrisy of the federalist disposition needs to be counterbalanced in government by the candidness and moral sentimentality of the republican disposition. Finally, northern interestedness and southern generosity—the only coupling other than independent/independent where both elements are positive characteristics—are each welcome characteristics. Thus, the natural aristocracy of his famous letter to Adams (28 Oct. 1813), listing genius and virtue as the only two desiderata of governing, must be grasped as comprising those of a northerly, federalist disposition *and* those of a southerly disposition.