

“The Diffusion of Light”

Jefferson’s Philosophy of Education

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ABSTRACT

Jefferson’s republicanism—a people-first, mostly bottom-up political vision with a moral underpinning—was critically dependent on general education for the citizenry and higher education for those who would govern. This paper contains an analysis of Jefferson’s general philosophy of education by enumerating some of its most fundamental principles, applicable to both elementary and higher education

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Enlighten the people generally, and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day.

—Thomas Jefferson to P. S. Dupont de Nemours, April 24, 1816

THOMAS JEFFERSON’S VISION OF REPUBLICANISM WAS critically dependent on a democratic and meritocratic vision of education—education for the general citizenry and higher education for those who would govern. Only in such a manner could tyranny be forestalled. “Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves therefore are its only safe depositories. And to render them safe, their minds must be improved to a certain degree” (1984, p. 274). This is not the general Rousseauian view of the natural goodness of all persons but instead a general observation, driven by scrutinizing history and prodded by reading works such as Kames’s *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* and Destutt de Tracy’s *Commentaire sur l’esprit des lois de Montesquieu*, that a structure must be put into place to guarantee, insofar as such things can be guaranteed, that natural rights will be preserved and that humans, left alone, can flourish.

Jefferson’s republicanism was a people-first, mostly bottom-up political vision with a moral underpinning—the last, a point missed by most scholars. His purchase of Scottish moral-sense philosophy showed that all people are morally equal in that each is endowed with a moral sensory faculty that allows each to be equally capable of morally correct decisions. His purchase of ancient eudaimonism showed that those best fitted to the highest offices of governance were among those that most distinguished themselves through virtue and talent—i.e., the natural *aristoi*. The teachings of

Jesus reinforced both purchases, and Jesus himself proved to be a shining and easily accessed exemplar of moral rectitude.

Thus, Jefferson’s principles of political republicanism were mutually reinforced and ultimately sanctioned by his developing moral views. In that regard, the feud between Hamiltonian federalism and Jeffersonian republicanism transcended the political realm and entered the moral realm—at least, in Jefferson’s eyes. Alexander Hamilton was a political realist and conservative that advocated strong, centralized government for the sake of a healthy political unit. Jefferson was a political idealist and progressivist that advocated minimal, decentralized government for the sake of human happiness. Jefferson was, therefore, not just a political theorist, he was also a normativist.

The political experiment of republicanism, risky because untried, relied essentially on educational reform to be instantiated systemically and *in toto*. At the highest levels, a system of education needed to be put into place to try to guarantee that the talented and

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virtuous, not just the wealthy and wellborn, would occupy the most important political positions. At the general level, a system of education needed to be put into place to guarantee that all citizens, women included, would be educated to their own needs and sufficient for the purposes of political participation at some level.

This paper contains an analysis of the general aims and principles of Jefferson's philosophy of education. I begin by enumerating and expatiating on what I take to be the most substratal aims of republican education, applicable to both elementary and higher education. I end with a critical assessment of Jefferson's educational thinking apropos of selected topics—education and human nature, classical education, education of women, and the possibility of educating American Indians and Blacks. I aim to show that Jefferson's educational views, like his political views, are the product of his views of humans and nature. Along the way, I show that both his educational views, like his political views, are in the service of morality, namely his view of human happiness.

General Aims of Education

In an 1814 letter to John Adams (July 5), Jefferson told of the lamentable state of education in America at the time. The post-revolutionary youths “acquire all learning in their mother's womb.” They no longer need books. Experience is deplored or neglected; all knowledge is deemed innate. Petty academies are sprouting up in every neighborhood, “where one or two men, possessing Latin, and sometimes Greek, a knolege of the globes, and the first six books of Euclid, imagine and communicate this as the sum of science.” Their pupils are exposed to “the theatre of the world” with learning sufficient to alienate them from serious pursuits and insufficient to make a contribution to science. “Every folly must run it's round” (Cappon, 1959/1986, 430–431), he concluded.

Jefferson's complaint was roughly that students were given a finishing-school education and then deemed themselves educated and ready for the world. Education, for Jefferson, was broad and visceral—it catered to the whole person, not just the façade, and involved the whole community. Most significantly, it was ongoing.

Jefferson's educational views are spelled out neatly in several bills, a report, and selected correspondence: four bills, which were begun in spirit in 1776 and proposed a few years later to the General Assembly of Virginia (1779), Jefferson's *Bill for Establishing a System of Public Education* (1817), his *Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia* (1818), and selected letters to correspondents—e.g., Carr, Bannister, Munford, Adams, Cabell, Burwell, Brazier, and Breckinridge.

Late in 1776, Jefferson began work on a committee—comprising Thomas Ludwell Lee, George Mason, Edmund Pendleton, George Wythe, and Jefferson—to revise the laws of Virginia. Lee died shortly thereafter, and Mason asked to be excused, due to insufficient competence in legal matters, so all the work fell on the remaining three. Knowing what we know of Jefferson, he certainly did more than his share of the work. The three lawyers, working independently most of the time, drafted 126 bills for the Virginia General Assembly to consider (1984, p. 31–44).

Four of the bills, Bills 79 to 82, were drafted by Jefferson and concerned educational reform. Bills 79 through 81 aimed directly at educational reform. Jefferson wrote in his *Autobiography*, “I consider four of these bills, passed or reported as forming a system by which every fibre would be eradicated of ancient or future aristocracy; and a foundation laid for a government truly republican.” He added:

The first bill proposed to lay off every county into Hundreds or Wards, of a proper size and population for a school, in which reading, writing, and common arithmetic should be taught; and that the whole state should be divided into 24 districts, in each of which should be a school for classical learning, grammar, geography, and the higher branches of numerical arithmetic. The second bill proposed to amend the constitution of Wm. & Mary College, to enlarge it's sphere of science, and to make it in fact an University. The third was for the establishment of a library. (pp. 43–44)

Jefferson drafted *A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge* (Bill 79)—in the fall of 1778. It was, as he wrote to George Wythe (August 13, 1786), the most significant bill for educational reform, “the most important bill of our whole code,” and the surest “foundation . . . for the preservation of freedom and happiness.” It contained the rudiments of a philosophy of education as well as a full-scale plan of implementation of that philosophy (1984, p. 859). *A Bill for Amending the Constitution of the College of William and Mary* (Bill 80) was intended to upgrade the curriculum of the college, fashion it into a state university of the highest rank, and make it financially stable—the last being the work of Pendleton. *A Bill for Establishing a Public Library* (Bill 81) was intended to establish a library for scholars, elected officials, and talented citizens. None of those three bills, directly aiming at educational reform, passed as originally drafted. *A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom* (Bill 82) did pass in 1786 and was called *The Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom* on Jefferson's tombstone. It set a precedent for secular education by disestablishing the link between the state and any particular religious affiliation. Of these bills, Chinard (1929/1962) wrote, “One may state here without fear of contradiction that no system so complete, so logically constructed and so well articulated had ever been proposed in any country in the world” (p. 99).

Jefferson, it is clear, thought long and hard on education throughout his life. In its most general aim, educational reform toward public education, like political reform, served the role of promoting human flourishing.¹ In his “Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia,” Jefferson listed the aims of elementary education and then the aims of higher education, yet nowhere did he give an exhaustive list of the general aims of education.

In a letter to Cabell (September 9, 1817), Jefferson outlined six features of education, some of which express educational aims:

1. Basic education should be available to all.
2. Education should be tax supported.
3. Education should be free from religious dictation.

4. The educational system should be controlled at the local level.
5. The upper levels of education should feature free inquiry.
6. The mentally proficient should be enabled to pursue education to the highest levels at public expense. (Jefferson and Cabell, 1856, pp. 413-427)

Those features form the core of a philosophy of education.

In a letter to future son-in-law Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr. (August 27, 1786), Jefferson advised the young man to educate himself in four ways. Randolph should begin with languages and mathematics, for languages exercise youthful memory and prevent “habits of idleness” and mathematics “stores the mind with truths” that are useful in other sciences. The mind at this stage of life is unready for more rigorous exercise. Next, he should attend lectures in astronomy, natural philosophy, natural history, anatomy, botany, and chemistry and focus on any of them that most fascinates him. Then, he should read history in his spare time after dinner, for the mind too needs its rest and history exercises mostly the memory, so it is ideal after dinner. Last, he should keep fit his body through simple diet and rigorous walking, for “it is of little consequence to store the mind with science if the body be permitted to become debilitated” (Jefferson, 1984, 860-864).

In what follows, I list and expatiate on what I take to be the most substratal aims of education for Jefferson.

TYRANNY AND THE RIGHTS OF MEN

Jefferson trusted the people, if suitably educated, to govern themselves. “Wherever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government,” he wrote to Richard Price (January 8, 1789). “Whenever things go so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights” (1984, pp. 935-938).

The addendum “wherever the people are well-informed” is critical. It is more than a commitment to educate all so that each can self-sufficiently fill his needs. In spite of numerous passages in which Jefferson wrote of his faith in the people,² Jefferson’s trust in the people was, for the most part, not unconditional, but might be grasped syllogistically: One must trust the people or the governors; one cannot trust the governors; therefore, one must trust the people. He wrote to Baron F. H. Alexander von Humboldt (June 13, 1817):

The first principle of republicanism is, that the lex-majoris partis is the fundamental law of every society of individuals of equal rights; to consider the will of the society enounced by the majority of a single vote, as sacred as if unanimous, is the first of all lessons in importance, yet the last which is thoroughly learnt. This law once disregarded, no other remains but that of force, which ends necessarily in military despotism. (Jefferson, 1904-1905, Vol. VI, p. 607)

In *Notes on Virginia*, Jefferson (1984) said that nothing was more important than rendering the people “the safe . . . [and] the ultimate, guardians of their own liberty” (p. 274). Their safety was best secured by the study of history—construed in Jefferson’s Whiggish sense—for “by apprising them of the past [history] will enable them to judge of the future” (p. 274) and, making them fit

judges of ambition, history would fashion them fit judges of their governors. “Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves therefore are its only safe depositories. And to render even them safe their minds must be improved to a certain degree” (p. 274). The notion is iterated in Section I of *A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge*. Jefferson wrote: “Whereas it appearath that however certain forms of government are better calculated than others to protect individuals in the free exercise of their natural rights, and are at the same time themselves better guarded against degeneracy, yet experience hath shewn, that even under the best forms, those entrusted with power have, in time and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny” (p. 365).

The passages are gravid with implications. Jefferson acknowledged that political power is not merely insidious but, in time, invidious. Irrespective of the type of government, there must be some check on political authority. That check can only be the people themselves.

The passages also clearly illustrate why Jefferson’s republicanism was an “experiment,” as he was wont to call it (Holowchak, 2012, pp. 29-50). He was in no position to assert categorically that government by and for the people must, or even can, work. Yet experience has shown that governments in which officials are not elected by and beholden to the people do not work—i.e., they are ultimately unresponsive to the needs of the people. If citizens’ rights are to be respected and defended and if governors are not to govern in their own best interest, something new must be tried.

Though his republicanism was mostly founded on eliminative reasoning—he could trust the people or the wealthy and wellborn, and the wealthy and wellborn have shown over time that they govern merely to suit their own interests—Jefferson did not share Adams’s pessimism of the human condition. Instead, he shared the unflagging optimism of many Enlightenment thinkers, as he trusted that each generation of humans was advancing, intellectually and morally, beyond the generation prior to it. What prompted the rapid progress of humans in the 17th and 18th centuries, he was sure, was their unflinching belief that liberty was the bedfellow of progress.

In a letter to George Wythe (August 13, 1786), Jefferson stated emphatically that the masses needed to be educated to be capable of recognizing and preventing political decay:

I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised, for the preservation of freedom and happiness. . . . Preach, my dear Sir, a crusade against ignorance; establish & improve the law for educating the common people. Let our countrymen know that the people alone can protect us against these evils, and that the tax which will be paid for this purpose is not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests & nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance. (1984, p. 859)

General diffusion of knowledge functions in accordance with the principle that each person should be educated to his needs. Only when all citizens have some measure of education and a large degree

of independence can a republic be assured that legislators and administrators will do their best to protect the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens. Jefferson wrote in Baconian knowledge-is-power fashion to George Ticknor (November 25, 1817):

I am now entirely absorbed in endeavors to effect the establishment of a general system of education in my native state . . . [having] elementary schools . . . collegiate institutions . . . [and a] university. . . . My hopes however are kept in check by the ordinary character of our state legislatures, the members of which do not generally possess information enough to perceive the important truths, that knowledge is power, that knowledge is safety, and that knowledge is happiness. (1904-1905, Vol. XII, p. 58)

EACH ACCORDING TO HIS NEEDS

Jefferson never wavered on his view that general education was the key to thriving, participatory republicanism. Enlighten only the well-to-do and there would be no check on their appetites. “Enlighten the people generally,” he wrote to Pierre Samuel Dupont de Nemours (April 24, 1816), “and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day” (Jefferson, 1984, p. 1387). To George Washington (January 4, 1786), he said, “It is an axiom in my mind that our liberty can never be safe but in the hands of the people themselves, and that too of the people with a certain degree of education” (1829, Vol. I, 394).

Jeffersonian republicanism was “government by its citizens in mass, acting directly and personally, according to rules established by the majority” (1984, p. 1392) he wrote to John Taylor (May 28, 1816). He added, in the same letter, in a manner that showed republicanism was an ideal to be approximated not attained, “Every . . . government is more or less republican, in proportion as it has in its composition more or less of this ingredient of the direct action of its citizens” (1984, p. 1392). For republican government to function well, its citizens need to be happy, well rounded, politically active, and especially free. Human thriving, thus, is not a matter of economic prosperity or acquiring stuff, as it seems to be for Americans today, but requires political liberty. The aim is not just, à la Socrates, filling up—putting knowledge into bodies lacking it—but sallying forth. Carpenter (2004) wrote: “For Jefferson, the finished product—the student venturing into the real world—was the ultimate goal of education. The practical application for republican citizens was their ability to function in the body politic” (p. 143). Jefferson was all about the usefulness of education, and usefulness for him meant serviceability for human flourishing.

Jefferson here recognized two classes of citizens, the laborers and the learned, and two levels of education to accommodate them (1984, pp. 459–460). The laborers were the majority and were divided roughly into husbandmen, manufacturers, and craftsmen. They needed to conduct business to sustain and improve their domestic affairs. For that, they needed to have full access to primary education in ward schools. The learned were those destined to higher education—comprising college-level (Jefferson’s grammar schools, which were to function as intermediate schools between ward schools and a university) and university-level

education, only those pursuing the latter being readied to conduct the affairs of the nation or to contribute to the advances of science. Jefferson summed in a September 7, 1814, letter to Peter Carr, “It is the duty of [our country’s] functionaries, to provide that every citizen in it should receive an education proportioned to the conditions and pursuits of his life” (1984, p. 1347).

Needs were not all personal. People were, for Jefferson, as they were for Aristotle, “political animals” (1926/1990a, 1097b12, 1169b19; 1932/1990b, 1253a3–4, 278b20) and, thus, they had social and political duties. To fit and function in a stable, thriving democracy, each citizen was expected to know and assume a participatory role to the best of that person’s capacity. That required some degree of self-understanding, and self-understanding could only be had through education.

In all, education functions to gratify the idiosyncratic needs of all citizens as private persons, to ready all citizens for some level of participation in governmental affairs, and to prepare the elite for participation in the high-level governing or in science.³

EDUCATION AND PROGRESS

“If the condition of man is to be progressively ameliorated, as we fondly hope and believe,” Jefferson wrote to Marc-Antoine Jullien (July 23, 1818), “education . . . is to be the chief instrument in effecting it” (Jefferson, 1861, p. 106).

Jefferson recognized two senses of progress. There is the improvement that individuals make when they work assiduously over time at something, such as knowledge of Latin grammar through the study of Latin or physical strength through daily physical exertion. There is also the improvement that the collection of individuals makes when people push themselves over the course of human history in a particular direction, such as moral advance or accumulated scientific knowledge.

Though he bought into the improvement of the human species over time, Jefferson was nonetheless an essentialist concerning the human organism. Humans, he thought, had a particular nature, and that nature was not changeable over time. Yet experience undeniably showed that humans had advanced both intellectually and morally throughout history. That showed that human capacities were massively underdeveloped, and the human organism was capable of great improvement.⁴ Consequently, one of the chief goals of education, for Jefferson, was to encourage the human developmental process through tapping into untapped human potential in morally responsible ways:

We should be far, too, from the discouraging persuasion that man is fixed, by the law of his nature, at a given point; that his improvement is a chimera, and the hope delusive of rendering ourselves wiser, happier or better than our forefathers were. As well might it be urged that the wild and uncultivated tree, hitherto yielding sour and bitter fruit only, can never be made to yield better; yet we know that the grafting art implants a new tree on the savage stock, producing what is most estimable both in kind and degree. Education, in like manner, engrafts a new man on the native stock, and improves what in his nature was vicious and perverse into qualities of virtue and social worth. (1984, p. 461)

Progress for Jefferson related to the degree to which the human mind, fixed by nature but massively underdeveloped, was perfectible and, judged by the standard of history, there was a considerable amount of perfecting for humans yet to do.

Kett (1986) stated that one of Jefferson's education novelties—seemingly for both lower and higher education—was the notion that “schools should be so arranged as to maximize academic competition” through “pitting . . . each student against all others in an academic free-for-all” (p. 238). The aim was the survival of “the few truly fit scholars” through “keen academic competition” (p. 238). Yet to say in rewarding talent and work Jefferson was aiming directly at keen academic competition is overstated. The educative system was a means of segregating the natural *aristoi*, the intelligent and virtuous, from the artificial *aristoi*,⁵ the wealthy and wellborn, and securing the higher levels of governmental functioning and other significant occupations only for the former. In that regard, each citizen was merely finding an individual level of competency. Selection of character—the moral dimension and something that escaped Kett's notice—was not to be neglected.

Jefferson too was wedded to political progress, hence his express abhorrence for ancient political thinking.⁶ Aristotle (1932/1990b, 1326a25–1326b6) believed, for instance, that a true democracy was limited in size. Jefferson strictly agreed with that sentiment but recognized that government for and by the people could escape the restrictions of size stated by Aristotle through the innovation of representatives, elected and recallable by the people.⁷ Moreover, to assure that the constitution reflected the progressive political and moral sentiments of the day, Jefferson advocated periodic constitutional conventions, at which the people themselves could discuss constitutional reform. Such conventions were deemed educative.⁸

In sum, Jefferson's view of progress through education was, and is still, straightforwardly liberal, deontic, and practical: Education aims to promote effective, participatory republicanism through allowing all citizens to be educated to their capacity, in accordance with their will, and for the sake of political stability and progressive change. The overall aim is normative: Intellectual advance without moral advance is nugatory.

MORAL IMPROVEMENT

“I think it lost time to attend lectures in this branch,” Jefferson wrote to Peter Carr (August 10, 1787). “He who made us would have been a pitiful bungler if he had made the rules of our moral conduct a matter of science” (1984, p. 901). Given that stricture that one ought not to attend lectures on morality, it might be surprising to find that Jefferson in his *Notes on Virginia* had a role, though a small one, for education in moral development. The first stage of education, he said, is decisive. It is not the time to encourage critical engagement with materials like the Bible, but instead a time when children should store historical facts to be used critically later in life. He added that here also the “elements of morality” (1984, p. 273) can be instilled. Such elements teach children that “their own greatest happiness . . . does not depend on their condition in life in which chance has placed them, but is always the result of a good conscience, good health, occupation [i.e., industry], and

freedom in all just pursuits” (p. 273). The quote, minus the suggestion that good health is needed for happiness, is in keeping with Panaetian Stoicism—what I deem a key Jeffersonian moral purchase (Holowchak, 2012, p. 170). It also shows that learning the elements of morality is not a matter of ingesting and digesting moral principles to apply to circumstances, but instead a matter of unlearning, as it were—i.e., placing faith in the capacity of one's moral sense to decide the right course of action without the corruptive influence of reason or peer pressure. Such unlearning, however, occurs early in the educative process.

The passage is important in another respect. It suggests that it is one thing to know morally correct actions; it is another to do them and to live happily. As is the case for Aristotle and *pace* Socrates, knowledge of happiness is not sufficient. Aristotle wrote (1926/1990a), and here he had Socrates as his critical target: “On the contrary, the aim of studies about action, as we say, is surely not to study and know about a given thing, but rather to act on our knowledge. Hence knowing about virtue is not enough, but we must also try to possess and exercise virtue, or become good in any other way” (1179b1–4, 1103b26–32, and 1105b13–18). Moreover, a good life is a life comprising virtuous actions as well as some other things—e.g., Jefferson often listed attributes such as good conscience, fine health, occupation, and freedom in just pursuits. Here education was aidful.

Doing what is right comes naturally to the mature moral-sense faculty. For Jefferson, morally correct action came easily and spontaneously to the moral sense, like sight comes to young eyes, and occurred without the intrusion of reason (Holowchak, 2012, pp. 159–176). What about the immature moral-sense faculty, however? Reason is needed to help the faculty mature through encouraging virtuous activity. One does not always do what one knows is the right thing to do. In youths, since both faculties are underdeveloped, encouragement occurs through education. History here is invaluable. History is also valuable for teaching youths moral optimism—that morality is on the move.

There are many passages in which Jefferson spoke of education as promoting love of virtue—i.e., doing what is right. Jefferson wrote to Cornelius Blatchly (October 21, 1822), “I look to the diffusion of light and education as the resource most to be relied on for ameliorating the human condition, promoting virtue, and advancing the happiness of man” (1905, Vol. XV, 397). The suggestion is that education functions to sharpen the rational faculty for three distinct ends: ameliorating the human condition, promoting virtue, and advancing human happiness. Yet there is no reason to take these three as distinct ends. It might be a summation of the formula industry plus virtue equals happiness—i.e., that virtue, rightly grasped, requires benevolence-motivated other-concern. In his “Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia,” Jefferson (1984) spoke of the primacy of the moral aspect of education in contrast to its political and economical aspects: “They are sensible that the advantages of well-directed education, moral, political and economical, are truly above all estimate. Education generates habits of application, of order, and the love of virtue; and controls, by the force of habit, any innate obliquities in our moral

organization” (p. 461). He also considered and rejected fear as a corrective to the tendency to vice:

It may be well questioned whether fear after a certain age, is a motive to which we should have ordinary recourse. The human character is susceptible of other incitements to correct conduct, more worthy of employ, and of better effect. Pride of character, laudable ambition, and moral dispositions are innate correctives of the indiscretions of that lively age; and when strengthened by habitual appeal and exercise, have a happier effect on future character than the degrading motive of fear. Hardening them to disgrace, to corporal punishments, and servile humiliation cannot be the best process for producing erect character. (p. 469)

The sense here is that there is a natural tendency for youths to behave indiscreetly—to follow the boisterous and cantankerous activities of other youths—and so the natural inclinations of the moral sense need to be reinforced. That is the sense of unlearning to which I alluded earlier. In modern parlance, youths need to be convinced that there is nothing wrong with doing the right thing.

With the maturation of the moral sense and rationality, Jefferson advised grandson Francis Wayles Eppes (May 21, 1816) that it is important to court the favor of others to act as cynosures. That cannot occur without honesty, disinterest, and good nature—indispensable ingredients of a happy life. The sentiment is that authentic goodness is crucial. Industry, without virtue, does no one good.

But while you endeavor, by a good store of learning, to prepare yourself to become an useful and distinguished member of your country you must remember that this can never be, without uniting merit with your learning. Honesty, disinterestedness, and good nature are indispensable to procure the esteem and confidence of those with whom we live, and on whose esteem our happiness depends. (Betts et al., p. 415)

The addition of disinterestedness is, of course, Stoical, and moral-sense ethics is importantly indebted to Stoicism. One cannot know what is in the interest of others without putting aside one’s own interests. The moral is that education to the neglect of virtue is vain.

As Jefferson did not consider ethics and religion, rightly construed (he often said the principles on which all religions agree are merely those principles innate to the moral sense⁹), as separate disciplines, here one might ask: How did religion fit into Jefferson’s views of education? Jefferson was quick to realize that organized religion, because of its extraethical political dimension, would be not merely an encumbrance to liberty; it would burke liberty. State sanction of any particular religion would be tantamount to state sanction of one particular politicized formula for the good life and the refusal to acknowledge other possibilities. He recognized that liberty required toleration, so all forms of nonharmful religious expressions would have to be sanctioned as well as atheism and agnosticism. Inquiry in theological matters, as he said to Peter Carr (August 10, 1787), might lead to belief or disbelief in deity (1984,

903-904). The former does not close the door to virtue. The latter allows for greater mental comfort. The most important incentive, he told Carr, is nonprejudicial inquiry into the matter, and that is more to be lauded than the outcome of one’s deliberations. Once again, we have an appeal to authenticity—being the same person in all inquiries or walks of life. Overall, there can be no state sanction of any religion in state-sponsored educational institutions.

It comes as no surprise, then, that religious study was conspicuously absent from the curriculum at Jefferson’s University of Virginia.¹⁰ It was incumbent on the professor of ethics, he said, to discuss proof for the existence of the “creator, preserver, and supreme ruler” (1984, p. 467) of the cosmos. That, in conjunction with the ancient languages, gave students the basics of true morality—i.e., those principles of morality that are common to all religions.

Proposal of a university without a professorship of divinity was proof sufficient to many of Jefferson’s godlessness and his purchase of atheism. In time, Jefferson felt the heat. With the university providing for no professorship of divinity, he proposed as a compromise to placate religionists that each sect be granted space on the campus to provide instruction for adherents as they might see fit. “By bringing the sects together, and mixing them with the mass of other students,” he wrote to Thomas Cooper (November 2, 1822), “we shall soften their asperities, liberalize and neutralize their prejudices, and make the general religion a religion of peace, reason and morality” (1984, p. 1465). The sentiment bespeaks more than Jefferson’s tendency to conciliate; it bespeaks his disrelish of organized religion. Religious sects engage in amaranthine and pointless metaphysical argufying, which, for Jefferson, reduced merely to jockeying for political power. As he wrote to John Adams (August 22, 1813), “We should all then, like the quakers, live without an order of priests, moralise for ourselves, follow the oracle of conscience, and say nothing about what no man can understand, nor therefore believe” (Cappon, 1959/1986, p. 368).

CREATION OF NATURAL ARISTOCRACY

That education was needed for intellectual advance follows from Jefferson’s progressivism. In his letter to John Adams (October 28, 1813) apropos of a natural aristocracy, he said:

Science had liberated the ideas of those who read and reflect, and the American example had kindled feelings of right in the people. An insurrection has consequently begun, of science, talents and courage against rank and birth, which have fallen into contempt. It has failed in it’s first effort, because the mobs of the cities, the instrument used for it’s accomplishment, debased by ignorance, poverty and vice, could not be restrained to rational action. But the world will recover from the panic of this first catastrophe. Science is progressive, and talents and enterprise on the alert. (1984, p. 1309)

Jefferson here advocated an egalitarianist objection to the artificial *aristoi*, based on rank and birth (and wealth), which resulted in the first catastrophe.¹¹

Yet the liberation of the people, through rational recognition, is not a liberation based on recognition of moral equality.

Instead, it is one based on recognition that those naturally superior by nature—the natural *aristoi*, who are superior in knowledge and talents and who have a fully cultivated moral sense—ought to oversee the political machinery. That he showed earlier in the same letter, when he sketched his aims for educational reform:

[The Bill for the More General Diffusion of Learning] proposed to divide every county into wards of 5. or 6. miles square . . . ; to establish in each ward a free school for reading, writing and common arithmetic; to provide for the annual selection of the best subjects from these schools who might receive at the public expence a higher degree of education at a district school; and from these district schools to select a certain number of the most promising subjects to be completed at an University, where all the useful sciences should be taught. Worth and genius would thus have been sought out from every condition of life, and completely prepared by education for defeating the competition of wealth and birth for public trusts. (p. 1308)

The final sentence is parturient. It shows that one of Jefferson's aims in educational reform was the creation of a natural aristocracy to overthrow the artificial aristocracy. The right sort of educational system will allow not only genius, but also worth—character or virtue—to rise to the top. Education allows for intellectual betterment and promotes moral sensitivity.

Jefferson's bill for religious freedom had the same aim. He wrote in the same letter to Adams:

The law for religious freedom, which made a part of this system, having put down the aristocracy of the clergy, and restored to the citizen the freedom of the mind, and those of entails and descents nurturing an equality of condition among them, this on Education would have raised the mass of the people to the high ground of moral respectability necessary to their own safety, and to orderly government; and would have compleated the great object of qualifying them to select the veritable aristoi, for the trusts of government, to the exclusion of the Pseudalists. (p. 1308)

Thus, it is not only the intelligent who should rule but also the virtuous—i.e., intellect without character, mere knowledge without wisdom,¹² is worthless—and education has as its aim the advance of intellect and the cultivation of virtue. That is a point pretermitted by the majority of scholars, because they ignore the normative dimension of Jefferson's thought. American education today, in contrast, aims to promote learning and, though college and university mission statements expressly acknowledge the significance of morality, such acknowledgment is mere hypocrisy—mouth honor, at best. Educational institutions are increasingly treating students as consumers and changing their curricula, which is in practice morally neutral, to accommodate the ever-changing students' demands, fashioned increasingly by merchandizers and the incentives of megacorporations. Jefferson certainly would have lamented this sad state of affairs.

The result of Jefferson's purchase of a natural aristocracy is in some sense, as Faulkner (1997) wrote, undemocratic:

The famous Jeffersonian plans for public education made education democratically general but also aristocratically hierarchical. . . . In general, Jefferson sought a natural aristocracy of enlightened talent as well as a democracy enlightened to be a republican citizenry. The mixture shows the extent to which an orientation by useful truth, and the prominence of its propagators and bearers, made Jefferson liberal democracy in important ways liberal but undemocratic. (p. 35)

What Faulkner pointed to is the undeniable element of meritocracy, infused in an underlying democratic framework.¹³

Jefferson also suggested in his natural-*aristoi* letter to Adams breeding for moral sensitivity. That might seem strange to us. Any suggestion of selective human breeding is always met with unabashed disdain by some segment of the human population today, in spite of the facts that selectivity occurs always in sperm or egg donation as well as in adoption of children. There is uncontested resistance to the morality of breeding, let alone the breeding of morality, but resistance is no sure sign that there is nothing to the breeding of morality. The question redounds: Can one breed for moral temperament? In other words, can one breed for particular virtues such as honesty, kindness, generosity, and friendliness?

The question is intriguing. Animal breeders freely admit to a capacity to breed for an animal's temperament. Like breeding for anything else, it is generally a matter of probabilities, not certainties. Animal breeders can breed, for instance, for friendliness, but that is not a moral disposition, say, in the Peripatetic or Stoic sense. To breed successfully for a certain sort of amiability in a dog, for instance, is to breed for a disposition toward behaving in an amicable way, but that disposition is not moral, because it is not given the aegis of rationality. Moral dispositions are essentially rational for Aristotle and the Stoics. For Aristotle (1926/1990a), an action was moral only if one knew that it was right, one chose it because it was right, and one acted from a stable disposition (1105a26-35). The Stoic view was similar. To breed a person that behaved friendly in all circumstances was not to breed a person that behaved friendly in the moral sense, as Aristotle's first two conditions of moral activity were not met.

For Jefferson, the question was more intriguing than it was for the ancient eudaimonists, since Jefferson's moral sense was not a rational faculty but some sort of sensual faculty. If my depiction of Jefferson's moral sense elsewhere (Holowchak, 2012, pp. 159-176) is correct or even nearly so, there is no reason to think that one could not breed for moral sensitivity in the sense specified by Jefferson. Jefferson acknowledged that all are equals in moral capacity, but only inasmuch as all are equals in other sensual capacities—e.g., olfaction, vision, or tactility. He wrote to Thomas Law (June 13, 1814), “The want or imperfection of the moral sense in some men, like the want or imperfection of the senses of sight and hearing in others, is no proof that it [i.e., the want or imperfection] is a general characteristic of the species” (1984, pp. 337-1338). It is beyond doubt that some are born with better vision, olfaction, or tactility than others. Jefferson also acknowledged in his *aristoi* letter to Adams that one can breed for traits—among them moral sensitivity. “Experience proves that the moral and physical qualities of man,

whether good or evil, are transmissible in a certain degree from father to son” (p. 1305).

There is some evidence of something like Jefferson’s moral-sense faculty in moral decision-making scenarios. In *Moral Minds*, Hauser (2006) argued that evolution has hardwired into the neural circuits of people a certain “universal moral grammar,” which is a “toolkit for building specific moral systems” (p. xvii). The need for rapidity is fashioned by the need for quick decisions in vital situations, in which one has no time for rational reflection:

[Humans] evolved a moral instinct, a capacity that naturally grows within each child, designed to generate rapid judgments about what is morally right or wrong based on an unconscious grammar of action. Part of this machinery was designed by the blind hand of Darwinian selection millions of years before our species evolved: other parts were added or upgraded over the evolutionary history of our species, and are unique both to humans and to our moral psychology. These ideas draw on insights from another instinct: language. (p. xvii)

The process, he added, is not like learning about virtue and vice in Sunday school, but like growing a limb. There is no explicit access to underlying principles—i.e., consciousness is not involved. Moreover, “moral instincts are immune to the explicitly articulate commandments handed down by religions and governments” (Hauser, 2006, pp. xvii–xviii).

Hauser illustrated through two scenarios of a greedy uncle, who stands to inherit much money upon the death of his nephew. In scenario one, the uncle, intending to drown his nephew in the bathtub, walks into the bathroom and does just that. In scenario two, the uncle, intending to drown his nephew in the bathtub, walks into the bathroom, finds his nephew already drowning, and does nothing to save him. The difference is accomplishing some end τ through direct action versus accomplishing τ through nonintervention, though the results are the same. To Hauser, a jury that found the uncle guilty in scenario one and not guilty in scenario two would be countermanding everyone’s moral intuitions (Hauser, 2006, pp. xviii–xix).

INCULCATION OF LIBERTY

In spite of Jefferson’s avowed alignment with the moral doctrines of Jesus, he was actually more in moral alignment with the Stoics—Panaetius especially—than with Jesus (Holowchak, 2012, pp. 17–22). One of the key tenets of Stoicism was the pursuit of knowledge as the means of securing virtue—a tenet absent in the teachings of Jesus.

Jefferson, it is fair to say, was obsessed with acquisition of knowledge. Recall his letter to George Tincknor (November 25, 1817), in which he recognized the “important truth” that “knowledge is power, knowledge is safety, and knowledge is happiness” (1904–1905, Vol. XII, p. 78). To Joseph Cabell (December 25, 1820), he stated that Massachusetts, though one-tenth the size of Virginia, exceeded it and all other states in political power, because of “her attention to education” (Jefferson and Cabell, 1856, p. 193). To Dr. Thomas Cooper (August 25, 1814), he said of Bacon’s take on useful knowledge: “But what are the sciences useful to us . . . [or] to

anybody? A glance over Bacon’s *arbor scientiae* will show the foundation for this question, and how many of his ramifications of science are now lopt off as nugatory” (Jefferson, 1861, p. 381).

Baconian knowledge was not autotelic. Education was valued because of its benefits, one of which for Jefferson was liberty. Stated Dalton and Hunt: “Liberty was a social idea, again reflecting the ideas of Locke, and an educational system provided a form of contract between the state and the individual” (1979, p. 270). In Jefferson’s thinking, there was a communitarian strain,¹⁴ existing for the sake of maximizing human independence and happiness. In that regard, he was a pupil of Enlightenment thinking.

French thinking also influenced Jefferson’s philosophy of education. From the French, Jefferson learned that education ought to be nationalistic, equalitarian, secular, and philosophically founded. Yet Jefferson aimed beyond nationalism. Education was to be in the service of enabling all people to know their rights, oversee their government, and preserve their liberties (Arrowood, 1930/1970, pp. 49–50). Thus, he likely studied the works of M. J. A. Nicolas de Caritat, Louis-René de Caradeuc de La Chalotais, Denis Diderot, Pierre Charron, and Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, and was influenced by men such as the Marquis de Lafayette, J. Correa de Serra, George Cuvier, Comte de Buffon, Alexander von Humboldt, and Jean Baptiste Say.

Advocacy of parochial control over institutions is evidence that he went substantially beyond the French pedagogues and consulted and was influenced by other authorities, both in America and overseas (Arrowood, 1930/1970, pp. 49–50): John Adams, Joseph Priestley, John Locke, Thomas Cooper, Marc-Auguste Pictet, Dugald Stewart, George Tichnor, Richard Price, William Small, George Wythe, Governor Fauquier, Peyton Randolph, and Patrick Henry, among others.

Parochial control over educational institutions is also in keeping with his decentralized political philosophy. Jefferson was a true libertarian. He feared strong, centralized government, because he was concerned of the corruptive effects of power on persons with political power.¹⁵ Arrowood (1930/1970) said, “Jefferson’s distinctive contribution to theory of education grew out of his most characteristic political doctrine” (pp. 58–59) which entailed governmental nonintervention in citizens’ affairs, distrust of political power, and government by the people. The sentiment is somewhat misleading. Jefferson’s educational thinking paralleled his political views; they did not grow out of them. Both his educational and political views were the result of his normative thinking on the nature of the cosmos and the nature of man (Holowchak, 2012, pp. 17–22). Education and politics were subordinate to and in the service of human happiness or thriving—an ethical ideal. Arrowood (1930/1970) himself seemed to acknowledge that, as he wrote later, “Education is the business of the state because education is essential to the happiness, prosperity, and liberty of the people, and it is for the maintenance and promotion of these that the state exists” (p. 60).

THIN GOVERNMENT

Thin government, a key feature of Jefferson’s political liberalism, is also a key feature of Jefferson’s progressivist views of education.

Jefferson's political liberalism was driven by the normative notion that no one ought to decide for another that other's best interest. That was not a commitment to a radical form of value-pluralism, but instead a commitment to the belief that each person must find a unique path to virtue—and the paths among different persons are many—and that that path must be taken voluntarily. Acting rightly through coercion is acting rightly, but not acting virtuously.

Thin government was not Jeffersonian devotion to some sort of radical atomism, as many¹⁶ would have it. It was a structured commitment to a system of education that was chiefly bottom-up driven and that functioned for the sake of all citizens, irrespective of wealth or birth. Thus, thin government was manifest in education in the dependency of universities and grammar schools on primary schools in the manner that the national government was dependent on smaller local governments.

Thin government was manifest at Jefferson's University of Virginia, in many respects, modeled in parallel with his republican principles in mind.

First, the professors were autonomous.¹⁷ Wagoner (2004) wrote:

Jefferson wanted professors who, as experts in specific fields of knowledge, would lecture on subjects that, in his familiar words, were "useful to us at this day, and in their highest degree." He was aiming to create a university much more akin to modern graduate and professional schools than to the more limited collegiate institutions of the day. It is for this reason that the university did not offer bachelor's degrees until long after Jefferson's death. The diplomas he and the initial Board of Visitors authorized were of two grades, "the highest of doctor, the second of graduate." (pp. 131–132)

Second, students had no set curriculum. Education was elective.¹⁸ Jefferson wrote to George Ticknor (July 16, 1823):

There is one [practice] from which we shall certainly vary, although it has been copied . . . by nearly every college and academy in the United States. That is, the holding the students all to one prescribed course of reading, and disallowing exclusive application to those branches only which are to qualify them for the particular vocations to which they are destined. We shall . . . allow them uncontrolled choice in the lectures they shall choose to attend, and requiring elementary qualification only, and sufficient age. (Long, 1935, 48)

Third, the institution had few governors and administrators. The Board of Visitors, trimmed to seven, was given full control over the running of the university. Each professor was to be compensated remuneratively the same as all others and had an equal voice in the institution's affairs. Of the seven, one was to be elected each year to the office of chair to function somewhat like a president at a university today does. Rapid rotation reflected Jefferson's distaste for long tenure in high political offices. Lack of a president of the university was merely to ensure that that power could not be centralized and that the institution would not be run autocratically (Wenger, 1995, pp. 368–369).

Jefferson attempted to supplant the religious, authoritarian model of pedagogy of the College of William and Mary with a model based on mutual respect and equality. Professors were to be the superiors of students only insofar as they possessed knowledge and moral maturity that students lacked. To promote mutual respect and equality, students and faculty were each to be lodged at the university. Students were to live in dormitories. Professors were to live in pavilions, sandwiched by students' dormitories.

The governance of the university was perhaps not so thin as Jefferson thought. He allowed professors to choose their own texts, as he wrote to Joseph Cabell (Feb. 3, 1825), "none of us are so much at the heights of science in the several branches, as to undertake this, and therefore that it will be better left to the professors until occasion of interference shall be given" (Jefferson and Cabell, 1856, p. 339). Nonetheless, he wished to keep a watchful eye on the professorship of government—a novelty of the University of Virginia. He continues to Cabell:

But 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 our duty to guard against such principles being disseminated among our youth, and the diffusion of that poison, by a previous prescription of the texts to be followed in their discourses. (p. 339)

In a letter to James Madison (February 17, 1826), Jefferson expressed trenchantly his guardedness:

In the selection of our law professor [for the University], we must be rigorously attentive to his political principles. You will recollect that before the Revolution Coke-Littleton was the universal elementary book of law students, and a sounder whig never wrote, nor of profounder learning in the orthodox doctrines of the British constitution, or in what were called English liberties. You remember, also, that our lawyers were then all whigs. But when his black-letter text, and uncouth but cunning learning got out of fashion, and the honied Mansfieldism of Blackstone became the student's hornbook, from that moment, that profession (the nursery of our Congress), began to slide into toryism, and nearly all the young brood of lawyers now are of that hue. They suppose themselves, indeed, to be whigs because they no longer know what whigism or republicanism means. It is in our seminary that that vestal flame is to be kept alive; it is thence it is to spread anew over our own and the sister States, because I believe none of us are so much at the heights of science in the several branches, and many disciples will have carried its doctrines home with them to their several States, and will have leavened thus the whole mass. (Jefferson, 1904-1905, Vol. XII, p. 456)

Jefferson's attachment to Whiggish principles of government and his insistence that Toryism be kept out of the University of Virginia's political curriculum is often cited as additional confirmation of his hypocrisy: He promoted open-mindedness but shut the door on conservatism, and that is not open-minded. One must be reminded of that for which Jefferson was fighting—moral and

political progress with an eye to the rights of man.¹⁹ It was clear to him that his fight was at its base ethical, not political—and I think there is still much to be said for that—whereas today it is easy to see just how often the crusade for liberty insidiously cloaks a sanguinary political agenda.²⁰

USEFUL KNOWLEDGE

A corollary of Jefferson's progressivism is the notion that knowledge ought to be useful. Two of the most general and significant aims of education are effective, participatory citizenry and political stability. Thus, though he was not averse to study for the sake of study, Jefferson emphasized the practicability of knowledge. In his natural-*aristoi* letter to John Adams, Jefferson emphasized that his aim at the University of Virginia was to teach "all the useful sciences" (1984, p. 1308). Jefferson wrote to John Banister (October 15, 1785) that there was no need to send an American youths to Europe, because all the useful sciences were taught just as well in America (1984, p. 838). Jefferson wrote William Green Munford (June 18, 1799) to advise him on the branches of mathematics that might be most useful to him (1984, p. 1063-1066). To Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr. (August 27, 1786), Jefferson stated that languages and mathematics should be studied earlier in life to be useful guides for other sciences (1984, p. 861).

Jefferson always insisted on the practicality of education, because his take on knowledge was Baconian. Stanton (2009) wrote:

Jefferson pursued the improvement of the human condition as a passionate Baconian, gathering information with the aid of his watch, ruler, and scales. He applied his measuring mind to plantation projects in a search for economy and efficiency. He enveloped his unwieldy operations in the consoling security of mathematical truths. . . . His many monumental earth-moving projects, in particular, led to a lifetime of time-and-motion calculations. . . . At the same time that Jefferson applied a geometric grid of field boundaries to the irregular features of his mountain, he imposed Enlightenment ideals of economy and order on the people who lived there. (p. 87)

In classifying subjects of study, he followed Bacon's *arbor scientiae*.²¹ Upon selling books to the Library of Congress, Jefferson arranged the books according to Bacon's three faculties of mind: memory (civil and moral history), reason (moral and mathematical philosophy), and imagination (the fine arts, comprising architecture, gardening, painting, sculpture, music, poetry, and criticism). The classification was not driven by considerations of *rerum natura* but utility, for Jefferson was an express nominalist.²²

A fine example of emphasis on usefulness of knowledge comes with the praise Jefferson heaped upon Edward Jenner (May 14, 1806) on behalf of the "whole human family" for his discovery of a vaccine for small pox.

Medecine has never before produced any single improvement of such ability. Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood was a beautiful addition to our knowledge of the animal economy, but on a

review of the practice of medicine before & since that epoch, I do not see any great amelioration which has been derived from that discovery, you have erased from the Calendar of human afflictions one of it's greatest. Yours is the comfortable reflection that mankind can never forget that you have lived. (Jefferson, 1984, p. 1163)

For Jefferson, Harvey's discovery of the circulation of blood, considered by historians of science to be one of the greatest medical discoveries, might seem to pale in comparison to Jenner's vaccine because it appeared to be nothing other than a bit of knowledge for its own sake. Yet every scientific discovery is potentially fruitful. As Jefferson wrote to Robert Patterson four years earlier (April 17, 1802), "No discovery is barren; it always serves as a step to something else" (Irving, 1835, p. 537).

Another example of utility is in a letter of unknown date to Bernard Moore²³ to suggest a course of study for one wishing to become a lawyer. Jefferson advised that Moore lay "sufficient ground-work" through the study of Latin and French and then turn to mathematics and natural philosophy, because they were "so useful in the most familiar occurrences of life" (Jefferson, 1904-1905, Vol. XI, pp. 420-421). In addition to their utility, they were "so peculiarly engaging & delightful as would induce every person to wish an acquaintance with them" (1904-1905, Vol. XI, pp. 420-421).

Nonetheless, following Martin (1952), we must acknowledge that Jefferson's conception of "useful" is broad, not banal, and aims at human flourishing. "A complete education should produce men who were in all ways useful to society—useful because intelligent, cultured, well-informed, technically competent, moral (this particularly), capable of earning a living, happy, and fitted for political and social leadership" (p. 37). Jefferson promoted himself as an illustration of his "utilitarian demands" (p. 37). That he devoted such great time to and found such pleasure in reading ancient Greek and Latin authors in the original language shows that Jefferson believed the ancient languages were indispensable for a happy, tranquil life.

LIFELONG LEARNING

Jefferson wrote to his physician, Vine Utley (March 21, 1819): "I was a hard student until I entered on the business of life, the duties of which leave no idle time to those disposed to fulfil them; and now, retired, and at the age of seventy-six, I am again a hard student. Indeed, my fondness for reading and study revolts me from the drudgery of letter writing" (1984, p. 1416). The sentiment expresses a revivification, due to newfound time for his beloved books. It also expresses an amaranthine commitment to learning.

Jefferson was no solitarian, committed only to his own comfort and best interest, as certain radicals state (Dawidoff, 1993, p. 438; Sheldon, 1991, p. 139; and Temperly, 1997, pp. 86-90). Consider the time and effort spent revising the laws of Virginia. Even in retirement, he was thoroughly immersed in the world around him and a consummate empirical investigator of it.²⁷ His daily activities afforded him numerous opportunities to formulate hypotheses on gardening, manufacture, natural history, economics, and politics, among various other things, and to test them through experience. So long as blood coursed through the arteries

of his body, Jefferson was moved to broaden his familiarity with and deepen his grasp of the world around him.

Why was Jefferson such an indurated, incurable lifelong learner? Science was irretrievably on the move, he thought, and he wished to be a vital part of that movement forward. He wrote to William Green Munford (June 18, 1799), “It is impossible for a man who takes a survey of what is already known not to see what an immensity in every branch of science yet remains to be discovered, & that too of articles to which our faculties seem adequate” (Jefferson, 1984, p. 1064). It was, then, an exciting epoch in which to live.

The aim of education for Jefferson was to give persons the tools they would need to make them involved, free, and happy. As Lehmann (1943) noted:

To Thomas Jefferson, school would never be a “finishing” agency. From each stage, man would have to move on in a never ending process of self-education, deliberately using the tools he had acquired. The narrow professional who had but a technical knowledge of his little vocational area was a curse to him. Education had to broad in order to assure the freedom and happiness of man. (pp. 201–202)

For that to occur, people needed to be motivated to be self-educators: the laborers, to advance personal and local affairs; the learned, to advance affairs of science, state, and nation. “[Social progress] depended entirely upon the natural, self-responsible desire of the individual for self-education and upon its fulfillment” (pp. 206–207). Citizens in the true sense of the term would participate in election and, if needed, recall of political officials, jury service, constitutional conventions, military service, and local political affairs. Thus, liberty for Jefferson did not mean the opportunity to do as one pleased whenever one pleased. Liberty entailed fullest participation of the citizens of a nation in the affairs of the nation. In that regard, Jefferson’s (roughly) 40 years of political service to his state and nation at the expense of his personal affairs; his devotion to writing letters all of his life not only to family and friends but also to unknown correspondents, seeking information; and his tireless work founding of the University of Virginia are illustrations of Jefferson’s profound generosity and active commitment to participatory republicanism.

There were limits to the advance of science, Jefferson recognized. In a letter to Pierre Samuel Dupont de Nemours (April 24, 1816), he wrote: “Although I do not, with some enthusiasts, believe that the human condition will ever advance to such a state of perfection as that there shall no longer be pain or vice in the world, yet I believe it susceptible of much improvement, and most of all in matters of government and religion; and that the diffusion of knowledge among the people is to be the instrument by which it is to be effected” (Jefferson, 1984, pp. 1387–1388).

Collectanea

This final section is a hodgepodge of Jefferson’s thoughts on education to give this essay a quasi-completeness: his preference for American education, the role of classical study in a curriculum, his thoughts on educating women and, finally, his views on education as they relate to American Indians and Blacks.

AMERICAN EDUCATION AND HUMAN NATURE

In a letter of reply to John Banister (October 15, 1785) about European education, Jefferson asked, “But why send an American youth to Europe for education?” (Jefferson, 1984, p. 838) The objects of a useful American education were classical knowledge, modern language, mathematics, natural philosophy, natural history, civil history, and ethics. Each, except for modern languages, could be learned equally as well at William and Mary College or other prominent institutions in the country as they could at any European institution.

Moreover, there were notable disadvantages of matriculating in Europe. A European student acquired a fondness for luxury and dissipation, contempt for simplicity, a sense of privilege, an abhorrence of equality, a love of wealth and birth, thin friendships, a distaste of fidelity, and appetency for harlots, among other urban vices. He summarized: “It appears to me, then, that an American coming to Europe for education, loses in his knowledge, in his morals, in his health, in his habits, and in his happiness. I had entertained only doubts on this head, before I came to Europe: what I see and hear, since I came here, proves more than I had ever suspected” (p. 839).

In contrast, American education for Jefferson was congruent with the moral ideals of agrarianism, simplicity of living, and full participatory government. Americans, he added, were those people whose “manners, morals and habits, are perfectly homogeneous with those of [their] country” (p. 839). That notion is congruent with Plato’s notion in *Republic* of the homomorphic relationship between the virtue of a well-run polis and the virtue of a good citizen (Holowchak, 2007).

Jefferson’s letter to Banister also strongly suggested that American education, like American agrarianism (Holowchak, 2011), was not merely a countrified standard that was suited to the American temperament given acclimatization to American soil and American ways. European cultural standards were corrupt because they were at variance with human nature. Jefferson, through his systemic educational reforms, was essaying to set the bar for an education, both scientific and moral, that was best suited for everyone—an education in touch with human nature.

CLASSICAL EDUCATION

Jefferson had an especial fondness for classical education—especially Greek and Roman literature. That seems inconsistent with his view of the practicality of American education. It also ran contrary to the popular view of his day of the irrelevance of the ancient languages in a practicable education.

Jefferson addressed that issue in a letter to John Brazier (August 24, 1819). First, Greek and Roman authors were models of “pure taste in writing”—models of a “rational and chaste style”—in contrast to the “inflated style” of northern ancestors or the “hyperbolic and vague style” (Jefferson, 1984, p. 1423) of the east. Next, he admitted to a certain indulgence in being able to read Greek and Roman authors in their own languages. This “innocent and elegant luxury” (p. 1423) was one that was addressed not merely to the senses. He wrote eloquently, “When the decays of age have enfeebled the useful energies of the mind, the classical pages fill up the

vacuum of *ennuie*, and become sweet composers to that rest of the grave into which we are all sooner or later to descend” (p. 1423).

Finally, the Greeks and Romans deposited and transmitted to us real sciences: history, ethics, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and natural history. The implicit sentiment here is not only that pursuit of knowledge began with the Greeks and Romans, and so advance in those disciplines cannot occur through blindness of their origins, but also that Greek and Roman literature—e.g., Cicero’s ethical writings, Euclid’s geometry, and Thucydides’s history—are relevant for human progress.

FEMALE EDUCATION

Jefferson’s systemic reforms for American education did include elementary-level education for females, for his bill in 1779 included three years of state-supported education for females. He did not anticipate any need for women to be educated beyond the most fundamental level. That is not to say that he did not have much to say about the important function of women in American or in any society. As Steele (2008) showed in his excellent essay “Thomas Jefferson’s Gender Frontier,” Jefferson viewed women as natural equals of men. He merely thought, as his critique of the backwardness of American Indian culture and excesses and effeminacy of the gentry of French culture showed, they were naturally suited for domesticity, while men were suited for harder work and political affairs. In a phrase, he was no gender-roles visionary, but a conservative.

Jefferson’s only sustained discussion of female education occurred in letter to Nathaniel Burwell (March 14, 1818). “A plan of female education has never been a subject of systematic contemplation with me” (1984, p. 1411), he conceded. His daughters required an education that would enable them, once mothers, to educate their own daughters and even sons, in the event of the death or incapacity of their father.

One of the largest obstacles to female education, Jefferson continues to Burwell, was the passion for reading novels, which was lost time that could have been employed for useful chores: “When this poison infects the mind, it destroys its tone and revolts it against wholesome reading. Reason and fact, plain and unadorned, are rejected. Nothing can engage attention unless dressed in all the figments of fancy, and nothing so bedecked comes amiss. The result is a bloated imagination, sickly judgment, and disgust towards all the real business of life” (p. 1411). One can surely guess what Jefferson would say about the tendency today of children to play video games, immerse themselves in plotless and amoral action-adventure movies, and gab and text on their own cell phones.

Jefferson did not categorically rule out reading novels in the letter. There were many fictitious narratives—e.g., Marмонтel’s new tales and the works of Miss Edgeworth and Madame Genlis—which based their narratives on real life and thereby were “useful vehicles of sound morality” (p. 1412). Pope, Dryden, Thompson, Shakespeare, Molière, Racine, and the Corneilles could be aidful in forming style and taste. He said in a letter to Peter Carr (August 10, 1787), “The writings of Sterne, particularly, form the best course of morality that ever was written” (1984, p. 902).

Outside of salubrious novels, he continues to Burwell, there were other items important for female education. First, the French language was indispensable for females’ education. For ornament, there were dancing, drawing, and music. Next, dancing was healthy, and its practice allowed for participation in “circles of festivity” (1984, p. 1412) without gawkiness. Drawing was innocent, engaging, and often useful. Music was a “delightful recreation for the hours of respite from the cares of the day” (p. 1412), but should only be attempted by those with an ear, as it were. Otherwise, it might bring shame to the avowed musician. Most significantly, there was household economy. “Diligence and dexterity in all its processes are inestimable treasures. The order and economy of a house are as honorable to the mistress as those of the farm to the master, and if either be neglected, ruin follows, and children destitute of the means of living” (pp. 1412-1413). The statement—that household economy was to be divided between husband and wife, with husband assuming order outside of the house and wife, inside of the house—is starkly Aristotelian (1990b, I.3-13).

Beyond the letter to Burwell, we only have glimpses of Jefferson’s thinking on female education. When Jefferson arrived in Annapolis from Philadelphia in 1783, he wrote to his daughter Martha (November 28) and advised her on the following course of daily activity, subject to the approbation of her chief tutor, Mrs. Hopkinson (1984, pp. 781-782):

from 8. to 10 o'clock practice music.

from 10. to 1. dance one day draw another

from 1. to 2. draw the day you dance, and write a letter the next day.

from 3. to 4. read French.

from 4. to 5. exercise yourself in music.

from 5 till bedtime read English, write &c.

Overall, Jefferson’s schedule—note the gap between 2 and 3 p.m.—might suggest haste, as it seems to show neither much imagination nor much forethought, as if the matter of female education clearly did not much concern him. It does, however, illustrate Jefferson’s nearly neurotic attachment to order and symmetry. He wished to make sure that Martha’s time was well spent, that there was regularity to her life, that there was a certain balance to the activities she pursued each day, and that those activities led to a fulsome life. Two points are worth noting. First, all pursuits related to Bacon’s category of imagination. Memory and reason were left out of the picture of female education. That says much about Jefferson’s vision of the nature of women. Second, what was missing—and it is an important part of any young person’s day—was the opportunity for spontaneous activity or even some amount of misadventure, some time in which Martha could decide for herself how best to spend her time. Martha was 11 at the time, but of course the times were different.

AMERICAN INDIANS AND BLACKS

In his “Second Inaugural Address,” Jefferson considered the plight of American Indians, “Endowed with the faculties and the rights of men, breathing an ardent love of liberty and independence, and

occupying a country which left them no desire but to be undisturbed, the stream of overflowing population from other regions directed itself on these shores; without power to divert, or habits to contend against, they have been overwhelmed by the current, or driven before it” (1984, p. 520).

There was no longer space for hunting, so they must be taught agriculture and the domestic arts and be readied for that society that cultivated intellectual and moral advance and added to bodily comforts—i.e., White American society.

There were, before education for integration, sizable obstacles to overcome: habits long-standing both of body and, especially, mind. Concerning the latter, Jefferson (1984) said: “[American Indians] inculcate a sanctimonious reverence for the customs of their ancestors; that whatsoever they did, must be done all through time; that reason is a false guide, and to advance under its counsel, in their physical, moral, or political condition, is perilous innovation; that their duty is to remain as their Creator made them, ignorance being safety, and knowledge full of danger” (p. 520). With undue respect for their ancestors, American Indians suffered from filio piety. In short, American Indians were capable of being educated as fully as White Europeans, but in the main resistant to assimilation in non-Indian culture.

Jefferson here and elsewhere generally expressed a good amount of sympathy for American Indians, but he was only modestly empathic. He spoke of the invasion of Whites as an overwhelming current, as if to excuse culpability with inevitability. The metaphor of a current is illustrative. Without capacities to divert or contend against the overpowering current, American Indians must either learn to swim—i.e., integrate fully in White society—or drown—i.e., be destroyed by Whites. Never did Jefferson give thought to the notion that the overwhelming current of White culture was genocidal. Never did he give evidence of thought to what it might be like to be an American Indian, whose lands were being stolen and way of life was being burked. That thought, had it been entertained, would have been horrific—for him, a voluntary state of imposed barbarism (Holowchak, 2012, Chapter 10).

Jefferson addressed the question of Black intelligence most directly in Query XIV of his *Notes on Virginia*. He hypothesized guardedly that Blacks were intellectually inferiority:

The opinion, that they are inferior in the faculties of reason and imagination, must be hazarded with great diffidence. To justify a general conclusion, requires many observations, even where the subject may be submitted to the Anatomical knife, to Optical glasses, to analysis by fire, or by substance, we are examining; where it eludes the research of fall the senses; where the conditions of its existence are various and variously combined; where the effects of those which are present or absent bid defiance to calculation; let me add too, as a circumstance of great tenderness, where our conclusion would degrade a whole race of men from the rank in the scale of being which their Creator may perhaps given them. (Jefferson, 1984, pp.269-270)

The passage is not illustrative of racism, as most assume, but misguided empiricism (Holowchak, 2013, pp. 215-227).

Education of Blacks was a more Gordian issue than that of Native Americans, because Jefferson tended to think of Blacks as intellectually inferior to other humans, though morally as competent. Unlike American Indians, they had had considerable exposure to White society, which was scientific and progressive, without showing in his eyes any promise of assimilation of that culture. He did not think that failure of assimilation might be due to the particular sort of exposure to White culture that Americanized Africans had—i.e., exposure as slaves and inferiors. The diminishing effect of continued degradation can and often does have the effect, over time, of belief in inferiority (Holowchak, 2012, pp. 203-228). In that regard, however, he differed little from most cognoscenti of his day.

As with American Indians, Jefferson showed in his writings considerable sympathy for Blacks but little empathy, and sympathy occurred mostly at the level of generality. He sympathized with Blacks, considered as a people. Freedom was part and parcel of the human condition and all people needed to be free, so Blacks needed to be free. Yet, I suspect, he had difficulty seeing the plight of any particular Black person. He likely never considered how he would have felt if he had been a Black man, a slave, or anyone perceived to be inferior. That thought too, I suspect, would have been horrific—to his thinking, a state of perpetual childlike naïveté and ignorance. For failure to be empathic, Jefferson ought to be faulted. Nonetheless, there is no reason to believe he thought Blacks were an exception to the general rule that each person ought to be educated according to his means and that Blacks of his day were incapable of elementary education. Moreover, there is every reason to believe, were he alive today, that he would have had an antipodean change of mind.

Upshot

In sum, Jefferson’s political reforms in keeping with his republicanism were both democratic and meritocratic. He sought democratically to narrow the gap between the wealthy and poor so that all could roughly have the same opportunity to secure for themselves their own happiness. He sought meritocratically to set up a system of education to allow for the most intelligent and virtuous to govern in the interest of the general citizenry and to patronize the advance of the sciences in the service of human flourishing.

Educational reform was a matter of efficiency, not waste. Jefferson wrote to J. Correa de Serra (November 25, 1817) concerning the democratic component of educational reform: “The object [of elementary schools] is to bring into action that mass of talents which lies buried in poverty in every country, for want of the means of development, and thus give activity to a mass of mind, which, in proportion to our population, shall be the double or treble of what it is in most countries” (Jefferson, 1919, 55).

For Jefferson, the object was equality, and education of the masses was needed to level the playing field. Moreover, there needed to be useful education for the most promising in talents and virtue. For that to occur, there needed to be reform of higher education so that the talents of scholars could be honed most effectively, not wasted as they were, in Jefferson’s eyes, at the College of William and Mary during his tenure as student. With reforms at the bottom and

top, there needed to be set in place colleges or grammar schools to act as educational conduits to move the best scholars to the University of Virginia and educate them in the manner most idoneous to their capacities at their age, and so languages and history were the foci. Thus, educational reform was systemic.

Jefferson's rationale for the systemization of education was economical, political, and philosophical. Economically, it was a matter of prodigious waste of resources. There was a mass of talents behind the mass of mind that lies buried in poverty. Politically, it was a matter of the demands of republican government. The mass of talents would have to be disinterred, if republicanism was to flourish, for republicanism was government for and by the people through elected representatives of them. Philosophically, it was a matter of the strictures of morality. No mass of mind could be left to wallow in poverty, if all citizens were equal by the law of nature.

Notes

1. See also Arrowood, 1930/1970, p. 70.
2. E.g., Jefferson to James Madison, December 20, 1787 (Jefferson, 1984, pp. 914-918); to John Breckenridge, January 29, 1800 (1984, pp. 1074-1076); and to Caesar A. Rodney, February 10, 1810 (1984, pp. 1216-1218).
3. See also Heslep, 1969, p. 98.
4. See Jefferson to William Green Munford, June 17, 1799 (Jefferson, 1984, pp. 1063-1066).
5. See Jefferson to John Adams, October 28, 1813 (Jefferson, 1984, pp. 1204-1310).
6. See Jefferson to Joseph Priestley, January 27, 1800 (Jefferson, 1984, pp. 1072-1074); to John Adams, July 5, 1814 (1984, pp. 1339-1343); to Isaac H. Tiffany, August 26, 1816 (Jefferson, 1905, Vol. XV, 65-66); to John Adams, December 10, 1819 (Cappon, 1986, 548-550); and to A. Korais, October 31, 1823 (Jefferson, 2004, 649-650).
7. Jefferson did not believe that senators should be put in office through popular election, as he wrote to Edmund Pendleton, August 26, 1776 (Jefferson, 1984, pp. 755-758).
8. See Jefferson to James Madison, September 6, 1789 (Jefferson, 1984, 959-964).
9. See Jefferson to Thomas Leiper, January 21, 1809 (Jefferson, 1904-1905, Vol. X, pp. 89-91); to James Fishback, September 27, 1809 (Jefferson, 1905, Vol. XI, 314-316); to William Canby, September 18, 1813 (1905, Vol. XIII, 376-378); to John Adams, August 22, 1813 (1904-1905, Vol. X, pp. 323-334); to Miles King, September 26, 1814 (1905, Vol. XIII, 196-198); to George Logan, November 12, 1816 (1905, Vol. X, pp. 68-69); to John Adams, January 11, 1817 (Cappon, 1986, pp. 505-506); to John Adams, May 5, 1817 (Cappon, 1986, pp. 512-514); and to John Davis, January 18, 1824 (1904-1905, Vol. XII, pp. 331-332).
10. See Jefferson to Thomas Cooper, November 2, 1822 (Jefferson, 1984, pp. 1463-1466).
11. For more, see Bowers (1943, p. 243) and Walton (1978, p. 119).
12. See Charron, 1729, 1340-1344.
13. For some thoughts on how these two views led to two competing visions of an American philosophy of education, see Beach, 2007.

14. Noting a strain is not to depict him as a communitarian. He was not a political atomist either, but a political meliorist. See Holowchak 2012, pp. 34-38.

15. See Jefferson to John Adams, September 28, 1787 (Jefferson, 1904-1905, Vol. V, pp. 349-352); to William Short, July 28, 1791 (1904-1905, Vol. VI, pp. 288-292); to Archibald Stuart, December 23, 1791 (Jefferson, 1984, pp. 982-985); to Edmund Randolph, May 8, 1793 (1904-1905, Vol. VII, 315-319); to James Madison, April 3, 1794 (Jefferson, 1829, Vol. III, 302-303); to Peregrine Fitzhugh, February 23, 1798 (1905, Vol. IX, pp. 1-4); to John Dickinson, July 23, 1801 (1904-1905, Vol. IX, p. 280-282); to Caesar A. Rodney, Feb. 10, 1810 (Jefferson, 1905, Vol. XI, pp. 357-359); and to Col. William Duane, March 28, 1811 (Jefferson, 1904-1904, 189-195).

16. The most ultraist being Conor Cruise O'Brien (1996).
17. Allowing them to choose their own texts, for instance.
18. Jefferson refused to have a president at the University of Virginia and even tried unsuccessfully to abolish the presidency at the College of William and Mary.
19. See Jefferson to Major John Cartwright, June 5, 1824 (Jefferson, 1984, 1490-1496).
20. E.g., the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq. O'Brien (1996) accused that Jefferson, early in his life, embraced of anarchic liberty, in which any effort, even an ensanguined one, to procure liberty was justified. The view is ultraist and unsustainable.
21. See Jefferson to George Watterston, May 7, 1815 (Jefferson, 1984, pp. 1366-1369).
22. See Jefferson to John Manners, February 22, 1814 (Jefferson, 1984, 1329-1333).
23. A copy of the letter, with modifications, is contained in a letter to Gen. John Minor (Aug. 30, 1814). For dating Moore's letter, see Cohen, 1971.

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