

## Jefferson, Week Two—The Revolutionary Philosopher at Work

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Today we will focus on Jefferson's best-known works of revolutionary propaganda: A Summary View of the Rights of British America, the Kentucky Resolutions, and of course his magnum opus, The Declaration of Independence. We will analyze the development of his constitutional reasoning in these documents, as well as comment on his dazzling literary style. Before leaving these works, we will also speculate on the quasi-paranoid psychology embedded in his arguments, a rhetorical extremism that has had repercussions down to the present day in American politics. This discussion will also delineate Jefferson's attempts at implementation of his radical political philosophy during his years as wartime Governor of Virginia, as Minister to France, and as President Washington's Secretary of State. We will offer examples of his successes and failures in these arenas, and show how frequently even moralist revolutionaries must make compromises in light of intractable political realities. We will also discuss Jefferson's personal philosophy of "the good life" and how he attempted to implement it on his Magic Mountain, Monticello.

### Terms to Know:

The Saxon Thesis—Jefferson's largely mythical understanding of British/American history. Jefferson believed (or claimed to believe) that American colonists were descended from freedom-loving, independent Germanic farmers who had left the forests of Germany to settle in pre-Norman England, there to live a harmonious and virtuous life without kings or lords to rule over them. Descendants of these same free Saxons brought their ancient values to the New World, and proceeded to live together in perfect harmony without coercive laws or predatory rulers. This "once upon a time" view of history was typical of Eighteenth Century Whigs.

The Expatriation Theory—Another of Jefferson's largely groundless historical viewpoints. He asserted that the earliest migrants from England came to America at their own expense "unassisted by the wealth or strength of Great Britain". Moreover, they regarded their decision to leave the Mother Country behind as a full legal, political, and moral separation from the corrupting influences of the Old World. The immigrants had ceased to be English, and had become sovereign and independent Americans, by virtue of their carving out a new way of life in the forests of Virginia and Massachusetts. Jefferson's theory had no legal standing in British law, but he tenaciously clung to the dogma throughout his life, while freely admitting that "I had never been able to get anyone to agree with me but Mr. Wythe" (his law teacher).

Libertarianism-The doctrine that governmental power is--ipso facto--perverse and corrupting. Consequently, "That government governs best, which governs least", as Jefferson put it.

Laissez Faire- "Hands Off!", or "Let it be." The Eighteenth Century doctrine (now getting its second wind) in political economy which holds that human society functions best when there is an absolute minimum of government intrusion. Laissez Faire constitutes a core component of Classical Liberalism (which is very much the opposite of what we mean by the term "liberalism"). Classical Liberalism refers to a strong commitment to limited, constitutional government, civil liberties, due process and freedom of religion. While these terms didn't come into general usage until late in Jefferson's life, he would certainly have agreed with their spirit.

The Scottish Enlightenment—The doctrines of the Glasgow Philosophers Francis Hutcheson, Lord Kames, David Hume, and others had a profound impact on Jefferson and almost all other American thinkers during the Revolutionary era. Their key insight was that all men possessed a "moral sense" which no government or religion could vitiate. Men had a natural sympathy and concern for one another, and found their greatest happiness in helping and serving their fellow suffering mortals. This communal, collectivistic ethic—which Jefferson warmly embraced--contrasted sharply with the unbridled individualism advocated by some of his contemporaries (such as Alexander Hamilton.)

Natural Law- (Sometimes called Natural Right, or the law of Nature,) is a system of law purportedly determined by nature, and thus universal. Classically, natural law refers to the use of reason to analyze human nature -- both social and personal -- to deduce binding rules of moral behavior. Natural law is contrasted with the positive law (meaning "man-made law", not "good law" ) of the community, and thus serves as a standard by which to critique and judge the positive law. Jefferson drew heavily on Locke's notions of Natural Law in writing the Declaration of Independence. The "Self Evident Truths" of Jefferson's Declaration are derived from Nature, and not from some merely man-made philosophical system.

Utilitarianism-Jeremy Bentham's philosophy of "social usefulness"—the idea that policies should be pursued based on the principle of acting to promote "the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers." Jefferson embraced the ethics of utility wholeheartedly, for both its pragmatism and its compassion.

## People to know:

Thomas Hobbes- Extremely influential English political philosopher of the 17<sup>th</sup> century . An early exponent of Natural Rights, the equality of men, individual rights, and representative government, Hobbes was also the upholder of Leviathan—the all-powerful state under the supreme rule of an Absolute Monarch. Hobbes believed such a strong central government was necessary to prevent the evils of social discord and civil war. Without a dominant sovereign, human life would be "nasty, brutish, and short," and of chronic violence between men: bellum

omnium contra omnes. One can see that Hobbes was seminal for the two great protagonists of the early American republic: Jefferson and Hamilton.

John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon—Radical English Whigs of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century who coauthored a number of writings (Cato’s Letters) attacking corruption within the English government, the Established High Anglican Church, and the monarchy’s practice of having “standing armies”—i.e., the militarized state. All these complaints resonated strongly with Thomas Jefferson, as well as other American Revolutionaries.

Laurence Sterne-The most popular English novelist of the Enlightenment, and one of Jefferson’s favorite authors. In works such as Tristram Shandy and A Sentimental Journey, Sterne sought to startle, even shock his readers into thinking in new and creative ways about familiar social problems. But he also urged readers to develop the “sentimental,” empathetic dimension of their personalities. Jefferson clearly reflected Sterne’s influence in his writings, most notably his famous letter “Heart and Head.”

Ossian—a fictitious Scottish author of the third century, and the supposed author of epic Gaelic poetry. Jefferson loved the poems of Ossian, and stoutly maintained their authenticity even when Samuel Johnson proved they were a forgery by Scottish poet James Macpherson. Jefferson and many other Enlightenment figures thrilled to the melancholic, romantic adventures of the characters Fingal and Deidre of the Sorrows. Strangely, the heroic masculinity of the Highland warriors and kings of the epic appealed to the pacifist Jefferson. It was typical of Jefferson that he continued to defend the legitimacy of the work even after it was shown to be a fraud. He even learned the ancient Celtic language, so he could enjoy the poems in their “original” language.

Cicero- one of Rome’s greatest orators and prose stylists, and one of Jefferson’s cultural heroes. Jefferson admired the Roman philosopher both for his vigorous, heroic defense of the Republic against its enemies and for his elegant writing style. Cicero developed the formalized style of the “villa epistle,” a model of leisurely, dignified letter-writing which Jefferson successfully emulated. (Remember, Jefferson wrote over 15,000 letters during his lifetime!) Jefferson also said that Cicero influenced his Declaration of Independence, with his notion of the “Public Right,” and his common sense basis for the right of revolution.

Epicurus-Roman philosopher of the “Good Life,” and another of Jefferson’s ancient world heroes. From Epicurus Jefferson learned that “happiness is the aim of life,” although this principle must not be confused with egoistic hedonism. Jefferson firmly believed that true happiness can only be found in the practice of virtue. Virtue teaches us to realize that working to secure the welfare of others provides the only reliable and genuine pleasure in life.

Quotes on death copied by Jefferson into his Commonplace Book:

Cicero: "What is there agreeable in life, when we must night and day reflect that, at some time or other, we must die?"

Euripides: "Alas, alas, races of mortals, wholly inspiring tears, much lamenting and much toiling! Behold how contrary to expectation fate goes her way! Now to one now to another, and to each in turn she metes troubles after a long season, and all the life of men is unstable."

Laurence Sterne: "Time wastes too fast! Every letter I trace tells me with what rapidity life follows my pen. The days and hours of it are flying over our heads like clouds of a windy day never to return more! Everything presses on: and every time I kiss thy hand to bid adieu, every absence which follows it, are preludes to that eternal separation which we are shortly to make!"

These and many other ruminations on death turn up with puzzling frequency in Jefferson's writings—puzzling that is, if we uncritically accept the one-sided view of Jefferson as the eternal sunny optimist. But clearly, he had a dark side as well. Jefferson had experienced the loss of so many loved ones, and had grieved so fiercely, that he turned to his favorite writers and philosophers to help gain some understanding of the grim truth of life—that we must all "bid adieu" to our precious ones. Just imagine: The Jeffersons' second child lived only a little more than a year, and their only son, born three years later, survived less than a month. Jefferson had lost his father in 1757, his mother in 1776, and his favorite sister Jane in 1765. His best friend Dabney Carr died in his prime and would be the first to be buried in Monticello's cemetery. And the heaviest blow of all came when his beloved wife, Patty, died of complications resulting from childbirth. Jefferson was a man all too acquainted with sorrow.