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978-1-107-04078-6 - Thomas Jefferson's Ethics and the Politics of Human Progress:
The Morality of a Slaveholder

Ari Helo

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Thomas Jefferson's Ethics and the Politics of Human Progress

Could Thomas Jefferson claim any consistency in his advocacy of democracy and the rights of man while remaining one of the largest slaveholders in Virginia? This extensive study of Jefferson's intellectual outlook suggests that, once we fully acknowledge the premises of his ethical thought and his now outdated scientific views, he could. Jefferson famously thought the human mind to be "susceptible of much improvement ... most of all, in matters of government and religion." Ari Helo's thorough analysis of Jefferson's understanding of Christian morality, atheism, contemporary theories of moral sentiments, ancient virtue ethics, natural rights, and the principles of justice and benevolence suggests that Jefferson refused to be a philosopher, and did so for moral reasons. This book finds Jefferson profoundly political in his understanding of individual moral responsibility and human progress.

Ari Helo is currently a University Lecturer in History of Science and Ideas at the University of Oulu. He earned his PhD at the University of Tampere in 1999 with a doctoral dissertation examining Thomas Jefferson's political thought. He has taught intellectual history, American studies, and cultural studies at numerous universities since 1996, and he has worked as a visiting researcher at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Helo's articles on American intellectual history have been published in Britain, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Netherlands, and the United States, among them the widely noticed "Jefferson, Morality, and the Problem of Slavery," with Peter Onuf, in *The William and Mary Quarterly* (2003) and a survey article on Jefferson's political thought in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Jefferson* (2009).

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*To all those Jefferson scholars whose insights on
the topic the author has failed to address*

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*No man can be sovereign because
not one man, but men, inhabit the earth ...*

Hannah Arendt

The Human Condition (1958) 1998, p. 234

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To paraphrase Tacitus, it is more becoming for a historian to remember than to bewail the dead. Many colleagues have asked me what I “truly think” of Thomas Jefferson as a person. I therefore wish to begin this book with a brief answer to that.

Regardless of the many years I have spent reading Jefferson's records and trying to grasp his thinking, I have never thought of him as a model to be embraced or rejected, but rather as a stranger from a strange culture. It was in Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* (1937) – a book about a strange African culture written from an almost equally strange European perspective of “the olden times” – where I found a short passage best exemplifying how I would estimate Jefferson. The passage is about Blixen's last visit to see a dying great Kikuyu chief, called Kinanjui:

From the look of him, I thought that he had come back from his journey triumphant, and had got all his cattle back with him, in spite of his Masai sons-in-law.... [H]e had plainly, I thought, done his worldly task, gone home, and taken his wages in every sense. If he were clear enough in his mind to look back at his life, he would find very few instances in which he had not got the better of it. A great vitality and power of enjoyment, a manifold activity were at their end here, where Kinanjui lay still.¹

To turn to the far easier assessments of persons and characters: On getting this book written I owe my biggest debt to a great historian and a great friend, Peter Onuf from the University of Virginia. It was his ceaseless encouragement and belief in the project over many years that made me finish the book. He is also one of those very rare scholars I have met who can discuss any topic in his field of expertise with genuine readiness to reconsider his own position on it.

Another friend and great intellectual, Allan Megill from the University of Virginia, has tirelessly responded to my pleas for critical advice over the years. Anyone familiar with Allan's extensive writings in philosophy and history can guess that critique was sometimes hard, but always helpful.

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An incredibly long time ago, Kari Palonen gave me the idea to study Jefferson and Seppo Tamminen had the questionable honor to review the first paper I ever wrote on Jefferson. I also wish to express my heartfelt thanks to a number of friends and colleagues for their comments and critical remarks about this manuscript at various stages. They include Robert Bannister, Roger Clarke, Cheryl Greenberg, Erkki Helo, Markku Henriksson, Marjatta Hietala, Maijastiina Kahlos, Petter Korkman, Kenny Marotta, Jeffrey Meikle, Sari Nokkanen, Keith Olson, Riikamaria Paakkunainen, Christoph Parry, Gerald Porter, Kari Saastamoinen, Leonard Sadovsky, Eran Shalev, Frank Shuffelton (d. 2010), Katri Sieberg, Juha Sihvola (d. 2012), Mark C. Smith, Mechal Sobel, Keijo Virtanen, and Brian Yost. For their immensely important editorial help in finishing the book I owe special thanks to Niina Koskipää and David Moltke-Hansen.

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Abbreviations Used in Notes

AJL	<i>The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams</i> , Lester J. Cappon (ed.), 2 vols., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959.
Anthology	<i>Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant: An Anthology</i> , J. B. Schneewind (ed.), 2 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
Extracts	<i>Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels: The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Second Series</i> , Dickinson W. Adams and Ruth W. Lester (eds.), Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983.
Ford	<i>The Works of Thomas Jefferson</i> , Paul Leicester Ford (ed.), 12 vols. (Federal edition), New York, 1904–1905.
Kames, <i>Essays</i>	Kames, Henry Home (Lord Kames), <i>Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion</i> , Edinburgh: 1751, facsimile reprint: London: University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, MI, 1981.
L&B	<i>The Writings of Thomas Jefferson</i> , Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh (eds.), 20 vols., Washington, DC, 1903–1904.
Legal CB	<i>The Commonplace Book of Thomas Jefferson: A Repertory of His Ideas on Government</i> [Jefferson's Legal Commonplace Book], Gilbert Chinard (ed.), Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1926.
Literary CB	<i>Jefferson's Literary Commonplace Book: The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Second Series</i> [Jefferson's Literary Commonplace Book], Douglas L. Wilson (ed.), Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.

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Locke, <i>Essay</i>	Locke, John, <i>An Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i> (1690, 1700), Peter H. Nidditch (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.
Locke, <i>Second Treatise</i>	Locke, John, <i>The Second Treatise of Government</i> , in John Locke, <i>Two Treatises of Government</i> (1690, 1698), Peter Laslett (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960, 1994, 265–428.
<i>Notes</i>	Thomas Jefferson, <i>Notes on the State of Virginia</i> (London, 1787), in <i>Thomas Jefferson Writings</i> , Merrill D. Peterson (ed.), New York: Library of America, 1984.
<i>PAPERS</i>	<i>The Papers of Thomas Jefferson</i> , Julian P. Boyd et al. (eds.), Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950–.
Smith, <i>TMS</i>	Smith, Adam, <i>The Theory of Moral Sentiments</i> (1759, 6th edition), D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (eds.), [The Glasgow Edition], Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.
TJ	Thomas Jefferson
TJW	<i>Thomas Jefferson Writings</i> , Merrill D. Peterson (ed.), New York: Library of America, 1984.