

On Thomas Jefferson's Epicureanism and Slavery

Introduction

"All Men are Created Equal"¹ were the words that Thomas Jefferson penned on the US Declaration of Independence, and yet it is clear that such equality did not extend to everyone, at least not at first. The history of America was blighted from the beginning by the unnatural abomination of slavery.² Given that Thomas Jefferson at times throughout his life identified himself as an Epicurean³, how do we come to terms with his owning of abject chattel slaves and participation in the slave trade? And additionally, how do we grapple with the apparent history of slavery within Epicureanism and make sense of the attitude towards, who Jefferson called, "those who labor for [my happiness]"⁴?

In this brief review, I will present the Epicurean attitude towards slavery as well as its history throughout the Hellenistic and Roman eras. Then, I will examine Thomas Jefferson's life with a focus on his Epicureanism and practice of slavery. I argue that Thomas Jefferson's behavior represents a perversion of Epicurean ideas and cannot be justified. Ultimately, I arrive at the view that he failed to apply the Canon with respect to his consideration of the status of African Americans and failed to live up to the Doctrines, thus weakening the case for describing him as 'great' Epicurean. I will then conclude with a discussion of what it does mean to be a great Epicurean.

¹ The Declaration of Independence was composed in 1776. While it is clear that many ideas within the document have correspondence with Epicurean philosophy, it is unclear at least from the primary historical record when it is that Thomas Jefferson first encountered Epicurus' philosophy. The earliest explicit attestation that I have encountered demonstrating his sympathies toward the philosophy of Epicurus is in his Notes on the Doctrines of Epicurus in c. 1799: <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=Epicurus&s=1111311111&sa=&r=6&sr=>.

² Contrasted with other popular American Founding Fathers, Jefferson is the most morally bereft when it came to slavery. John Adams never owned slaves, was horrified of the institution, and argued that the revolution would not be complete until all the slaves were free. Benjamin Franklin had as many as nine slaves, who he freed upon learning of the human capacity of enslaved peoples, and later was a founding member and president of the first abolition society in America, the Philadelphia Abolition Society. George Washington is closest in analogy to Jefferson, having hundreds of slaves at his own plantation in Mount Vernon, but rather than leave his people in bondage at the time of his death, he made preparations for their emancipation in his will. All of Washington's slaves would later be freed.

³ See the letters to William Short, 1819: "As you say of yourself, I too am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing every thing rational in moral philosophy which Greece & Rome have left us."

⁴ The full quote in context from his 1793 letter to Angelica Church: "I have my house to build, my fields to farm, and to watch for the happiness of those who labor for mine."

Slavery throughout the Ancient World and within Epicureanism

The institution of slavery is one that has existed in various forms ever since humans settled into sedentary communities during the Neolithic age. By the time of Classical Greece, it had been well and firmly established, and even found philosophical support amongst the Peripatetics. Whereas Aristotle in his *Politics* had opined that enslavement is a natural state for many, saying that a slave should be considered “anyone who, while being human, is by nature not his own but of someone else”, Epicurus argued in favor of a contractual view of natural justice, emerging from the “covenant [of] mutual benefit, to not harm one another or be harmed” (*Principal Doctrines*, 31). Therefore, a system of abject slavery, whereby personal agency is taken away from individuals, would simply not have the stamp of natural justice.

However, we know from the biographer Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*⁵ that Epicurus had a number of slaves and that, in his will and after his death, he freed four: Mys, Nicias, Lycon, and Phaedrius. It’s unclear from the text if these were all of his slaves or only a fraction. It could be argued that there is enough contextual evidence to suggest that these were indeed all of them, since no other names were explicitly mentioned. On the other hand, Norman DeWitt in his book *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, speculates that there must have been a number of “literate slaves to serve as secretaries and copyists”, in order to support the copying of philosophical manuscripts for distribution. In *Oeconomicus* by Xenophon (which Philodemus responds to in his work, discussed later) we learn that it was common in ancient Greece for smaller landowners to own a few slaves, but that larger estates could own dozens. Given this evidence, along with the knowledge that Epicurus inherited wealth from his family and received generous gifts from patrons for the continued operation of the *Kepos*, it is plausible that there were more slaves than those named explicitly in his will. If it is true that there were a number of nameless, unfreed slaves who Epicurus retained in his possession upon his death, then they would have been passed on to Amyntochus and Timocrates to continue the publishing operation. In either case, we can safely conclude that Epicurus failed to deliver freedom for his slaves during his lifetime, which we must honestly acknowledge as one of his failings (it would have been better if they had been freed during his life).

What else can we say regarding the treatment of slaves in the *Kepos* as compared to elsewhere in Athens and in the Mediterranean world? There is secondhand observational evidence that the slaves of the Garden enjoyed a more free existence there than in the outside world. Consistent with his pattern of inclusivity for those at the lower tiers of the contemporary societal hierarchy, it has been attested that Epicurus admitted slaves and women as equals. Diogenes Laertius recorded that those philosophers who accused Epicurus of impropriety

. . . are stark mad. For our philosopher has abundance of witnesses to attest his unsurpassed goodwill to all men. . . [such as] his gratitude to his parents, his generosity to his brothers, [and] his gentleness to his servants, as evidenced by the terms of his will and by the fact that they were members of the School, the most eminent of them being the aforesaid Mys.

⁵Book X: Life of Epicurus: <http://www.attalus.org/old/diogenes10a.html>

So not only did Epicurus treat well those who served him, but he also included them in his instruction. Centuries later, during the late Roman Republic, the Platonist Cicero reports in a private letter that at least one slave called Licinus escaped from bondage in Rome to stay in the Athenian Garden as a freeman with Patro, who was then Scholarch and successor to Epicurus.⁶ These observations support the view that the *Kepos* was a secure place for those seeking asylum from the realities of slavery in the outside world.

The 1st century BC Epicurean philosopher, Philodemus of Gadara, a contemporary of Cicero, wrote many treatises on Epicurean philosophy, having had access to and inheriting the legacy of c. 250 years of Epicurean tradition by his time. One of his scrolls, *On Property Management*, recovered at the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum (a neighboring city to Pompeii, which was also covered during the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD) discusses personal economics and the management of property. In it, Philodemus calls "wretched" the cultivation of one's own land "in a manner involving work with one's own hands" and lists slavery as an appropriate means of income for a philosopher, alongside rental property. I will not apologize for ancient enslavers but only say that Philodemus emphasized that it is imprudent to be cruel to one's slaves, and suggested putting them to work on crafting skills rather than to subject them to strenuous field labor. We understand his advice in a modern context as a caution against tyrannical behavior when one is in a position of power over others and that it is good to pursue business endeavors that can lead to job-creation for others and autarchy for oneself.

Thomas Jefferson's Epicureanism and Slavery

Given this background on the history of slavery with Epicureanism, we can proceed to the question of Thomas Jefferson. To ascertain his familiarity with the tenets of the philosophy, it is useful to begin with a review of what Epicurean texts he had access to. It is certain that in his private library, he had a number of translations of Diogenes Laertius' biography, which includes the Letters and Doctrines.⁷ He also had at least five Latin copies of *De Rerum Natura*, but probably not access to any of the Herculaneum scrolls, which were only discovered in 1750 and reconstructed and translated much later. Nonetheless, he should have had a sound enough foundation in his understanding of Epicurean philosophy to employ the Canon (the Epicurean epistemological tools, which are the faculties of sensation, feelings of pleasure and aversion, and pre-conceptions) in his thoughts and deeds.

⁶ Cic. Q. fr. 1.2:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0022%3Atext%3DQ+FR%3Abook%3D1%3Aletter%3D2>

⁷ Jefferson's library catalogue contains three mentions of Laertius' work, two in Latin and one in French, published in the 17th century (see E. Millicent Sowerby, comp., *Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson*, Washington, D.C., 1952–59, 5 vols. description ends Nos. 31–3).



Me sitting on Monticello's west portico during my recent visit.

Jefferson proclaimed a lifelong disdain for slavery, but his actions were incongruous with his words, at least in his personal life. As far as his public and political view, he was always at least verbally opposed to the institution, and as president enacted the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves of 1807. His enthusiasm to publicly oppose slavery diminished strongly after 1784, after his proposed ban on slavery expansion failed in Congress by one vote.

Regarding his personal life, Jefferson acquired his slaves originally through willed inheritance from both his father and his father-in-law. Over time he would go on to buy and sell slaves, actively participating in the trade itself, such that the total number of his slaves exceeded 600 during his life, and at any one time there were more than 100 at Monticello.⁸ Of these, he would only free two in his life, allowed another two to walk away unpursued by slave catchers, and freed five in his will.

⁸ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-dark-side-of-thomas-jefferson-35976004/>

Slave life at Monticello

Jefferson carried the guise of a 'kind master'.⁹ However, in a sort of coercive twist, he would reserve the selling of slaves as punishment for the most disobedient among them - their fear of being sold off to a 'worse master' compelling them into compliance with Jefferson's overseers' demands, among other coercive torture methods, such as flogging. Jefferson was intimately involved with the upkeep and conduct of slavery at Monticello, treating it like a business. In his notes, he meticulously records the productivity of as well as the resources distributed to each slave. This documentation attests to his awareness and knowing toleration of the condition of his slaves.

I have in my mind a picture of Jefferson as a slave master who uses kindness as a front, but who is manipulative and coercive in reality, with a dark side that turns a blind eye to brutality that only he has the power to stop. At the end of the day, he was very cold and calculating and would rather use 'motivating' tactics to guarantee that his production goals at the Monticello facilities were met rather than permit his slaves to persist in their way unmolested, albeit at a lower productivity. His interactions with his slaves strike me as reminiscent of the interaction between a man and his dog, not of interaction between equal men, and it is true that Jefferson viewed them as subhuman.¹⁰

When Thomas Jefferson was thirty, Sally Hemings was born into slavery at Monticello. He would later take her as his concubine after having met her as a 14-year old adolescent when she accompanied his eldest daughter Patsy to go to him in Paris, where he served as envoy to France. If their sexual relationship began in their time together in France, which is a point of contention among historians, it would by today's standard be considered statutory rape. Whether rape or not, most moderns would agree that leveraging a position of authority to persuade or coerce someone of lower authority into sexual submission is clearly unethical. I find it hard to stomach when it is suggested that they were in love. Committed love, or *storge*, must be born out from friendship, and Epicurus says that friendship begins in mutual advantage (*Vatican Sayings* 23). It is difficult to imagine the mutual advantage in a life of abject subjugation. I do reserve the rather dark possibility that, evaluating her situation and that of the larger world (being uncertain in most things except its racism), she may have chosen to remain in the role of a slave concubine because of the advantages Jefferson enticed her with¹¹ rather than lash out and face the consequences or try to escape.

⁹ To understand what slavery was like at Monticello - at least for a house slave - I would recommend the short personal memoir of Peter Fosset, "Once a Slave of Thomas Jefferson," who was one of Jefferson's last living slaves and delivers a decidedly positive account:

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jefferson/slaves/memoir.html>

¹⁰ "To this catalogue of our indigenous animals, I will add a short account of an anomaly of nature, taking place sometimes in the race of negroes brought from Africa." - Jefferson in *Notes*, including Africans with other animals exhibiting the phenomenon of albinism, an example of his pseudo-scientific racism.

¹¹ One catalog records how much he spent on furnishing her with dresses while in France early in their relationship, equivalent to around \$30 today. Back in Virginia, she served as his chambermaid, attending to his wardrobe and taking to light tasks such as sewing - a 'favorable' situation when compared with the slaves of the field.



Image: The Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. during blossom season.

It is an unfortunate historical reality that Thomas Jefferson was deeply racist. His attitude towards African Americans informed his practical view towards slavery throughout the whole of his life. Reflecting in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he says of the black race that

I advance it, therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstance, are inferior to the whites in the endowment both of body and mind.

He is often famously quoted (the words are inscribed into his monument in Washington, D.C.) as having anticipated the inevitability of abolition. However, conspicuously omitted is the text which immediately proceeds (which I have bracketed and underlined for effect) that conveys the full context:

Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free. [Nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government. Nature, habit, opinion has drawn indelible lines of distinction between them. It is still in our power to direct the process of emancipation and deportation peaceably. . .]

He had a theory of a future race war¹² which motivated his call to free the slaves and then deport them back to Africa. In his hypothetical future scenario, racial tensions between blacks and whites, who he viewed as separate and incompatible 'nations', would devolve to a point of conflict, after which the 'superior' white race would come to eradicate the 'inferior' black race. Therefore, out of his self-considered prescience, conscience, and magnanimity, and for the preservation of the 'lesser race', he advocated that slavery should be (slowly) phased-out and the freedpeople either returned to Africa or relocated to the West Indies. I need not comment on how horrific these Platonic (in the sense of conceiving the abstract as true) meanderings of mind are, and it is incredibly unfortunate that a self-described Epicurean would allow such thoughts to guide their action.

Frank Speech to Thomas Jefferson

It is quite ironic that in his letter to Epicurean friend William Short, 1819, he questions his friend's discipline as an Epicurean, saying that:

I take the liberty of observing that you are not a true disciple of our master Epicurus, in indulging the indolence to which you say you are yielding. One of his canons, you know, was that "that indulgence which prevents a greater pleasure, or produces a greater pain, is to be avoided."

Here we see Jefferson admonishing his friend William for holding states of repose as choice-worthy, cautioning that doing so might lead to harmful inactivity and personal degradation. He speaks frankly with William in this regard, which is consistent with the Epicurean practice of *parrhesia*, or frank speech, which Philodemus describes as being a fundamental aspect of life in ancient Epicurean communities. Indeed, an equal goal of life in the *Kepon* alongside theoretical investigation was moral reform. Therefore, we are encouraged to evaluate each other's Epicurean practices and behaviors for our own mutual benefit. Keeping faith with this tradition, I shall attempt to deliver my own appraisal and advice.

From the above quote we surmise that Jefferson had an understanding of the canonicity of the feelings, or the pleasure and aversion faculty. This not only implies that he was familiar with the Canon in general, but that he understood that we are to avoid those things which give us displeasure in the long term. One could rightly turn around Jefferson's own accusation against him, for his apparent lack of embracing the evidence of his senses and relinquishing that practice which to him seemed so mutually demeaning - slavery.¹³

¹² A historian under the handle "sowser" reviews Jefferson's hypothetical ideas in this post: https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments/48p4tp/did_the_british_royal_family_ever_own_slaves/d0lw1z4/

¹³ "The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal." - Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*

However, he could not bring himself to do it. He claimed to have been searching for evidence of the intellectual and mental equality of blacks with whites. However, when this evidence was presented to him on numerous occasions, he refused to accept it. In 1791, the freeman Benjamin Banneker, an auto-didact astronomer and producer of almanacs, penned an open letter to Jefferson and sent him a copy of one of his almanacs to prove his intellectual capability as a self-taught black man, appealing to the 'champion of liberty' for the consideration of the rights of the enslaved and confronting him directly on his conspicuous contradictions. Rather than disown his ill-conceived prejudices outright, Jefferson responded in a carefully polite but substantively ignorant way,

I considered [the almanac] as a document, to which your whole color had a right for their justification, against the doubts which have been entertained of them.¹⁴

No body wishes more than I do, to see such proofs as you exhibit, that nature has given to our black brethren talents equal to those of the other colors of men; and that the appearance of the want of them, owes merely to the degraded condition of their existence, both in Africa and America.

The obvious elephant-in-the-room is that their 'degraded condition in America' was attributable to the inferiority complex accrued after centuries of bondage, coincident with the substantial loss of their original language, religion, cultural heritage, and personal histories.

Regarding Banneker, Jefferson's soft praise gave way to suspicion with time. Shortly after Banneker's death, in another of Jefferson's personal letters, he revealed his suspicion that Banneker was a fluke and not representative of the rest of his race, going as far as to accuse his work of being not solely his own:

"He sent me his book on the literature of the negroes. his credulity has made him gather up every story he could find of men of colour (without distinguishing whether black, or of what degree of mixture) however slight the mention, or light the authority on which they are quoted. the whole do not amount in point of evidence, to what we know ourselves of Banneker. We know [Banneker] had spherical trigonometry enough to make almanacs, but not without the suspicion of aid from Ellicot, who was his neighbor & friend, & never missed an opportunity of puffing him. I have a long letter from Banneker which shews him to have had a mind of very common stature indeed."

Only a true Cynic would employ such gymnastics of the mind to explain away what is clearly an earnest attempt to demonstrate proficiency in an intellectual pursuit and replace it with a 'nefarious' ulterior motivation (viz. to promote the abolitionist agenda and the equality of blacks), and then belittle him to boot.

¹⁴ The same suspicions to which he himself alludes in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, published six years earlier.

Unfortunately this is not the only example of Jefferson's selective skepticism and refusal to accept the obvious. There was an African American poet by the name of Phillis Wheatley, whose poem Jefferson panned in overtly racist fashion:

Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry.—Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination.

Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism.

I read her poem,¹⁵ and while aesthetics can certainly be debated, there is no disputing that it is a sophisticated work and that his verdict that it is 'below the dignity of criticism' is racist absurdism. Epicurus grants that the wise person, although not composing poetry themselves, will be the finest judge of music and poetry, but this sort of behavior is certainly not what he intended.

To conclude this *parrhesia* section, I will now advance to Jefferson's imprudence in the domain of household management, another important aspect of Epicurean life. Jefferson's personal debts had dire consequences and ultimately precluded him from the financial security required for the manumission of his slaves - an act which perhaps (or perhaps not, given what we have since learned of his views) would be among his desires. His inclination towards excesses of generosity, hospitality, and other extravagances with his friends and guests resulted in significant debts and caused any feelings of anxiety that would naturally come about in reaction to the dire state of his finances.

At the time of his death, he had amassed a total debt exceeding \$107,000, corresponding to more than \$2,000,000 in 2020 dollars. His overly lavish lifestyle was the undoing of not only himself, but those poor families whose cohesion relied on his continued good health. Had he ascertained the natural limit of his material needs and desires (which by that time, he should have far exceeded) in a truly Epicurean manner, these harms would have been prevented. After his death, his 130 remaining unfreed slaves were put on the auctioning block at Monticello's west lawn to settle his estate. The families were split in as many as seven different ways.

Born and reared as free, not knowing that I was a slave, then suddenly, at the death of Jefferson, put upon an auction block and sold to strangers.

- Peter Fossett, an ex-slave child of Jefferson, from his memoir *Once the Slave of Thomas Jefferson*

His early abolitionist sentiment waned in older age as his mind closed to the possibility that blacks were the equal of whites. He allowed his prejudice to solidify itself rather than accept the evidence of his sensory and emotional faculties. Indeed, he could not come to terms with the

¹⁵ "His Excellency General Washington" by Phillis Wheatley:
<https://poets.org/poem/his-excellency-general-washington>

reality of the intellectual equality of blacks, because that would retroactively condemn his lifelong participation in 'the peculiar institution', a conclusion too painful (or perhaps not) for him to accept. He took the easier and less cognitively-dissonant route, clinging to his pseudoscientific biases until the end. His immoderate tendencies and the severe mismanagement of his estate were catastrophic not only for himself but for those who depended on him. He did not employ the Canon, he did not employ the Doctrines. His Epicureanism was selective and expedient, when at all present. By these measures, the 'Sage of Monticello' was unfortunately not an Epicurean Sage.

Conclusions

It is easy to judge in retrospect the blatant moral failings of those in other historical times and places from our 'enlightened' modern vantage. Nonetheless, it is perhaps unfair to not withhold judgement before making an honest attempt to understand historical context and circumstance to the extent that it is possible. This essay has attempted to bring context and circumstance to light, and shown that they do not offer much in terms of a moral defense. Even when there is no way around a damning appraisal, that is still not grounds for abject dismissal of any or all positive offerings the person in question contributed. We can and should still appreciate Jefferson for his intellectual contributions, advocacy of Epicureanism, and having laid down the philosophical foundations of this country, while at the same time fully acknowledging and coming to terms with his personal failings. His influence on and mentoring of Frances Wright is particularly notable given how powerful her voice was when it came to the fight for abolition, universal suffrage, and other moral social reform - let alone her contribution to Epicurean philosophy through her didactic novel *A Few Days in Athens*.

In response to this assessment of Thomas Jefferson, who I do not feel we should claim as one of the greatest exemplars of the philosophy, we may ask what then ought the attributes of such an exemplar be? Should they be identified and revered by how truly they adhered to the doctrines themselves, or, knowing that they were a self-described adherent, by what they accomplished? What is the measure of 'greatness' in the Epicurean discipline? In our dialogues on the subject in the Garden of Epicurus on Facebook, one contributor, Matthew Itzo, suggested that what makes an Epicurean 'great' is ". . . their knowing or unknowing adherence to the doctrines. Self-described adherents who don't follow doctrine is what leads to the dilution of what an Epicurean is, watering down the philosophy or breaking it off into branches. I imagine there being many Epicureans throughout history, who lived a pleasurable life, undocumented." I agree with this sentiment.

Ultimately, it is many of those relatively unremarked and unremembered - I'm thinking of the long list of scholars and disciples for whose lives we have only the faintest glimpse - who followed the doctrines towards their happiness, living in obscurity and abiding in silent pleasure, who are indeed worthy of being considered the greatest Epicureans ever, after Epicurus himself.

Further reading:

- The Dark Side of Thomas Jefferson (this one is particularly horrifying, be warned).
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-dark-side-of-thomas-jefferson-35976004/>
- A very informative Wikipedia page:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Jefferson_and_slavery
- Records on Sally Hemmings:
<https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/jefferson-slavery/thomas-jefferson-and-sally-hemings-a-brief-account/research-report-on-jefferson-and-hemings/appendix-h-sally-hemings-and-her-children/>
- Another particularly disturbing read, but also a necessary one:
<https://www.facinghistory.org/nobigotry/readings/created-equal>