

# Democracy & Education

## Educating Each According to His Needs

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### Abstract

This essay is a reply to Brian Dotts's "Beyond the Schoolhouse Door," which focuses on the need of a system of general education in Jefferson's writings on educative reform.

### This article is a response to:

Dotts, B. W. (2015). Beyond the schoolhouse door: Educating the political animal in Jefferson's little republics. *Democracy & Education*, 23(1), Article 5. Available at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol23/iss1/5>

**D**OTT'S (2015) ANALYSIS of Jefferson's views on education in "Beyond the Schoolhouse Door: Educating the Political Animal in Jefferson's Little Republics" is a welcome addition to the often stale literature on Jefferson's educational views. Dotts's focus is on the indispensability of ward-school education for the general citizenry in a thriving Jeffersonian republic. While much has been written about Jefferson's views of higher education—especially his thinking and work concerning the University of Virginia—too little literature exists on lower education. Though Jefferson always insisted that his educational reforms ought to be systemic or taken as a whole—e.g., his Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge in 1776 and his Bill for Establishing a System of Public Education of 1817 (Holowchak, 2014b, pp. 8–9, 37–49)—he was clear that the need for instantiation of a system for ward schools outstripped that of grammar schools or a university<sup>1</sup> (TJ

to John Tyler, 26 May 1810). To Senator Joseph C. Cabell (13 Jan. 1823), he wrote:

*Were it necessary to give up either the Primaries or the University, I would rather abandon the last, because it is safer to have a whole people respectably enlightened, than a few in a high state of science, and the many in ignorance. This last is the most dangerous state in which a nation can be.<sup>2</sup>*

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With his focus on Jefferson's preference for educating the general citizenry, each to his needs, Dotts (2015) gets at the force and richness of Jefferson's views and their normative dimension for the stability, robustness, and prosperity of a Jeffersonian republic. General education is, Dotts rightly notes, not just a required preventative of corrupt governing; educating the general citizenry empowers citizens by allowing for full and expeditious political participation, if only locally. He writes, "The public good could only be understood and legitimized through public deliberation sustained by an educated citizenry on a local level" (p. 4). Yet it is not so much the legitimization of the public good but its actualization that was Jefferson's intendment. For such actualization, each citizen is to be educated not according to some one-size-fits-all blueprint for happy citizenry but according to his needs—a point Dotts unfortunately overpasses. To his nephew Peter Carr (7 Sept. 1814), Jefferson wrote, "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."

Jeffersonian republicanism is not merely about freedom from, Dotts (2015) notes, because though Jefferson aimed at "decentralizing political, economic, and religious power," such decentralization is for the sake of broadening the educative base—"society could benefit from a greater number of informed minds" (p. 4). As such, as I note in several publications (e.g., Holowchak, 2012, 29–49; 2013b, 41–60; and 2014a, chap. 2), Jeffersonian republicanism is about putting into place a substratal political structure that allows for preservation of rights and for periodic constitutional revisions in keeping with advances in science and public enlightenment, thereby allowing for fullest actualization of human capacities for citizens on all levels.

Dotts (2015) is correct to note that Jefferson's aim was not pure democracy, though Jefferson inclined much in that direction. Dotts writes of the perception of democracy at the time, "Democratic ideas and reforms were often met with resistance and frequently referred to as mob rule, and they were perceived as irrelevant since the masses were without the requisite educational credentials to govern" (p. 5). That view was expressed neatly by Connecticut Senator Uriah Tracy in 1803:

*In a democracy the people control the government, and instead of enjoying any true national liberty, they have only the liberty of making themselves pre-eminently miserable; and therefor it is that democracies have ever moved, and ever must move, with an awfully rapid stride to despotism. (as cited in Bowers, 1967/1936, p. 231)*

Jefferson sought to defuse this perception by educating the citizenry and holding them accountable for electing and overseeing representatives. Distrust of democracy and its equation with chaos and mob rule were not only the prevalent sentiments in Jefferson's day but also in antiquity. Plato (trans. G. M. A. Grube, 1992), for instance, wrote in *Republic* of democrats as being "full of freedom and freedom of speech" and of each having "the license to do what he wants." Like a "coat embroidered with every kind of ornament," democracy "would seem to be the most beautiful [constitution]" (p. 557b–c). The ensuing discussion is characterized

by anarchy, which Plato believed naturally slides into tyranny. Thus, attempting to establish a democratic base in Jefferson's day was considered by many, if not most, with some degree of erudition to be a snipe hunt.

Dotts (2015) also writes of basic education comprising lessons in "republican virtue." He says, "Republicanism taught moderation in wealth, a love of liberty and knowledge, informed judgment, interdependence, and maintaining an indefatigable balance between and commitment to individual rights and the public interest" (p. 3). Yet it is not so much that republicanism per se has anything to teach but rather that the basic political schema demands that republicanism, with its emphasis on ward schools as well as intelligent and morally sensitive governors at all levels (the last point pretermitted by Dotts), allows for the sort of channels or prompts to guide or incite human flourishing. In that regard, Jefferson was like Aristotle (trans. H. Tredennick, 1933/1989), who wrote in the first sentence of his *Metaphysics* that all humans by nature desire to learn (p. 980a22). Yet Jefferson was also like Aristotle, as Dotts does note, in that he recognized every human is by nature "civic minded and politically active" (p. 2) or, in Aristotle's words, a "political animal"<sup>3</sup> (*zōon politikon*, p. 1253a3–4 and 1278b20). Republican virtue was also prevalent in the Whig historians whom Jefferson extensively read, and, Dotts notes, they included Spelman, Dalrymple, Sullivan, Acherly, Care, Macaulay, Gordon, and especially Kames.

Through reference of Jefferson's letter to Thomas Law (13 June 1814), Dotts (2015) correctly mentions that Jefferson's principles of government are founded on "moral instinct"—i.e., the moral sense. This moral sense Dotts describes, quoting Jefferson, as "a sense of duty . . . social dispositions . . . implanted' deep within people that must be discovered 'by education, by appeals to reason and calculation' and 'motives to do good'" (Dotts's ellipses, p. 3).

As is often the case with discussions on Jefferson's moral sense, the description is faulty. First, Dotts (2015) fails to recognize that Jefferson is not describing in his letter to Law the moral sense but those people without a moral sense. Jefferson wrote:

*When it [the moral sense] is wanting, we endeavor to supply the defect by education, by appeals to reason and calculation, by presenting to the being so unhappily conformed, other motives to do good and to eschew evil, such as the love, or the hatred, or rejection of those among whom he lives, and whose society is necessary to his happiness and even existence; demonstrations by sound calculation that honesty promotes interest in the long run; the rewards and penalties established by the laws; and ultimately the prospects of a future state of retribution for the evil as well as the good done while here.*

Second, Jefferson's point, missed by Dotts, is that the moral sense, a faculty that works chiefly without the input of reason, which typically does more harm than good when it intrudes (Holowchak, 2013b, pp. 147–164; 2014a, chap. 6; 2015, chap. 1), can be remedied by education and other rationally induced motives.

As I note in several publications, the moral sense neither is to be "discovered" nor even to be much cultivated, in the precise sense of the word. As with Kames's notion of intuitive perception,<sup>4</sup> people

are born with a sense (literally) of right and wrong. What education early on does is to encourage youths to eschew vice and pursue virtue through encouraging moral actions and discouraging vicious actions. Strictly speaking, there is no learning, only encouraging. That was why Jefferson recommended reading history for its moral “lessons,” but he also recommended reading morally uplifting novels like Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* and Sterne’s *A Sentimental Traveller*; ancient ethical works such as Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations* and Seneca’s *Moral Essays*; utopian works such as Mercier’s *L’An 2440* and Harrington’s *Oceana*; and even morally moving sermons, like those of Reverends Sterne, Massillon, and Bourdaloue. That too was why Jefferson disadvised Peter Carr (10 Aug. 1787) concerning taking lectures at a university on morality.

Dotts (2015) rejects some interpreters’ atomistic interpretation of Jefferson’s conception of liberty. Jefferson was not only influenced by Locke, Dotts states, but also by Aristotle, Sidney, and especially Cicero.<sup>5</sup> Dotts is right to emphasize the significance of Cicero in the development of Jefferson’s political and especially moral thinking. In a chapter on Jefferson’s ancient-philosophy sources in a forthcoming book on Jefferson and morality (Holowchak, 2015), I have much to say about the influence of Cicero on Jefferson. Both formally renounced the Stoics, but both continually came to Stoic sources in critical times of their lives. Jefferson, I argue there and in other publications, was a living Stoic, not an Epicurean (Holowchak, 2012, pp. 17–22; 2014a, chap. 7; 2015, chaps. 9 and 10), and he is indebted to Cicero for much of his Stoicism.

Education of the citizenry, Dotts (2015) mentions, prepares citizens for fullest political participation, which entails not only voting for and keeping watch over elected representatives but also participation in the militia, when needed, and jury duty—the last two functions being significant and generally overlooked parts of Jeffersonian republicanism.<sup>6</sup> Critical discussion of the militia and jury duty as they relate to Jeffersonian republicanism makes Dotts’s paper a significant addition to the literature on Jefferson’s educational views.

Throughout the essay, Dotts (2015) sprinkles in his share of quotes from Jefferson’s writings to illustrate his numerous points. His use of quotes shows good familiarity with the body of Jefferson’s writings. For illustration, when expatiating on Jefferson’s distrust of trial by judge or magistrate, Dotts quotes from Query XIV of *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Jefferson wrote, “The common sense of twelve honest men gives still a better chance of just decision, than the hazard of cross and pile.” The reference to “cross and pile” suggests the arbitrariness or even bias of the judicial system with which Jefferson struggled much of his political career.

At paper’s end, Dotts (2015) suggests that Jefferson’s political philosophy can empower educators to facilitate awareness among students of “the dynamic role they can play in their communities by understanding their relationship to government” (p. 10) and to apprehend why is it critical for them to be politically aware and effectively active. Those points are well made—some reference to Dewey’s appreciation of Jefferson’s views of education in the service of democracy would be aidful—but it must be conceded that we do not live in a Jeffersonian republic. Thus, our opportunities for the

sort of full political participation Jefferson championed are limited. Moreover, I suspect many if not most citizens are jaded, as they feel that elected representatives are more influenced by corporate nudges than by any clamor of an active citizenry.

There are a couple of quilllets—and here I am perhaps being somewhat pernicky. There are Dotts’s (TK) several references of education empowering only White Americans—not women or Blacks—and his espousal of Jefferson’s aristocratic leanings. For instance, at paper’s end, he writes of “the irony of a slaveholder writing about the importance of liberty and self-government.” Dotts says, “[Jefferson] enjoyed the luxury of theorizing about republican ideals and enjoying an aristocratic lifestyle supported by inheritance and slavery” (p. 10).

It is clear today that Jefferson was wrong concerning his beliefs about Black intellect and imagination—he stated in Query XIV of his *Notes on the State of Virginia* that Blacks are likely inferior in reason and imagination, though not memory or morality (p. 266)—but he was not, as most scholars loudly state he was, racist. Jefferson was incapable of the sort of sustained enmity that characterizes racists and haters. Furthermore, racism is ascribable to Jefferson only when we assume 21st-century sensitivities and awareness to Jefferson and his contemporaries. He lived in the 18th and 19th centuries, thus he was a product of the science and ignorance of his day. To evaluate him by today’s standards is to commit what I elsewhere call the fallacy of historical anachronism (Holowchak, 2013a, p. 226). In short, it is easy for any of us today to criticize Jefferson from a contemporary perch, when it is very likely that had we been in shoes, as it were, we would not have done otherwise. What applies to his avowed racism applies equally to his avowed misogynism.

Again, it is oversimple to say that Jefferson wrote as a democrat and lived like an aristocrat. His political philosophy was axially democratic, as his work on ridding of entails and primogeniture and on religious freedom shows, and that political philosophy was of the man, not merely something dreamt up by the man. As an “aristocrat,” he may have lavishly entertained at Monticello and at what is now known as the White House, but he preferred to live simply, for Jefferson was Stoically, not Epicureanly (in the modern, not ancient, sense of Epicurean), inclined.<sup>7</sup> Living Stoically, however, he was not embarrassed by his status or wealth. He merely put both best to use as he saw best use. Thus, neither “aristocrat” nor “democrat” fits Jefferson. Such unsuitable labels lead to the all-too-facile ascription of hypocrisy that scholars commonly and harefootedly employ.

As Sterne (1776) wrote in his sermon “The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus,” read and recommended by Jefferson both early on to Robert Skipwith (17 July 1771) and much later to John Minor (30 Aug. 1814): “Riches are not the cause of dissipation, but the corrupt calculation of the world, in making riches the balance for honour, for virtue, and for every thing that is great and good” (pp. 21–23). Sterne added, “Let [the rich man] comfort the captive, or cover the naked with a garment, and he will feel what is meant by that moral delight arising in the mind from the conscience of a human action” (pp. 23–25). Jefferson throughout his life did his share of comforting and covering, and in retirement he certainly

looked back, as his obelisk shows, at his efforts toward educational reform with Sternian delight.

## Notes

1. All references to Jefferson's writings throughout are from Peterson's (1984) collection.
2. That sentiment is in keeping with Dupont de Nemours's advice to Jefferson on education. "All knowledge readily and daily usable, all practical sciences, all laborious activities, all the common sense, all the correct ideas, all the morality, all the virtue, all the courage, all the prosperity, all the happiness of a nation and particularly of a Republic must spring from the primary schools or Petites Écoles." P.S. Dupont de Nemours to TJ, 21 Apr. 1800 from Holowchak (2014a, chapter 9).
3. See also *Nicomachean Ethics*, pp. 1097b12 and 1169b19.
4. Disrelish of reason apropos of moral judgments and knowledge of certain "metaphysical" truths—e.g., the nature of deity, the uniformity of nature, and the existence of causality in the cosmos—Kames expresses often. It is too slippery a guide and too inaccessible by the majority of humans, ill-suited for reasoning (pp. 259, 265, 267, 284).
5. Here Dotts mentions Jefferson's "theories"—an unfortunate choice of words, since Jefferson never articulated his political philosophy in a formal treatise.
6. Jefferson calls us back to the agrestic ideal of Greek times, characteristic of, say, an Athenian farmer-citizen.
7. Consider, for instance, the informality of manners he adopted while president or the manner of his "physical habits," including diet, to Dr. Vine Utley (21 Mar. 1819).

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