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## EPICURUS SURVIVES: THOMAS JEFFERSON'S APPLICATION OF EPICUREANISM

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EPICURUS SURVIVES:  
THOMAS JEFFERSON'S APPLICATION OF EPICUREANISM

An Essay Submitted to the  
Office of Graduate Studies  
College of Arts & Sciences of  
John Carroll University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts

By  
Jennifer L. Moeller  
2020

Core ideas underpinning the accomplishments Jefferson chose to frame his legacy can be traced to Epicurus. Both men devote themselves to declaring happiness is the aim of life and to aiding others in that pursuit by elevating reason above religion and employing education as a vital tool to deploy and protect that right. Epicurus empowers individuals to take control of their own happiness. Jefferson's citizen-controlled societal framework, built to recognize and protect the individual pursuit of happiness, institutionalizes Epicureanism. Epicureanism is the through line for the three achievements Jefferson requests to be inscribed on his gravestone: "author of *The Declaration of Independence (Declaration)*, of the Statute of Virginia (Statute) for religious freedom and the Father of the University of Virginia (UVA)."<sup>1</sup> Given their shared goal to declare and protect individual happiness, the ample evidence Jefferson is an Epicurean, and the plethora of Epicurean ideas in the ancient and post-15<sup>th</sup> century works in Jefferson's library, there is a surprising dearth of scholarship on the connection. Recurring application of Jefferson's ideas suggests we may owe a greater debt to Epicurus than is commonly appreciated. They have been used to reaffirm the natural rights of all in America and create protections for human rights in other countries, including the 1948 United Nation's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. John Adams' last words on the day he and Jefferson died, the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration, were said to have been "Jefferson survives."<sup>2</sup> I suggest that, through Jefferson, Epicurus also survives.

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1. "Jefferson's Gravestone," Thomas Jefferson's Monticello (Thomas Jefferson Foundation, 2008), <https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/jeffersons-gravestone>.

2. Andrew Burstein, "Jefferson Still Survives," History News Network, (The George Washington University, March 2001), <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/634>.

Jefferson is an avowed Epicurean and the inescapable, attributed and unattributed, Epicurean ideas in dozens of works in his large library no doubt reinforced each other in his mind. He freely shares the strength of his attraction to Epicurean ideas with a friend: “the doctrine of Epicurus, which, notwithstanding the calumnies of the Stoics, and caricatures of Cicero is the most rational system remaining of the philosophy of the ancients, as frugal of vicious indulgence, and fruitful of virtue as the hyperbolical extravagancies of his rival sects.”<sup>3</sup> He writes his own “Notes on the doctrine of Epicurus.”<sup>4</sup> Decades later William Short expresses his own Epicureanism to Jefferson who replies with a finalized version he titles “A Syllabus of the doctrines of Epicurus” (Syllabus), and the comment, “I too am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing every thing<sup>5</sup> rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us.”<sup>6</sup>

Jefferson found this genuine Epicurean doctrine in his three copies of Diogenes Laertius’ (180-240CE) *Lives of Eminent Philosophers (Lives)*. *Lives* includes three letters and forty doctrine purportedly written by Epicurus (ca. 341-270BCE).<sup>7</sup> Barbara Oberg, an editor of *The*

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3. Thomas Jefferson, “Thomas Jefferson to Charles Thomson, 9 January 1816,” Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-09-02-0216>. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Jefferson’s writing are taken from this source accessed from January 1-March 30, 2020.

4. Thomas Jefferson, “Notes on the Doctrine of Epicurus, [ca. 1799?],” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-31-02-0241>.

5. Punctuation and spelling are taken directly as written from sources cited for Jefferson’s writing, Diogenes *Lives* and the *Declaration*.

6. Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to William Short, 31 October 1819,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-0850>.

7. Howard Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1989), 215, Note 19. Jones notes that Cyril Bailey’s, *Epicurus: the Extant Remains* (Oxford, 1926), acknowledges

*Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, suggests Jefferson's Notes "seem to be based on the Letter to Menoeceus"<sup>8</sup> in *Lives*. It provides ample textual evidence for Jefferson's Epicurean ideas and I will use it as the primary source. But Jefferson's study of Epicureanism is further substantiated by his purchase of Pierre Gassendi's voluminous *Opera Omnia* which contains the Epicurus chapter from *Lives*<sup>9</sup> and is an attempt to reconcile Epicureanism with Christianity. Saul Fisher claims that for Gassendi, "The single most time-consuming project of his career consists in his prodigious efforts towards reviving the works and reputation of one particular classical figure, Epicurus."<sup>10</sup> Jefferson no doubt used *Opera* to further explore Epicurus' ideas, but those underpinning his life work can still be traced to their pre-Christian roots. His seemingly most beloved source for Epicurean explication were his eight copies<sup>11</sup> of Lucretius' (99-55BCE) pre-Christian poem *De Rerum Natura (DRN)*, one of which he held back from the sale of his library to Congress.<sup>12</sup> Lucretius had access to original Epicurean texts and is considered his "most

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Diogenes' statements about Epicurus' life "tally well" and the letters and doctrine are internally consistent and often confirmed from other sources.

8. Jefferson, "Notes on the Doctrine of Epicurus, [ca. 1799?]."

9. "Thomas Jefferson's Libraries," LibraryThing, Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.librarything.com/catalog/ThomasJefferson>.

10. Saul Fisher, "Pierre Gassendi," ed. Edward N. Zalta, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2014 (November 18, 2013), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/gassendi/>.

11. "Thomas Jefferson's Libraries."

12. Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 70.

devoted and gifted Roman follower.”<sup>13</sup> While *DRN* could be used as a primary source, *Lives* provides the most direct connection and is more than sufficient.

A survey of other books in Jefferson’s library containing Epicurean ideas on the natural right to pursue happiness and the ways to protect that pursuit would be supportive but is out of scope.<sup>14</sup> However, the ubiquity of indirect sources for Epicurean ideas suggests their constant reinforcement for Jefferson. The broad adoption of these ideas also helps explain how Colonial Representatives and Virginia legislators were persuaded to support his gravestone accomplishments. Redistribution of *DRN* awakened interest in Epicurean ideas that helped reimagine the role of religion and the purpose and rights of governments in the widely read books of Jefferson’s time. Stephen Greenblatt studies the impact of *DRN* in *The Swerve* and concludes the man who rediscovered the manuscript is “the midwife to modernity.”<sup>15</sup> Specifically, ideas from the widely read works of John Locke, Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton whom Jefferson calls “the three greatest men that have ever lived, without any exception”<sup>16</sup> have all been connected to Epicurus.<sup>17</sup> More broadly, the editors of *Epicurus in the Enlightenment*

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13. Epicurus, *Epicurus: the Art of Happiness*, trans. George K. Strodach (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), XIII.

14. “Thomas Jefferson’s Libraries.” Jefferson’s libraries contained dozens of books that refute and praise Epicurus. They include: Cicero, Epictetus, Plutarch, Virgil, Ovid, Machiavelli, Montaigne, Coke, Hobbes, Gassendi, Locke, Newton, Montesquieu, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon (authors of the Cato Letters), Shaftesbury, Bolingbroke, Voltaire, Rousseau, Blackstone, Dugald Stewart, Antione Destutt de Tracy.

15. Greenblatt, *The Swerve*, Preface.

16. Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to John Trumbull, 15 February 1789,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-14-02-0321>.

17. See: W R Albury, *Halley’s Ode on the Principia of Newton and the Epicurean Revival in England* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 39. Fisher, “Pierre

note “diverse manifestations, applications and selective appropriations” of Epicurean ideas are “employed by a diverse gallery of authors.”<sup>18</sup> Charles Wiltse lists several Enlightenment sources (many of whom could be linked to Epicurus) for the “happiness principle” and notes “Jefferson assumes the principle without question or reference...The notion was generally accepted by Americans of the revolutionary period and there is no record of any question raised in regard to it in the convention which voted the *Declaration*.”<sup>19</sup>

Given the demonstrably Epicurean underpinning of Jefferson’s life work, mountains of writing that consider each man separately,<sup>20</sup> and Jefferson’s documented interest in Epicurus, there is surprisingly little scholarship focusing on their link. There are three possible reasons for this dearth of scholarship. One is the breadth of Jefferson’s areas of study. Jefferson read, adapted and adopted scientific, ethical and political ideas from hundreds of sources. He cut and paste his own version of the Bible and writes “I never submitted the whole system of my opinions to the creed of any party of men whatever, in religion, in philosophy, in politics, or in anything else, where I was capable of thinking for myself. Such an addiction is the last

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Gassendi." Greenblatt, *The Swerve*, 69. Reid Barbour, “Remarkable Ingratitude: Bacon, Prometheus, Democritus,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 32, no. 1 (1992), <https://doi.org/10.2307/450941>, 79.

18. Neven Leddy and Avi Lifschitz, *Epicurus in the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2009), 3.

19. Herbert Lawrence Ganter, “Jefferson’s ‘Pursuit of Happiness’ and Some Forgotten Men,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (October 1936): 559, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1925217>.

20. David Konstan, “Epicurus,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, April 16, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epicurus/>. Konstan includes a copious list of works on Epicurus just since the 1990s.

degradation of a free and moral agent.”<sup>21</sup> Summarizing his sources for the pursuit of happiness, Howard Mumford Jones concludes, “Jefferson himself has been labeled a stoic, an epicurean, a deist, a utilitarian, a materialist, a romantic, a disciple of French thought, a classicist, and a follower of Jesus as the search has gone forward. The results have been interesting, but they have also been kaleidoscopic.”<sup>22</sup> Jefferson does aggregate philosophies, but a lack of appreciation for Epicureanism in his other influencers and the collective impact of his ideas on Jefferson’s work suggest the Epicurean kaleidoscope piece is clearer and larger than commonly recognized.

The second reason may be the richness of either tracking Epicurean ideas to an end point of explosion in the Enlightenment or tracking a host of Enlightenment thinkers to the founding fathers. Carli Conklin includes Newton, Locke, and Bacon as important influences on Jefferson. Her intention is “to illuminate the intermingling and ultimate convergence of several old ideas at a single place of particular meaning,”<sup>23</sup> but her scope does not encompass Epicurus’ impact on those authors. Carl Becker focuses on the influence of English authors, particularly Locke, and only makes a brief mention of the ancients.<sup>24</sup> Herbert Ganter notes scholarship on the source for the pursuit of happiness in the *Declaration* stops at the Enlightenment, as merely tracking Locke “thence back to the Greeks, would be to devote too much time to exploring the tributaries, with

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21. Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to Francis Hopkinson, 13 March 1789,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-14-02-0402>.

22. Howard Mumford Jones, *The Pursuit of Happiness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 86.

23. Carli N Conklin, *The Pursuit of Happiness in the Founding Era : An Intellectual History* (Columbia: University Of Missouri Press, 2019), xiii.

24. Carl L Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (North Charleston, Sc: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 27.

consequent neglect charting the main channel.”<sup>25</sup> Scholars detail Epicurean thinking evident in Enlightenment thinkers and artists but generally do not move forward to the American Revolution. Some consider the history of Epicurean ideas through the twentieth century but skip the Jefferson/Epicurus connection.<sup>26</sup> Jones briefly mentions Epicurus as a potential source for Jefferson but misses the Epicurean connection to the secondary sources when he writes Jefferson accepted “the not very illuminating formula of Gassendi, Wollaston, and Locke that happiness is the excess of pleasure over pain.”<sup>27</sup>

This brings us to the third potential reason, the seeming lack of evidence for Jefferson’s interest in Epicurus until later in life. Gilbert Chinard finds no Epicurean evidence in Jefferson’s commonplace books. Wiltse agrees and writes “it is probable that he was not well acquainted with the Epicurean doctrine at the time the Declaration was written.”<sup>28</sup> But Ganter suggests the commonplace books are “not the only evidence to be relied upon in trying to probe the mind of such an omnivorous reader,” as Jefferson had easy access to school and relative’s libraries and many of his writings and books, which might have shown an early interest, were lost in a 1770

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25. Ganter, “Jefferson’s,” 16, no. 4, 560.

26. Dane R Gordon and David B Suits, eds., *Epicurus : His Continuing Influence and Contemporary Relevance* (Rochester, N.Y.: Rit Cary Graphic Arts Press, 2003). These essays consider Gassendi and Bishop Butler but then skip to C.S. Pierce and Karl Marx and only one contains a fleeting mention of Jefferson, 26.

27. H. M. Jones, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 14 and 65.

28. Ganter, “Jefferson’s,” 16, no. 4, 558-9. Ironically, Wiltse connects Epicurean ideas to Scottish common sense philosophy, “In general, the appeal to natural rights is identical with the appeal of the Scottish philosophers to the common sense and reason of mankind,” but misses Jefferson’s affinity for them through his Scottish Professor William Small at William and Mary.

fire.<sup>29</sup> He very likely read *Lives* and *DRN* while at William and Mary, two copies of each were in his 1783 catalog.<sup>30</sup> George Wythe willed two of his five copies of *DRN* to Jefferson suggesting they were of particular meaning. Jefferson writes in his 1776 *Notes on Shaftesbury and Locke*, that the ancients “permitted free scope to philosophy as a balance” against “the superstition of the times” and “the Epicureans & Academicks were allowed all the use of wit & raillery against it.”<sup>31</sup> His famous head/heart letter to Maria Cosway in 1785 is replete with references to Epicurean pleasure and pain<sup>32</sup> and in a 1787 letter to a young man he recommends *DRN* among the books to study.<sup>33</sup> Peter Onuf notes a rehearsal of the Epicurean head/heart argument in his *Literary Commonplace Book* and suggests Epicurean exhortation to think for oneself would have appealed to him early given his “rigorous process of self-construction.”<sup>34</sup> There is much evidence of Jefferson’s interest before his first mention of Epicurus in an 1802 letter.<sup>35</sup>

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29. Ganter, “Jefferson’s,” 16, no. 4, 561-62.

30. “Thomas Jefferson’s Libraries,” LibraryThing, Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.librarything.com/catalog/ThomasJefferson>.

31. Thomas Jefferson, “VI. Notes on Locke and Shaftesbury, 11 October–9 December 1776,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-01-02-0222-0007>.

32. Mark Andrew Holowchak, “The ennui of...a tedious sermon,” in *Thomas Jefferson: Moralizer* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2017).

33. Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, with Enclosure, 10 August ...,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-12-02-0021>.

34. Peter S Onuf, *The Mind of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville; London: University Of Virginia Press, 2007), 28.

35. “From Thomas Jefferson to Nicolas Gouin Dufief, 23 March 1802,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-37-02-0087>.

It is possible that being aware of the widespread negative misrepresentation of Epicureanism, he chose not to acknowledge his debt to Epicurus until later in life. Epicureanism is hurled at him as an insult. A 1792 pamphlet denounces Jefferson “the externals of pure Democracy afford but a flimsy veil to the internal evidences of aristocratic splendor, sensuality and Epicureanism.”<sup>36</sup> Epicurus recognizes and rejects the accusations against his philosophy in his own life, “When we say, then, that pleasure is the end and aim, we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of the sensuality, as we are understood to do by some through ignorance, prejudice, or willful misrepresentation.”<sup>37</sup> Authors Jefferson admires may have been afraid to ever attribute their thinking to Epicurus but based on the strength of his attestations to be an Epicurean, it is highly plausible Jefferson gravitates to those ideas even if they were unattributed. The editors of *Epicurus in the Enlightenment* note, “Ever since its negative assessment by Cicero and the early Church Fathers, Epicureanism had been used as a smear word – a rather general label indicating atheism, selfishness and debauchery.”<sup>38</sup> Norman DeWitt agrees, “It was the fate of Epicurus to be named if condemned, unnamed if approved,”<sup>39</sup> and he

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36. Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and the Rights of Man* (Charlottesville: University Of Virginia Press, 2006), 474.

37. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. Robert Drew Hicks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0004.tlg001.perseus-eng1:10.1>, 131.

38. Leddy, *Epicurus in the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2009), 3.

39. Norman Wentworth DeWitt, "A Synoptic View Of Epicureanism," in *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), 8, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctts81p.4](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctts81p.4).

calls Jefferson “one of the few men with courage to avow himself an Epicurean.”<sup>40</sup> His ability or willingness to laud Epicurus later in life does not negate but support the substantial evidence of the Epicurean imperative driving his life work.

This is not to suggest Epicurus is his sole source of inspiration. While Carl Richard finds “Jefferson’s favorite philosopher was Epicurus,”<sup>41</sup> he writes Tacitus, Epictetus and Jesus are also of great value to him. Jefferson is undoubtedly influenced by many thinkers. But his documented appreciation for Epicurus and the accumulation of Epicurean ideas at the heart of the work for which he chose to be remembered suggests the philosopher had substantial impact on him. As a step toward understanding this largely unexplored influence, the following highlights fundamental Epicurean ideas in the achievements Jefferson chose for his gravestone.

### **Declaration of Independence**

Jefferson’s Epicureanism is on display in the *Declaration* when he proclaims not only that happiness is the goal, but that individuals are responsible for and have the right to protect their pursuit of happiness. Epicurus’ conception of happiness is generally misunderstood and his emphasis on security is almost completely overlooked, but Jefferson understands and applies these ideas in ways Epicurus could only have dreamt about. The ideas with Epicurean roots are highlighted in this famous section of Jefferson’s *Declaration*, which underwent only minor editing from draft to adoption:

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40. Norman Wentworth DeWitt, *St. Paul and Epicurus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), 47, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.cttsrzk.5](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.cttsrzk.5).

41. Carl J. Richard, “A Dialogue with the Ancients: Thomas Jefferson and Classical Philosophy and History,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 9, no. 4 (1989), 433, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3123751>.

We hold these **truths to be self-evident**, that **all men are created equal**, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain **unalienable Rights**, that among these are Life, **Liberty** and the **pursuit of Happiness**.--That to **secure these rights**, Governments are instituted among men, **deriving their just powers from the consent** of the governed,-- That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the **Right of the People** to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem **most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness**.<sup>42</sup>

The connection between the *Declaration* and Epicurus is not well studied, though some indirect and direct connections have been made. While a few throw up their hands trying to pinpoint a source,<sup>43</sup> Carl Becker calls the pursuit of happiness “a glittering generality,”<sup>44</sup> most scholars point to Locke.<sup>45</sup> Locke, as well as many of the other suggested enlightenment sources for the phrase, is demonstrably influenced by Epicurus.<sup>46</sup> Fred Spier links the famous phrase to seven influential enlightenment thinkers and he notes, “All of these philosophers were inspired, directly

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42. “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription,” National Archives, September 25, 2018, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

43. H. M. Jones claims no one, “has ever understood why Jefferson substituted this phrase for John Locke’s comprehensible trilogy, life, liberty, and property,” and Peckham cites *The Scots Magazine* in 1776, “What can they possibly mean by these words, I own it is beyond my comprehension.” Jones, *The Declaration*, 12, 25. Wiltse says, “the pursuit of happiness might well be the turn given it by one with a fine a feeling for language as had Jefferson.” Ganter, “Jefferson’s,” *The William & Mary Quarterly* 16, no. 4, footnote 558-9.

44. Howard Mumford Jones and Howard H. Peckham, *The Declaration of Independence: Two Essays* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1976).

45. For summaries of sources for pursuit of happiness see full citations in bibliography for Matthews 8-9, Sheldon 50-51, Jayne 2-6 and Conklin.

46. See Kroll in bibliography for Pierre Gassendi’s influence on Locke. Fisher claims Gassendi’s, “single most time-consuming project of his career consists in his prodigious efforts towards reviving the works and reputation of one particular classical figure, Epicurus.” Fisher, “Pierre Gassendi.”

or indirectly, by the Greek philosopher Epicurus.”<sup>47</sup> And though he does not explicitly make the connection, Spier’s seven philosophers all had a place in Jefferson library.<sup>48</sup> It may well be Jefferson took phrasing for Epicurean ideas from these intermediate sources, but Greenblatt looks further back and credits Epicurus’ renowned proxy Lucretius, through his ancient poem *DRN*, as the source for Jefferson’s pursuit of happiness.<sup>49</sup> DeWitt, however, makes the most direct connection between Epicurus and the *Declaration*. He summarily dismisses Locke as the more proximate source and claims Jefferson’s choice of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are “veritable watchwords of Epicureanism.”<sup>50</sup> Jefferson’s references for the Epicurean ideas in the *Declaration* can never be known with certainty. But the parallels between the ideas supporting Jefferson’s life work and *Lives*, the most authentic representation of Epicurean philosophy, suggests the purity of those ideas survive the journey from Epicurus to Jefferson regardless of their path.

Links between *Lives* and Jefferson’s other writing suggest that he had an Epicurean understanding of happiness in mind when writing the *Declaration*. We will look at four Epicurean ideas specifically:

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47. Fred Spier, “Pursuing the Pursuit of Happiness: Delving into the Secret Minds of the American Founding Fathers,” *Social Evolution & History* 12, no. 2 (September 2013), 158. While a dive into intermediate links from Jefferson to Epicurus would be supportive, it is unfortunately, out of scope.

48. “Thomas Jefferson’s Libraries.” Jefferson’s copies of books by the authors Spier lists: Baron d’Holbach (2), Denis Diderot (5), William Wollaston (1), Jean Jacques Burlamaqui (2), John Locke (6), Baruch de Spinoza (3) and René Descartes (2).

49. Greenblatt, *Swerve*, 70-71.

50. DeWitt, *St. Paul and Epicurus*, 47.

1. happiness is the goal of life;
2. though absolute happiness is impossible, people must actively pursue it;
3. happiness is tranquility of mind and absence of pain in the body;
4. virtuously measuring pleasures and pains is the path to happiness.

Throughout his life, Jefferson repeatedly asserts the fundamental Epicurean idea that happiness is the goal. Diogenes succinctly summarizes Epicurean doctrine as “the beginning of happiness,”<sup>51</sup> and Epicurus cites the goal in his advice to Menoeceus “we must exercise ourselves in the things which bring happiness, since, if that be present, we have everything.”<sup>52</sup> Jefferson adopts this goal early in life, writing when he is just 20 years old, “Perfect happiness I believe was never intended by the deity to be the lot of any one of his creatures in this world; but that he has very much put in our power the nearness of our approaches to it, is what I as stedfastly believe.”<sup>53</sup> Expressing his desire to return to Monticello rather than engage further in public service in 1782, he rejects the idea government can compel its citizens to serve, as that would, “contradict the giver of life who gave it for happiness.”<sup>54</sup> A year before his first election to the Presidency, he summarizes in his Epicurean Syllabus “happiness is the aim of life.” Near the end of his life, in response to an individual hoping to write a biography, Jefferson replies that

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51. Diogenes, *Lives*, 138.

52. Diogenes, *Lives*, 122.

53. Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to John Page, 15 July 1763”  
<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-01-02-0004>.

54. Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, 20 May 1782”  
<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-06-02-0174>.

the principles which guided his public life were based on “a belief that they tended to promote the happiness of man.”<sup>55</sup>

The second Epicurean idea, that one is responsible for their own happiness, is implicit in Jefferson’s use of the active, “pursuit of happiness,” rather than simply “happiness” which would have paralleled the absolutes of “life” and “liberty.” I return to the quotes above in which each set out happiness as the goal to point out they also both put the onus on the individual to pursue it. Epicurus writes “we must exercise ourselves in the things which bring happiness,”<sup>56</sup> whereas Jefferson writes “the nearness of our approaches to it” are “in our power.”<sup>57</sup> Diogenes provides an extreme example of the degree to which Epicurus believes one controls their own happiness, “Even on the rack the wise man is happy.”<sup>58</sup> It is easy to see how this concept of being in control of your own happiness would appeal to the self-made Jefferson. He writes to the mathematician Nathaniel Bowditch “you are the best judge of what most promotes your own happiness.”<sup>59</sup> And, he berates fellow Epicurean William Short for laziness and exhorts him to take control, “a debility of body and hebetude of mind, the farthest of all things from the happiness which the

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55. “From Thomas Jefferson to Stephen Simpson, 27 October 1824,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-4648>.

56. Diogenes, *Lives*, 122.

57. Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to John Page, 15 July 1763” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-01-02-0004>.

58. Diogenes, *Lives*, 118.

59. Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to Nathaniel Bowditch, 27 April 1825,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-5174>.

well regulated indulgences of Epicurus ensure. fortitude...teaches us to meet and surmount difficulties; not to fly from them, like cowards...weigh this matter well.”<sup>60</sup>

This directive to Short warning of “debility of body and hebetude of mind” highlights the next shared concept of happiness. Epicurus summarizes it when he writes, “By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul.”<sup>61</sup> He reiterates this idea, as well as the idea that happiness is the goal of life and that people control their own happiness, in his advice on how to think about desires, “He who has a clear and certain understanding of these things will direct every preference and aversion toward securing health of body and tranquillity of mind, seeing that this is the sum and end of a blessed life.”<sup>62</sup> Jefferson rephrases this Epicurean highest good in the Epicurean Syllabus he sends to Short, “The Summum bonum is to be not pained in body, nor troubled in mind.”<sup>63</sup> Further, both believe a contented mind is the more important of the two and that true physical needs are easily met. Diogenes summarizes Epicurus’ teaching “he holds mental pleasures to be greater than those of the body.”<sup>64</sup> Epicurus writes of necessary desires, “whatever is natural is easily procured,” and gives an example of happiness received from physical necessity versus luxury, “Plain fare gives as much pleasure as a costly diet, when once the pain of want has been removed, while bread and water confirm the

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60. Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to William Short, 31 October 1819,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-0850>.

61. Diogenes, *Lives*, 131.

62. Diogenes, *Lives*, 128.

63. Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to William Short, 31 October 1819.”

64. Diogenes, *Lives*, 137.

highest possible pleasure when they are brought to hungry lips.”<sup>65</sup> Jefferson recommends a prudent tranquil life and downplays physical needs to his nephew in 1788, “Health, learning & virtue will ensure your happiness; they will give you a quiet conscience, private esteem & public honor. Beyond these we want nothing but physical necessities; and they are easily obtained.”<sup>66</sup> Understanding what is necessary and choosing to be content in these examples introduces the idea of choice which is central to the final link between Jefferson and the Epicurean concept of happiness to be considered.

Thoughtful decision making is necessary to pursue an Epicurean happy life. Epicurus writes, “While therefore all pleasure because it is naturally akin to us is good, not all pleasure is choiceworthy, just as all pain is an evil and yet not all pain is to be shunned. It is, however, by measuring one against another, and by looking at the conveniences and inconveniences, that all these matters must be judged.”<sup>67</sup> Jefferson’s letter to Maria Cosway in 1786, arguably his most wrenchingly personal, is an Epicurean masterpiece of weighing pleasures and pains. His head argues that the pain of parting from her is too great, while his heart which argues that the pleasure of the time spent together is greater. He writes, “Put into one scale the pleasures which any object may offer; but put fairly into the other the pains which are to follow, and see which preponderates.”<sup>68</sup> Daryl Hale finds, “Jefferson makes a strong case for each side, using the

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65. Diogenes, *Lives*, 130-131.

66. Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, 6 August 1788,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-13-02-0349>.

67. Diogenes, *Lives*, 129-130.

68. Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to Maria Cosway, 12 October 1786,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-10-02-0309>.

occasion of his new love in his life to provide passionate support for his intellectual grasp of the basic Epicurean positions.”<sup>69</sup>

Jefferson’s adoption of the same kind of wise decision making Epicurus preaches to obtain happiness is also evident in their use of similar terms. Even without an allowance for the vagaries of translation over two thousand years, Jefferson’s selection of terms strongly suggest he understands and adopts Epicurus’ ideas on how to prudently make decisions to live a happy life. Jefferson’s use of the term virtue in his letter to his nephew is shorthand for the measured decision making Epicurus teaches. He uses the active application of virtue as the means to an Epicurean end when he writes to José Correia Da Serra it is “the order of nature to be that individual happiness shall be inseparable from the practice of virtue.”<sup>70</sup> This is remarkably similar to Epicurus’ letter to Menoeceus, “For the virtues have grown into one with a pleasant life, and a pleasant life is inseparable from them.”<sup>71</sup> Both men believed wisdom, prudence, and justice were necessary to weigh pleasures and pains so that on balance, one lived a happy life. Epicurus writes to Menoeceus “prudence is a more precious thing even than philosophy; from it spring all other virtues, for it teaches that we cannot lead a life of pleasure which is not also a life of prudence, honour, and justice.”<sup>72</sup> In his Epicurean Syllabus, Jefferson writes “virtue the foundation of happiness,” and further defines virtue as “prudence, temperance, fortitude and

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69. Daryl Hale, “Thomas Jefferson: Sublime or Sublimated Philosopher?” *International Social Science Review* 72, no. 3/4 (1997): 81-82, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41882239>.

70. Thomas Jefferson, “Thomas Jefferson to José Corrêa Da Serra, 19 April 1814,” <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-07-02-0216>.

71. Diogenes, *Lives*, 132.

72. Diogenes, *Lives*, 132.

justice,”<sup>73</sup> echoing Epicurus’ sixth doctrine, “It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and well and justly.”<sup>74</sup>

The similarities in their conceptions of happiness suggest Jefferson intends the *Declaration* to establish the Epicurean idea that the pursuit of happiness is the aim of life. Jefferson also seems to have used the *Declaration* to deploy the Epicurean belief that people had the right and power to protect that pursuit. Epicurus’ sixth doctrine states, “In order to obtain security from other men any means whatsoever of procuring this was a natural good.”<sup>75</sup> Jefferson protects the individual right to procure happiness by deploying it to the collective in the *Declaration*. He establishes the purpose of government is protecting happiness and places the power to govern with individuals. Governments that “shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness” should be formed by “the consent of the governed.”<sup>76</sup> Individuals never lose their power, “whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it.”<sup>77</sup> In fact Epicurus’ phrase “any means whatsoever” even gives cover to the conflict implied by declaring independence from England. Epicurus gives substantial support to actively protecting the right to pursue happiness. Although he does not

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73. Jefferson, “Notes on the Doctrine of Epicurus, [ca. 1799?].”

74. Diogenes, *Lives*, 140.

75. Diogenes, *Lives*, 140.

76. “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription.”

77. *Ibid.*

advocate a system of government that we know of,<sup>78</sup> Epicurus does not mean for humans to be passive. Doctrine forty begins, “Those who were best able to provide themselves with the means of security against their neighbours, being thus in possession of the surest guarantee, passed the most agreeable life in each other's society.”<sup>79</sup> Perhaps Jefferson, in gathering the Colonies together is following Epicurus’ thirty-ninth doctrine, “He who best knew how to meet fear of external foes made into one family all the creatures he could.”<sup>80</sup> DeWitt notes the concept of safety occurs in nine of the forty doctrines, though this has “completely escaped the acumen of historians.”<sup>81</sup> He links Epicurus’ emphasis on security to Jefferson directly and through intermediaries, “The teaching there embodied possesses singular importance because it can be traced down through history to the Declaration of Independence.”<sup>82</sup>

Organizing a society may seem far afield from the generally accepted position that Epicurus advocates for in his fourteenth doctrine “a quiet private life withdrawn from the multitude.”<sup>83</sup> And Jefferson is clear he has the right and desire to withdraw to private life. He writes to James Monroe, “nothing could so completely divest us of that liberty as the establishment of the opinion that the state has a perpetual right to the services of all it’s

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78. Diogenes, *Lives*, 26. Diogenes lists “Of Kingship” as one of his books and notes he produced three hundred scrolls so we do not know if perhaps he had a proposal for governance.

79. Diogenes, *Lives*, 154.

80. Ibid.

81. DeWitt, *St. Paul and Epicurus*, 46.

82. Ibid.

83. Diogenes, *Lives*, 143.

members,” eventually concluding “we are made in some degree for others, yet in a greater are we made for ourselves.”<sup>84</sup> But Jefferson tips the Epicurean pleasure/pain scale to justify his life work by heavily weighting the satisfaction received from fulfilling the innate desire to help others. In a letter to Thomas Law he claims “nature hath implanted in our breasts a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct.”<sup>85</sup> Jefferson applies the Epicurean admonition to trust “the truth of our senses”<sup>86</sup> to this moral sense. He places the pleasure of helping others in an Epicurean framework in his letter to Law. He writes the French Epicurean philosopher, Claude Adrien Helvétius,<sup>87</sup> proposes that we act kindly to strangers out of self-interest “because we receive ourselves pleasure from these acts,” and that Helvetius, “one of the best men on the earth,” defines interest to mean “whatever may procure us pleasure or withdraw us from pain.”<sup>88</sup> Jefferson makes a self-interested reasoned choice to engage in public life to help secure the lives of all Americans. I suggest the satisfaction he received from the accomplishments he chose for his epitaph outweighed the pains of delaying his own personal, economic and intellectual pursuits.

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84. Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, 20 May 1782.”

85. Thomas Jefferson, “Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Law, 13 June 1814,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-07-02-0307>.

86. Diogenes, *Lives*, 32

87. For links between Epicurus and Helvétius and more conduits between Epicurus and Jefferson, especially Montaigne, Montesquieu, and Locke, see: Pierre Force, “Helvétius as an Epicurean Political Theorist,” in *Epicurus in the Enlightenment*, (Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2009), 105-118 and David Wootton, “Helvétius: From Radical Enlightenment to Revolution,” *Political Theory*, 28, No. 3 (June 2000), 307-336.

88. Jefferson, “Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Law, 13 June 1814.”

Even without Jefferson's calculation, there is Epicurean justification for a public life in his seventh doctrine, "Some men have sought to become famous and renowned, thinking thus they would make themselves secure against fellow men. If, then, the life of such persons really was secure, they attained natural good."<sup>89</sup> And the fourteenth doctrine above, which some use to argue Jefferson could not have been Epicurean, includes a prerequisite which seems to describe Jefferson's life, "When tolerable security against our fellow-men is attained, then on the basis of power sufficient to afford support and of material prosperity arises in most genuine form the security of a quiet private life withdrawn from the multitude."<sup>90</sup> Jefferson writes at the beginning of his retirement in 1810, "I am now at that period of life when tranquility, and a retirement from the passions which disturb it, constitute the summum bonum."<sup>91</sup>

Epicurus is only able to empower people individually. His efforts were limited by his station in life and the military and political upheaval of Roman expansion into Greece "Athens itself being alternately besieged and caressed by alien lords whose real interest lay far off in Macedonia or Asia."<sup>92</sup> But Epicurus is doing what he could by providing individuals who practiced his doctrine their own agency to pursue a happy life. Jones states Epicurus' goal "was not to build an abstract philosophical structure. It was to provide his fellow man with a means of

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89. Diogenes, *Lives*, 146.

90. Diogenes, *Lives*, 143.

91. Thomas Jefferson, "Thomas Jefferson to Charles Holt, 23 November 1810," <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-03-02-0160>.

92. Thomas Franklin Mayo, *Epicurus in England (1650-1725)*. (Dallas, Tex.: Southwest Press, 1934), xviii.

securing happiness in a dark and hostile world.”<sup>93</sup> He is giving people permission and intellectual tools to pop open their own umbrellas against ignorance and superstition to fend off invasion of their rights by others as much as possible, at the very least mitigating the effects on their peace of mind. Jefferson, operating in a more hopeful but still shifting world, is able to envision a system of connected Epicurean umbrellas creating a societal dome to protect the right to pursue happiness. He writes, “The only orthodox object of the institution of government is to secure the greatest degree of happiness possible to the general mass of those associated under it.”<sup>94</sup>

Protecting the right to happiness underpins much of his work. In his first presidential inaugural address, he expresses a wish to “be instrumental to the happiness and freedom of all.”<sup>95</sup> Vernon Louis Parrington writes Jefferson’s use of the words pursuit of happiness in the *Declaration* implied “a broader sociological conception” representing the driving force behind Jefferson’s life work, “far more than a political gesture to draw popular support; they were an embodiment of Jefferson’s deepest convictions, and his total life thenceforward was given over to the work of providing such political machinery for America as should guarantee for all the enjoyment of those inalienable rights.”<sup>96</sup> Jefferson’s next step to protect enjoyment of inalienable rights is to insulate

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93. Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition*, 22.

94. Thomas Jefferson, “Thomas Jefferson to Francis Adrian Van der Kemp, 22 March 1812,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-04-02-046>.

95. Thomas Jefferson, “Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States: From George Washington 1789 to George Bush 1989,” The Avalon Project at Yale Law School (Yale), accessed April 8, 2020, [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/jefinau1.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/jefinau1.asp).

96. Herbert Ganter, “Jefferson’s ‘Pursuit of Happiness’ and Some Forgotten Men,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (July 1936): 429, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1925217>.

government from those who, claiming to speak for specific gods and religions, would impose restrictions on those rights.

### **Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom**

Keeping religion from interfering with the pursuit of happiness is fundamentally Epicurean. For Epicurus and Jefferson, the centrality and power of religion, what men said and did in the name of gods, interfered with the free exercise of reason, the most important tool for living a happy life. Their work returned agency to people to be free from misguided or ambitious men who claimed to speak for the divine. While they do not deny the existence of gods, neither man believes they were involved in daily life. Epicurus employs observational science and logic to free individuals from the myths men tell about gods to create irrational fears or false hopes. Jefferson, fully devoted to an Epicurean objective reality of science and the value of reason, is able to take an additional step to eliminate religion as basis for political power. One religion woven through the collective societal umbrella would not protect happiness, it would limit choice and interfere with free will in the individual's pursuit of it. Instead the collective canopy of umbrellas served to strengthen the protection of each individual to practice their religion under their umbrella. Revisionists argue Jefferson's interest in the separation of church and state is politically motivated and not intended to be as absolute as it has generally been interpreted.<sup>97</sup> They have not understood Jefferson's philosophical underpinnings and the vital place Epicurean based individual reason had as a motivating factor in his life.

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97. Francis Cogliano, *Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy*, 137-169. See Cogliano for a summary of the controversy which falls along conservative and liberal political lines.

Epicurus uses reason and free thinking to develop a conception of god to free others to use those same vital tools as they pursue happiness without worrying about divine interference. He unequivocally claimed gods exist “indicated by the common sense of mankind,”<sup>98</sup> but they are too perfectly happy to be involved with humans. Diogenes neatly sets the stage for disinterested deities and the importance of reason in his summary of Epicurean doctrine, “Two sorts of happiness can be conceived, the one the highest possible, such as the gods enjoy, which cannot be augmented, the other admitting addition and subtraction of pleasures.”<sup>99</sup> Epicurus’ first doctrine proves it is illogical for powerful gods to disturb themselves with lives of humans, “A blessed and eternal being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble upon any other being; hence he is exempt from movements of anger and partiality, for every such movement implies weakness.”<sup>100</sup> Gods do not stir themselves to help or hinder humans even by mistake “in the acts of a god there is no disorder,” consequently, “no good or evil is dispensed by chance to men so as to make life blessed.”<sup>101</sup> In fact nothing on earth requires active involvement of the gods “let the regularity of their orbits be explained in the same way as certain ordinary incidents within our own experience; the divine nature must not on any account be adduced to explain this, but must be kept free from the task and in perfect bliss.”<sup>102</sup> Jones summarizes Epicurus’ intent as

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98. Diogenes, *Lives*, 123.

99. Diogenes, *Lives*, 121.

100. Diogenes, *Lives*, 139.

101. Diogenes, *Lives*, 134.

102. Diogenes, *Lives*, 97.

the “desire to free his contemporaries from a false belief in divine control of human affairs.”<sup>103</sup>

As evidence of the success of Epicurus’ admonitions to not fear gods or death, D.S. Hutchinson writes, “Epicurus was indeed widely regarded as undermining the foundations of traditional religion.”<sup>104</sup> Writing 500 years after Epicurus, Diogenes still feels the need to refute his accusers, “His piety towards the gods and his affection for his country no words can describe.”<sup>105</sup>

Jefferson also believes in a detached god and his Statute allows individuals to make up their own minds about the role or existence of the divine. He reveals a strikingly Epicurean version of god in his response to Miles King who urged him to be more supportive of Christianity. He claims to have followed his reason regarding religion, but suggests his unperturbable Epicurean god did not necessarily notice “not that, in the perfection of his state, he can feel pain or pleasure from any thing we may do; he is far above our power.”<sup>106</sup> Scholars generally agree with Holowchak that for Jefferson, “Deity is divorced from regulating human concerns.”<sup>107</sup> He quotes Mario Valsania, “A sound Epicurean, Jefferson did not renounce his

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103. Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition*, 55.

104. Brad Inwood and Lloyd P Gerson, eds., *The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writings and Testimonia* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), ix.

105. Diogenes, *Lives*, 10.

106. Thomas Jefferson, “Thomas Jefferson to Miles King, 26 September 1814,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-07-02-0495>.

107. Mark Andrew Holowchak, “The ‘Reluctant’ Politician: Thomas Jefferson’s Debt to Epicurus,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45, no. 2 (2012): 285. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecs.2012.0021>.

opinion that humans...are left alone in this world...God is a relatively distant figure for him.”<sup>108</sup>  
Governments certainly have no divine basis to dictate beliefs, methods of worship or behavior.

Like Epicurus, Jefferson finds unfettered reason the right way to think about god. The first line of the final Statute even gives credit to god for giving humans reason, “Almighty God hath created the mind free.”<sup>109</sup> Jefferson suggests that freedom of thought can even lead to denial of god’s existence in his advice to the young Peter Carr, “Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because, if there be one, he much more approved the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear.”<sup>110</sup> And if there are gods, reason helps you select a god or religion. Jefferson suggests in his letter to King that these are fundamental choices “our particular principles of religion are a subject of accountability to our god alone.”<sup>111</sup> Even the existence of an afterlife is subject to reason rather than dogma as seen in Jefferson’s response to King’s concern for Jefferson’s soul:

whether the particular revelation which you suppose to have been made to yourself were real or imaginary, your reason alone is the competent judge. for dispute as long as we will on religious tenants, our reason at last must ultimately decide, as it is the only oracle which god has given us to determine between what really comes from him, & the phantasms of a disordered or deluded imagination.<sup>112</sup>

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108. Holowchak, “The ‘Reluctant’ Politician,” 286.

109. Thomas Jefferson, “82. A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, 18 June 1779,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0082>.

110. Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, with Enclosure, 10 August 1787.”

111. Jefferson, “Thomas Jefferson to Miles King, 26 September 1814.”

112. Ibid.

Belief in a powerful but remote god and the value of reason leads logically to skepticism of people who claim to be representatives for god on earth. Jefferson is as suspicious as Epicurus of those who impose their opinions on others.

Overzealous or ambitious clergy or divine myths are a constant threat requiring humans to exercise reason. Jefferson is able to provide the additional protection of a secular political system. Epicurus rather dryly notes that people find their own gods favor their own interests, laying bare their greed or ignorance:

the utterances of the multitude about the gods are not true preconceptions but false assumptions: hence it is that the greatest evils happen to the wicked and the greatest blessings happen to the good from the hand of the gods, seeing that they are always favourable to their own good qualities and take pleasure in men like unto themselves, but reject as alien whatever is not of their kind.”<sup>113</sup>

He also puts it plainly, “The basic causes of human unhappiness are mistaken beliefs about the gods.”<sup>114</sup> The Statute makes Jefferson’s skepticism clear:

the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world and through all time.<sup>115</sup>

Jefferson’s Statute states any attempts to limit freedom of the mind “tend to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness.”<sup>116</sup> His disgust with religious dogma includes Christianity. He

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113. Diogenes, *Lives*, 124.

114. Diogenes, *Lives*, 123-4.

115. Thomas Jefferson, “82. A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, 18 June 1779.”

116. *Ibid.*

recommends skepticism to his nephew “those facts in the bible which contradict the laws of nature, must be examined with more care, and under a variety of faces.”<sup>117</sup> He also creates his own bible by eliminating everything but the moral examples of Jesus. Richard uses Jefferson’s own words to summarize his distrust of most of the Bible. He writes Jefferson “complained of ‘the follies, the falsehoods, and the charlatanisms’ that Jesus's biographers had foisted upon him.”<sup>118</sup> He continues, “Jefferson trusted, however, that ‘the dawn of reason and freedom of thought in these United States’ would tear down ‘the artificial scaffolding’ set up by these biographers.”<sup>119</sup> Despite, or perhaps because of, his broad knowledge of religions and the centuries of influence and infighting in the name of a god, Jefferson holds a surprisingly Epicurean view of the need to empower people to employ reason to protect against false religious impediments to the pursuit of happiness. For Epicurus and Jefferson, gods and religion have no place in governing societies.

Of course, as a gravestone accomplishment, we know the Statute was important to Jefferson, but the effort it took over many years underscores his commitment to codified separation of church and state. It took nine years for Jefferson’s 1776 draft bill for “disestablishing the Church of England and for Repealing Laws Interfering with Freedom of Worship,”<sup>120</sup> to pass in Virginia as, *A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom*, the Statute.

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117. Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, with Enclosure, 10 August 1787.”

118. Richard, “A Dialogue with the Ancients,” 437.

119. Ibid.

120. Thomas Jefferson, “I. Rough Draft of Jefferson’s Resolutions for Disestablishing the Church of England and for Repealing Laws Interfering with Freedom of Worship, [before 19 November 1776],” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-01-02-0222-0002>.

Jefferson prints his draft to sway the public and persuades Madison to keep fighting for the bill while he is in France. Immediately after learning it passed, Jefferson has his original draft distributed throughout Europe and writes to Madison, about the underpinning philosophy “it is honorable for us to have produced the first legislature who has had the courage to declare that the reason of man may be trusted with the formation of his own opinions.”<sup>121</sup> The Statute was a critical step in the inclusion of religious freedom in the First Amendment to the *Constitution*, which once again, Jefferson implored his friend Madison to pursue. He continually fought incursions by religion. Responding to a pamphlet claiming that he would thwart the clergy’s efforts to establish a certain type of Christianity in America when he was President, he writes to Benjamin Rush “they believe truly. for I have sworn upon the altar of god eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.”<sup>122</sup> Jefferson expresses pride in separating church and state until the end of his life. He describes his hope that America would serve as a model for other societies to replace religiously based governance with one that rests on the reason of a free people in his response to an invitation to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the *Declaration*.

may it be to the world what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all.) the Signal of arousing men to burst the chains, under which Monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the

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121. Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 16 December 1786,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-10-02-0461>.

122. Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, 23 September 1800,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-32-02-0102>.

blessings & security of self government. the form which we have substituted restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion.<sup>123</sup>

### **University of Virginia**

“Unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion” are at the core of the Epicurean and Jeffersonian pursuit of happiness, but both believe education is the means by which people learn how to think about happiness and how to temper their free will and employ their reason to more effectively seek it. As with the *Declaration* and the Statute, the founding of the University of Virginia (UVA) is an example of Epicurus’ influence on Jefferson’s ideas about individual happiness and his efforts to expand protections for those ideas to his country’s citizens. UVA is intended to model how to best pursue individual happiness by teaching students how to think for themselves. It is also intended as an example of the systemic protection education provides for the right to pursue happiness by identifying and preparing those most capable of serving the public and developing the intellect of all citizens to select competent leaders and thoughtfully decide the issues of the day and to recognize when their rights to pursue happiness are being encroached.

While UVA is the project he turned to in retirement, education is no afterthought for Jefferson. Gordon Baker writes, “A cultured scholar in his own right, Jefferson throughout his lifetime also held an intense interest in education and continually pressed for its development and

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123. Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to Roger Chew Weightman, 24 June 1826,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-6179>.

extension.”<sup>124</sup> Epicurus’ influence can be seen in Jefferson’s 1818 “Rockfish Gap Report of the University of Virginia Commissioners” (Rockfish) in which he comprehensively lays out his plans for UVA, drafting it even before the Commission met. Epicurean influence is also evident in Jefferson’s “Bill for the more General Diffusion of Knowledge” (Bill) introduced in 1776, and his 1781 *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Notes). These detail his proposal for a system of schools from grammar school through university and were a precursor to his plans for UVA. The Epicurean ideas that individuals can be taught to take control of their own happiness by learning to think for themselves, striving to understand the nature of things, and making wise decisions are evident in all three of these documents.

Epicurus’ entire philosophy is intended to teach others that they can and should pursue happiness. Education is his tool to remove unnecessary fears about gods and nature, to provide guidance on protecting one’s happiness and to explain how to weigh pleasures and pains properly. He writes to Menoecus:

Let no one be slow to seek wisdom when he is young nor weary in the search thereof when he is grown old. For no age is too early or too late for the health of the soul. And to say that the season for studying philosophy has not yet come, or that it is past and gone, is like saying that the season for happiness is not yet or that it is no more.<sup>125</sup>

Jefferson agrees with Epicurus’ belief in education as a tool to teach people how to be happy. Referring to his Bill he writes, “The general objects of this law are to provide an education adapted to the years, to the capacity, and the condition of every one, and directed to their

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124. Gordon E. Baker, “Thomas Jefferson on Academic Freedom,” *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 39, no. 3 (1953): 377, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40220968>.

125. Diogenes, *Lives*, 122.

freedom and happiness.”<sup>126</sup> Displaying the Epicurean belief that the absence of physical pain and tranquility of mind are true happiness, Jefferson’s educational system is designed to “teach them how to work out their own greatest happiness, by shewing them that it does not depend on the condition of life in which chance has placed them, but is always the result of a good conscience, good health, occupation, and freedom in all just pursuits.”<sup>127</sup> Wiltse suggests that for Jefferson, beyond securing a societal system to protect the pursuit of happiness, education for all is an obligation once the right to pursue happiness has been declared,

The happiness principle is undoubtedly the most significant feature of Jefferson’s theory of rights, for it raises government above the mere negative function of securing the individual against encroachments of others. By recognizing a right to the pursuit of happiness, the state is committed to aid its citizens in the constructive task of obtaining their desires, whatever they may be.<sup>128</sup>

In Rockfish, Jefferson summarizes the Commission’s intent for UVA, “These are the objects of that higher grade of education...which the legislature now propose to provide for the good & ornament of their country the gratification & happiness of their fellow citizens.”<sup>129</sup>

Epicurus’ philosophy and Jefferson’s proposals for educational systems are not attempts to indoctrinate people into a rigid set of beliefs. Despite Diogenes reference to the “siren-charms

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126. Thomas Jefferson, “The Works of Thomas Jefferson, Vol. 4 (Notes on Virginia II, Correspondence 1782-1786),” Online Library of Liberty (Liberty Fund, Inc., 2013), [https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/756#Jefferson\\_0054-04\\_338](https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/756#Jefferson_0054-04_338).

127. Jefferson, “The Works of Thomas Jefferson, Vol. 4 (Notes on Virginia II, Correspondence 1782-1786).”

128. Ganter, “Jefferson’s,” *The William & Mary Quarterly* 16, no. 4, 559.

129. Thomas Jefferson, “Rockfish Gap Report of the University of Virginia Commissioners, 4 August 1818,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-13-02-0197-0006>.

of his doctrine,”<sup>130</sup> neither Epicurus nor Jefferson wish to form homogenous utopian cults offering “the way” to happiness. Teaching in Jefferson’s education system is to be “directed to their freedom and happiness,” and the curriculum is to be determined by those in charge of the schools as, “Specific details were not proper for the law.”<sup>131</sup> Jefferson and Epicurus are trying to teach people to understand happiness is the goal and they have a right to pursue it by thinking for themselves about everything, including the gods. They are to learn to use facts, observations and sensations to come to reasoned conclusions, make wise decisions and live the happiest lives possible.

According to Diogenes, Epicurus’ philosophy includes about three hundred rolls, on topics including the gods, music, science, human relationships, nature, kingship, feelings, and ethics.<sup>132</sup> But based on his extant writing, these lessons are presented as logical deductions based on existing facts and observations, subject to debate and revision. Many of his lessons are designed to quell fears, “In the first place, remember that, like everything else, knowledge of celestial phenomena...has no other end in view than peace of mind.”<sup>133</sup> But they are less about the specific topic and more about providing examples of how to apply reason and facts to understand the true nature of things. He tells Herodotus, “Our canon is that direct observation by

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130. Diogenes, *Lives*, 9.

131. Jefferson, “The Works of Thomas Jefferson, Vol. 4 (Notes on Virginia II, Correspondence 1782-1786).”

132. Diogenes, *Lives*, 26.

133. Diogenes, *Lives*, 85.

sense and direct apprehension by the mind are alone invariably true.”<sup>134</sup> His nascent scientific method allows for constant improvement in knowledge and prevents unnecessary fears. In his summary of objects in the sky and weather, he writes to Pythocles:

For in the study of nature we must not conform to empty assumptions and arbitrary laws, but follow the promptings of the facts; for our life has no need now of unreason and false opinion; our one need is untroubled existence. All things go on uninterruptedly, if all be explained by the method of plurality of causes in conformity with the facts, so soon as we duly understand what may be plausibly alleged respecting them. But when we pick and choose among them, rejecting one equally consistent with the phenomena, we clearly fall away from the study of nature altogether and tumble into myth.<sup>135</sup> 87

For Epicurus, living happily means actively employing reason. His sixteenth doctrine is, “Fortune but seldom interferes with the wise man; his greatest and highest interests have been, are, and will be, directed by reason throughout the course of his life.”<sup>136</sup> Diogenes writes Epicurus changed the standard greeting, “I wish you joy,” implying passive reception of random pleasure or pain in his letters, to one that teaches active engagement and personal control over happiness when “he replaces the usual greeting, by wishes for welfare and right living, ‘May you do well,’ and ‘Live well.’”<sup>137</sup> And properly applying reason means following facts. Diogenes notes that for Epicureans, “Opinion they also call conception or assumption, and declare it to be true and false; for it is true if it is subsequently confirmed or if it is not contradicted by evidence,

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134. Diogenes, *Lives*, 62.

135. Diogenes, *Lives*, 87.

136. Diogenes, *Lives*, 144.

137. Diogenes, *Lives*, 14.

and false if it is not subsequently confirmed or is contradicted by evidence.”<sup>138</sup> Diogenes summarizes that *The Canons* taught “it is from plain facts that we must start when we draw inferences about the unknown. For all our notions are derived from perceptions, either by actual contact or by analogy, or resemblance, or composition, with some slight aid from reasoning.”<sup>139</sup>

Jefferson displays Epicurean notions of freely following facts and applying reason when he writes about UVA, “This institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. For here we are not afraid to follow the truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error, so long as reason is left free to combat it.”<sup>140</sup> In Rockfish, he warns stagnation in human thought reduces the potential for happiness, “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 chimaera, and the hope delusive of rendering ourselves wiser, happier or better than our forefathers.”<sup>141</sup> Also in Rockfish, Jefferson includes among the objectives for UVA “to develop the reasoning faculties of our youth” and “generally to form them to habits of reflection...rendering them examples...of happiness within themselves.”<sup>142</sup> Gordon Baker writes, “His insistence on freedom of inquiry and expression, his steady reliance on the force of

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138. Diogenes, *Lives*, 34.

139. Diogenes, *Lives*, 32.

140. Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to William Roscoe, 27 December 1820,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-1712>.

141. Jefferson, “Rockfish Gap Report of the University of Virginia Commissioners, 4 August 1818.”

142. *Ibid.*

reason, are equaled in eloquence by few, if any, figures in American history.”<sup>143</sup> David Post suggests Jefferson sees a virtuous circle in which developing an individual’s happiness helps secure societal protections for the development of individual happiness. He then quotes Jefferson on the centrality of education to a society in which one is free to pursue happiness, “Through the individual’s pursuit of happiness and development of potential, the general good of republican society was also thought to be increased. ‘If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.’”<sup>144</sup>

For Jefferson, education is not only a tool to aid to pursuit of one’s own happiness, it is the means to ensure protection for the right to pursue it. Free thinking and thoughtful reasoning are the ribs of individual Epicurean and Jeffersonian umbrellas. The cover is woven of and continually enlarged by knowledge gained from observable facts, sensations, and logical deductions. But for Jefferson, citizens also need to be educated in order to thoughtfully elect representatives that will protect their freedoms and be able to detect threats and collectively deploy their umbrellas to repel tyranny. In Notes, Jefferson strongly implies protecting the individual pursuit of happiness is the purpose for the educational system in his Bill, “But of all the views of this law none is more legitimate, than that of rendering people safe, as they are the ultimate, guardians of their own liberty.” He reiterates this idea in a letter in which he opposes placing constitutional authority in just one branch of government, “I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society, but the people themselves: and if we think them not

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143. Baker, “Thomas Jefferson on Academic Freedom,” 377.

144. David M. Post, “Jeffersonian Revisions of Locke: Education, Property-Rights, and Liberty,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47, no. 1 (January 1986): 155, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2709601>.

enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.”<sup>145</sup> His Bill makes it clear educating everyone will also have the benefit of yielding those best suited to protect the pursuit of happiness:

it is generally true that that people will be happiest whose laws are best...whence it becomes expedient for promoting the publick happiness that those persons, whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue, should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of rights and liberties of their fellow citizens, and that they should be called to that charge without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition...it is better that such should be sought for and educated at the common expence of all, than that the happiness of all should be confined to the weak or wicked.<sup>146</sup>

His goals for UVA also include the need to train “statesmen, legislators & judges, on whom public & individual happiness are so much to depend” and summarizes the objectives for the university “nothing, more than education, advancing the prosperity, the power and the happiness of a nation.”

Jefferson successfully embeds the Epicurean idea that the natural aim of life is happiness in the bedrock of America when he includes it as an inalienable right in the *Declaration*. Ganter notes the phrase the pursuit of happiness “has achieved a greater permanence in the national

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145. Thomas Jefferson, “From Thomas Jefferson to William Charles Jarvis, 28 September 1820,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-1540>.

146. Thomas Jefferson, “The Works of Thomas Jefferson, Vol. 2 (Correspondence 1771-1779, Summary View, Declaration of Independence),” Online Library of Liberty (Liberty Fund, Inc., 2013), [https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/755#Jefferson\\_0054-02\\_1150](https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/755#Jefferson_0054-02_1150).

consciousness than any of the other components.”<sup>147</sup> Jefferson maximizes the Epicurean doctrine, “In order to obtain security from other men any means whatsoever of procuring this was a natural good,”<sup>148</sup> when he established societal protections for people as they follow Epicurus’ admonition to “exercise ourselves in the things which bring happiness, since, if that be present, we have everything.”<sup>149</sup> Jefferson is the catalyst in codifying the pursuit of happiness as the natural goal and right for the citizens of his new country and in placing the power to protect that right in the hands of the people. He institutionalizes protection from those claiming to speak on behalf of gods who wish to encroach on the pursuit of individual happiness. He is passionate about creating an educated citizenry capable of maintaining or reinventing the system of societal governance that will best protect the pursuit of happiness. We do not know if Jefferson dreamt of the articulation of his life work but his chosen epitaph indicates his pride and awareness in hindsight. He writes to Madison just months before his death, “If ever the earth has beheld a system of administration conducted with a single and steadfast eye to the general interest and happiness of those committed to it, one which, protected by truth, can never know reproach, it is that to which our lives have been devoted.”<sup>150</sup> Many Epicurean ideas survive through Jefferson including the fundamental Epicurean ideas represented by his epitaph: happiness is the goal of

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147. Herbert Lawrence Ganter, “Jefferson’s ‘Pursuit of Happiness’ and Some Forgotten Men,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (July 1936): 423, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1925217>.

148. Diogenes, *Lives*, 141.

149. Diogenes, *Lives*, 122.

150. Thomas Jefferson, “To James Madison from Thomas Jefferson, 17 February 1826,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/04-03-02-0712>.

life, those claiming to speak on behalf of gods should not limit happiness, and education is vital to helping people in their pursuit of happiness. Focusing on the inherent equality in the Epicurean natural right to pursue happiness, as translated into the Declaration's assertion that, "all men are created equal," Alexander Tsesis claims the *Declaration* is "no mere ornament of the past,"<sup>151</sup> and he inventories its deployment by Abraham Lincoln to oppose slavery, Franklin Roosevelt to buttress New Deal efforts to address economic inequality, and a tool to argue for voting rights and Civil Rights.

These efforts tightened the weave of the protective Epicurean inspired Jeffersonian umbrella but there are still holes. Gender, economic, educational, racial, and healthcare protections are still inadequate in the birthplace of the first widespread practical application of human rights to liberty and pursuit of happiness as the basis for societal organization. Those who claim to speak on behalf of gods are an increasing threat to the individual pursuit of happiness. And the Epicurean definition of happiness which Jefferson shares, has been replaced by an acquisitive culture so that even under those under the most densely woven umbrellas struggle to find happiness. Through Jefferson, Epicurus survives but perhaps does not thrive.

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151. Alexander Tsesis, *For Liberty and Equality : The Life and Times of the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 316.

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